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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GOD
AND ITS EVOLUTION
IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Children's and adolescents' spirituality is important, especially to those entrusted with their education. To effectively nurture children's spirituality, parents, teachers, and ministers would benefit in knowing how young people experience God, what they think about God and how they relate to God: in effect, their lived experience of God. Learning about these phenomena could help greatly in communicating with children and adolescents about God. This study aims to build on the work of those who have investigated elements of the spirituality of children and adolescents in a qualitative way.

The purpose of this study is to provide teachers and youth ministers with useful information to help guide them in their ministries. The research is guided by the qualitative methodology of phenomenology, the purpose of which is to uncover the lived experience of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it. Data collection methods were artwork, guided open-ended interviews, and written expression. The research sample consisted of 100 students, 51 of whom were girls and 49 of whom were boys. These students were aged from 4 to 17 years-of-age and were from three metropolitan Catholic schools in Perth, Western Australia.

This study sought to discover the experiences these students have of God, the relationships they have with God, and the concepts they hold regarding God. It sought to determine any patterns of interplay among these elements. It also sought to discover any observable patterns of evolution of these elements. In addition, this study questioned to what extent the spirituality of its respondents, as expressed through the above elements, is a shared phenomenon. It investigated to what extent and in what ways girls' responses differed from those of boys. It explored the apparent differences in the responses of students of different ages. Finally, it examined the types of language the students used to communicate about God and the relative usefulness of these forms of language for the students in understanding and communicating to, and about, their God.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i)   incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii)   contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Spirituality is an essential element within the makeup of the human person. Some say it evolved because it has survival value for the species (Hardy, 1966, 1979).

An individual's spirituality is a vital component of his/her personal being. It is composed of many factors. When this spirituality involves an orientation toward a supreme being (often called God), important factors include how a person conceives of God, experiences God and relates to God. These factors are core elements of the individual's lived experience of God, that is, they are the way through which individuals understand God and actively incorporate this understanding into their everyday relationships and actions. The relational aspect of spirituality is mentioned by theologian Dorothee Solle (1990:1) who believed "the object of theology can only be the relationship between God and human beings".

Fostering children's relationships with God is important in the work of faith educators, chaplains and others. Thom (1993:35) maintained that one of the key issues in religious education is to "teach about God in such a way as to enable individuals to relate to a personal deity in accordance with each person's dignity and uniqueness".[1] Rizzuto (1979) concluded that children come to school with well-developed notions of God. To be able to teach effectively about God and help children in the development of their relationship with God, it could benefit teachers to know what experiences of God, concepts of God, relationships with God and language about God their children bring with them. However, in the last half century, religious education has been dominated by the work of stage developmental theorists. Based on Piaget's (1953) theory that cognitive development proceeds in clearly definable, invariant stages, some researchers proposed and defined stages to account for many aspects of religious development.[2] Such research resulted in the accumulation of vast amounts of information about the way children think about religious matters and how such thinking develops with age. However, it provided little information about how children experience and relate to God or of the understandings and conceptualisations of God that have meaning in a child's life. Valid and useful though such research is, the

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[1] Babin (1965) and Macdonald (1990) also commented on the importance of fostering in children a personal relationship with God.
[2] See, for example, Erikson (1963), Goldman (1964), Elkind (1968), Greer (1972), Peatling (1974), Francis (1979), Oser (1980), Fowler (1981) and Kohlberg (1981).

high profile accorded it had an unfortunate result: the marginalisation of research into the more experiential and affective dimension of religion and of alternative theories to account for religious development. Despite the domination of stage developmental theory, several theorists conducted research that departed from the popular measurement of religious thoughts and attitudes, and focused more on religious experiences and feelings.[3] However, until the 1990s, this body of research was not widely disseminated, nor did it inform educational practice. This is due mainly to the popularity of developmental theory. Eventually, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a gradual shift in focus occurred among those interested in the spiritual life of children. This shift was precipitated by the concurrence of a number of factors:

1)   There was growing critique of the methods and conclusions of cognitive theorists. Methodological and paradigmatic limitations were noted by scholars.[4] Some replicant studies, instead of confirming the findings of the original study, revealed varying, sometimes opposing, findings.[5] It was asserted that the backgrounds of the researchers had led them to assumptions and biases about gender, race, level of intellect and religious affiliation, about which they were largely unaware.[6] As a result, the conclusions of many studies, originally believed to be objectively derived and universal, were found to be subjective, partial and culturally determined.[7]

2)   Practitioners in fields relating to religious development[8] became dissatisfied with the inability of the developmentalist approach to adequately inform them about the religious phenomena they experienced.[9] They witnessed young children with a religious perception said to be improbable for their age; they observed children, who were said to be capable only of received religion, oppose parents' beliefs and wishes regarding religion and religious practice; they experienced teenagers' fervour and spiritual growth fuelled by feelings and affective perception, rather than cognition. Some practitioners sought alternative insights into the phenomena they observed.

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[3] See, for example, the works of James (1902), Otto (1958), Maslow (1964), Hardy (1966), Paffard (1973), Robinson (1977), Heller (1986), Hay (1987) and Coles (1989).

[4] For example, Dykstra (1981), Moran (1986), Moore (1991), Ford-Grabowski (1992) and McGrady (1996).

[5] For example, Drewek's (1996:2) study found "cultural biases of the Fowler model in defining Stages 3 and 4. Hacker (1984), Furushima (1985), De Marco (1995), and Lee (1999) also found biases or limitations in Erikson's, Fowler's, and Kohlberg's work.

[6] This point is mentioned by a number of scholars, for example, Broughton (1986), Harris (1986), Donaldson (1978), Slee (1996) and Fernald (1997).

[7] As noted by Gilligan (1982), Parks (1986), Kwilecki (1988, 1992) and Rizzuto (2001).

[8] For example, Macdougall (1996), Myers (1997) and Slusser (1997).

[9] Myers (1997:3-4) wrote about her observations of her daughter and the girl's playmate. She noted: "There was an assuredness, a strength, a spiritedness in this small child that was not accounted for in child development theory. ... The actions of these two young children ... challenge the conceptualization of egocentralism [sic] that Anna Freud, Jean Piaget, and others have described as being characteristic of young children. While adults who know them could confirm that egocentrism certainly was present on many occasions in the thinking of these two young children, the point is that such a descriptive theoretical construct is incomplete. There is something else resting on the edges of our theoretical frameworks which must be considered."

3)   Until well into the 1990s, qualitative research was regarded widely as lacking in rigour and validity. Despite the lack of favour in which it was held, qualitative research attracted the interest of some scholars.[10]   They developed various methods to investigate aspects of the religious life of children. The aims of these researchers had less to do with being able to make definitive, universal statements, and more to do with explicating the hidden religious forces at work in the lives of particular people at a particular point in time. In this, it provided a counterpoint to the more general picture generated by the developmental theorists.

4)   In the 1980s, there arose among the populations of the Western world a hunger for spiritual things. There appears to be a spiritual vacuum within these societies, partially fuelled by secular societies' disenchantment with religion. Harris (1996:116, 127) spoke of the "prevailing understanding of knowing which exists … today. It is an understanding which equates knowledge with what is definite, objective, publicly verifiable. … Knowledge, in many sectors, is equivalent to information, facts, concepts, technical skill". This is no longer adequate. There is, Harris says, a "rediscovery of spirituality, especially in the West". The interest in all things 'new age', and the number of books, articles, lectures and workshops devoted to exploring spirituality, attest to the growing interest in spirituality (Bridger, 2001:13). O'Murchu (1997:5) believes there is "a new spiritual revolution".[11]

5)   Theorists arrived at conclusions which impacted on the understanding of the nature of religiosity. Scientists researching in the field of neurobiology discovered the role of the brain in religious experience. They found that people engaged in some forms of religious experience, such as meditation, underwent significant neurological changes to their brains. D'Aquili (1993, 1998, and 1999) hypothesized that the brain has two distinct modes of functioning, the everyday and the mystical/religious. He conjectured that this state of the brain has arisen because it has survival value for the human species; a theory proposed many years previously by Hardy (1966, 1979) and developed by Hay (1987). The research of d'Aquili and others led to the development of the new field of neurotheology. This research highlights the essential nature of religious experience and the derivative nature of cognition about religious matters. Bridger (2001:7) summarised the situation: "The past twenty five years have witnessed an unexpected but significant revolution. The self-assured – even arrogant – positivism of the mid-twentieth century has been replaced by the legitimisation of the spiritual".

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[10] For example, Harms (1944), Hardy (1966), Robinson (1977), Heller (1986), Hay (1987) and Coles (1989).
[11] Gallup (1998) declared that there is a remarkable surge in spirituality in Australia today. Roof (1998:211, 223) found "A reclaiming of the spiritual … is at the very heart of [religious] changes for younger cohorts of Americans", noting how "deep the spiritual quests of our time now reach". Creel (2000) concluded that college students are searching for spiritual fulfilment and self-transcendence.

THE PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

Owing to the emphasis placed on the cognitive development of religious ideas, there has arisen a consequent neglect within research of the more affective and experiential elements of the religious lives of people, and a serious neglect of the academic study of spirituality in the lives of individuals. This neglect is also seen in the field of religious education. Hill (1988:108) claimed: "Spirituality is the foundation upon which religious education must build. Christian spirituality … is at the heart of religious education. …However, spirituality historically has not received the focus it deserves in religious education".

Hay, Nye and Murphy (1996:47) commented strongly on this issue:

> Over the past thirty years the dominance of cognitive developmental theory in the field of religious education has led to a severe neglect of the study of the spirituality of the child and to a distortion of what goes on in the religious education classroom. …[Developmental theories] at times come near to dissolving religion into reason, at the expense of an holistic understanding of what it means to be human.

Nye (1996) believes there is clearly insufficient understanding of the nature of children's spirituality. In particular, little is known of children's lived experience of God; that is the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and experiences that inform, and flow from, the child's ontologically significant relationship with God. Today it is generally acknowledged that children's spirituality differs from that of adults, but a greater understanding is required of the nature of this phenomenon. Rizzuto (1979) explained that if educationists want to understand the religious progress of a child they must have some knowledge of the private God the child brings with him/her. She believed that by the time children came to school, they already had well-developed notions of God, of their relationships with God, and of their place in the scheme of things.

In 1997 I undertook research that examined certain aspects of the spiritual lives of adolescents (Devenish, 1999). In 1998 I was a part of a team that conducted a study of the concepts of God of primary school children (Collins, Devenish, Moroz and Reynolds, 1999). Various teachers to whom I spoke showed interest in the work, commenting on its possible usefulness to them in their teaching practice. Judging by the responses of these teachers, what would benefit them most is an accurate insight into the nature of the 'private God' of their students, that is, their students' lived experience of God, and of the ways this private God changes and evolves throughout the schooling years.

Choosing a methodology that reveals something of the depth, variety and complexity of the phenomenon of children's spiritual lives is important. Dahlin (1990:75), writing of the usefulness of research for religious education, commented that questions about God

> can really only be answered in a qualitative kind of research. To look at the students' understanding in terms of quality, value, meaning and content is ... of more help to the teacher than to consider it in terms of quantitative distributions.

Phenomenology seeks to understand "the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:118). Berryman (1985:125) concluded that "phenomenology's method holds a clue for studying the quality of the child's relationship with God". A number of researchers explored aspects of the spirituality of children using phenomenological methodology.[12] They reported unexpected and significant findings about the way children make sense of God in their lives.

This study aims to build on the work of previous research, with the intention of adding to our understanding of the spirituality of children and adolescents. The study specifically examines children's and adolescents' experiences of God, relationships with God, and concepts of God; it also examines the respondents' use of language about God, the gender and age differences present, and indications of the impact of life experiences on the phenomena; finally, the study attempts to determine the patterns of evolution of these elements.

The methods used to collect data were drawing, writing, and interviews. Children and adolescents of various ages drew a picture that captured something of the meaning of God for them; they wrote a letter to God, or a reflective text about the meaning of God for them (depending on their age); then they participated in a guided, open-ended interview in which they said anything they wanted to say about God, and answered any specific questions I asked them. Using the methodology of phenomenology, I described, analysed and interpreted the data, constructing a picture of how the respondents experience and relate to God and of the ways they conceptualise God. I then explored and reported on the types of language children and adolescents use when communicating about God, the differences between the spirituality of girls and boys, and any observable impact of life experiences on the spirituality of the respondents. Finally, I searched for any patterns of evolution present in the data.

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[12] See, for example, the works of Harms (1944), Hardy (1966), Paffard (1973), Robinson (1977), Heller (1986), Hay (1987), Coles (1990), Thom (1993) Tamm (1996), Hay with Nye (1998) and Reimer and Furrow (2001).

The objectives of this study were:

1)   to describe the experience of God, the relationship with God, and the conceptualisations of God of 100 students between the ages of 4 and 17;

2)   to analyse those descriptions;

3)   to interpret those descriptions;

4)   to infer patterns of meaning relative to the children's God language, gender, age, and life experiences;

5)   to extrapolate patterns of relationships among these phenomena;

6)   to investigate and articulate any phases of evolution evident in the data;

7)   to derive from these data recommendations for theory development and further research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central questions addressed by the research are as follows:

- What experiences of God do children and adolescents have?

- What relationships with God do children and adolescents report?

- What concepts of God do these students have?

- What language do these students use to communicate about God?

- What life experiences have impacted on the above elements to the extent that they are observable to the researcher or the participant?

- What gender differences are discernable in the data?

- How do these phenomena evolve throughout the school years?

The questions asked during the interviews varied according to students' responses. In order to stimulate the provision of further information, it was necessary to ask some students questions similar to the following:

1)   Tell me about God.
       What is God like?
       Where is God?

2)   Have you ever felt that God was near to you?
       (If yes) Tell me about it.

3)   Do you talk to God? Tell me about it.
       Does God talk to you? (If yes) Tell me about it.
       If God were here talking to us now, what would God tell us?

4)   Does God expect anything from us?

TERMS USED

God Concept

This term refers to the ideas one has of God together with the associated notions of the qualities, role and relational nature of God. This term is also known as *God images* and *God representation*.

Experience of God

This term refers to experiences of a numinous or mystical nature that are characterised by a heightened sense of awareness, and frequently accompanied by an increased sense of relatedness to God, self, others and the world.

Relationship with God

The term refers to the nature of the relationship between oneself and God, including null and negative relationships.

Lived Experience

This term refers to everyday experience of a particular phenomenon and includes the felt quality of the experience, the significance of the experience, and the interpretation or meaning assigned to the experience.

Evolution

Evolution is "the process by which something develops gradually into a different form" (The Australian Oxford Dictionary).

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years there has been much interest in religious development as it occurs in children and adolescents. This interest, and its concomitant research, generated vast amounts of literature, much of which pertain to the development of religious thinking and attitude. Recently, there has arisen a concern for and interest in children's spirituality, as opposed to children's religiosity. This interest broadened the scope of the field of study and introduced new methods of investigation. Only a brief review of the relevant body of literature is possible. For the sake of clarity, the literature that seems most relevant to this study has been divided into ten categories:

- the work of the developmental theorists;

- spirituality;

- neurotheology;

- religious experience;

- relationship with God;

- God-concept;

- language issues;

- gender issues;

- age differences;

- previous significant research.

The first category examines the work of the **developmental theorists**. These researchers established the significance and popularity of studies into religious thinking and attitude. The overview of this body of work sets the scene in religious research, and presents much of the research that has informed understanding of children's religious development until the present. The second category briefly reviews the nature and growth of **spirituality**. This section outlines the chief differences between the more traditional approach of the developmentalists and the comparatively recent phenomenon of spirituality, a subject that can be seen as the new wave in religious studies. The third category is **neurotheology**, a very recent development

that melds discoveries in the science of neurobiology with theological insights. The resultant, still evolving, theories claim to have discovered some of the biological mechanisms whereby spiritual phenomena become physically grounded in humans. These theories have implications for the way one approaches spirituality and religion. The three categories of **religious experience**, **relationship with God,** and **God concept** briefly explore the research and findings of scholars who have investigated these elements of religion. They are examined because they form the three central elements of the conceptual framework. The seventh category is an overview of **research and theories about language**. One of the main ways a person's spirituality is expressed is through language. For this reason, language is one of the minor elements of the conceptual framework. The eighth category is **research and theories regarding gender**. One recurrent strand in the body of research into religious understanding relates to the religious and spiritual differences between boys and girls. For this reason, gender is one of the minor elements of the conceptual framework. The ninth category is **research and theories regarding age.** This category explores findings regarding the differences between children of different ages. Age is one of the minor elements of the conceptual framework. The tenth category, **previous significant research**, more closely examines the research that has most informed this work, and of which this study is an extension.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL THEORISTS

'The study of religion in childhood and adolescence has been dominated for thirty years by investigations of the process by which religious thinking develops"(Hyde, 1990:15).

PIAGET

Jean Piaget (1953) is the 'father' of modern understanding about the development of cognition. His extensive research with children focused on analyses and descriptions of mental development. Piaget considered that mental development occurred in stages which are invariant. Piaget developed the view that children's thinking is not just a simpler version of adult thought, but is fundamentally different, based on a different perception of reality which changes over time, in accordance with the maturation level and life experiences of the child. The reciprocal relationship between cognitive maturation level and life experiences develops new mental processes within the child.

Piaget (1953) theorised the existence of two paths of mental development: integration and substitution. The main pattern of development is *integration*, a process whereby a child's older form of reasoning is integrated into a more complex understanding. This is brought about by the child's developing reasoning capacity and by the restricted ability of the older pattern to adequately explain the child's observations of particular phenomena. However, in areas that are not logical, mental development tends to occur through *substitution*, a term referring to the substitution of one pattern of thinking for another. When this occurs, an earlier form of thinking can co-exist with a later one in a state of suppression, and can re-assert itself under certain conditions. In addition, factors external to the child such as cultural, social or educational influences can affect the order of appearance of behaviours and understandings.

In 1932 Piaget completed his only study of children's moral development, *The Moral Judgement of the Child*. He recognised that moral development is linked to action and affectivity, and concluded that there are two types of morality for children, heteronomy and autonomy. Heteronomy is characterised by adherence to external authority, and by constraint and conformity; autonomy is characterised by an interiorization of authority, and by reciprocity and cooperation (pp. 65-66). Piaget found that these two modes of thinking and acting are not fixed. A child can acquire the mode of autonomy in a particular circumstance, but be operating in the heteronomous mode in other circumstances. Piaget wrote of successive phases that are repeated for each new plane of thought the child encounters. For him, the path of mental development exhibited in moral development is substitution.

Multitudinous research arose as a result of Piaget's cognitive development theory. Theorists and researchers adopted Piaget's theory to advance understanding in their own disciplines: most educational theory in the last fifty years has been based on Piaget's notion of the cognitive development of the child; studies in Piaget's own field of psychology have been influenced by his thinking; moral reasoning, especially as espoused by Kohlberg, is based on Piaget's cognitive-development theory; the faith development theory of Fowler, among others, is indebted to Piaget's theories. Strangely, despite Piaget's findings regarding moral development, subsequent researchers adopted his stage theory of cognitive development and his theory of integration to explain religious, moral and faith phenomena.

ERIKSON

Erik Erikson (1963), a student of Freudian psychology and a developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, proposed a theory about human development throughout the life cycle. He theorised eight psychosocial stages, focusing on specific crises in people's relationships with other people. His theory stressed the importance of culture and upbringing for a person's development. Erikson's theory elucidated the psychological and social dimensions of people's lives. Because of this, he cannot be called a cognitive developmentalist. However, his theory was essentially a stage development theory in that he believed that if a person does not resolve the tension of a particular stage, they cannot effectively deal with any succeeding stages. Although not as widely read as other developmentalists, Erikson's theory is of significance because it greatly influenced the thinking of several of these theorists.

GOLDMAN

Ronald Goldman is well known as a pioneer investigator into the religious thinking of children. For Goldman (1964), religious development is primarily religious thinking, which is like any other kind of thinking except that its objects are religious. Despite his recognition that "there is a continuous fusion between intellect and emotion, between fact and faith" (p. 67), Goldman clearly focused on thinking as if it were an independent reality, divorced from emotions, instincts, and social and cultural pressures.

Underpinning Goldman's research was a Piagetian stage-development framework. Goldman theorised that Piaget's stages of cognitive development applied to the realm of religious thinking, which, in his opinion, occurred through the process of integration. Goldman specifically set out "to see whether Piaget's three stages could be applied to the realm of religious thinking" (1964:51). He found a direct correlation between the

two. He named his stages 'intuitive religious thinking', 'concrete religious thinking' and 'abstract religious thinking' (ibid:60). Between each of these stages Goldman posited an intermediate stage (ibid:52-62). Goldman's theories inspired many other researchers to investigate elements of the religious thinking of children.[13]

From this research Goldman (1965) derived a theory for the application of his findings to the religious education setting. He called this theory 'readiness for religion'. Goldman conceived of this theory as being similar to the idea of readiness for reading, writing and mathematics. His theories received widespread acclaim and became the foundation of many religious education programs. The impact of Goldman's work is summarised by Slee (1986a:84).

> Goldman has had a profound impact on both empirical research in the development of religious thinking and on the theory of religious education. In both spheres, Goldman's influence extends to an international context. ... In empirical research of children's religious thinking, Goldman's study has continued to be identified by subsequent researchers as a major text, providing the focal model for subsequent studies.

KOHLBERG

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development has had a major influence on the fields of education, psychology, and religion during the past four decades. Like Piaget, Kohlberg belonged to the school of genetic epistemology, the main assumption of which is that our knowledge of the world is ordered by innate mental structures. Kohlberg applied Piaget's work on cognitive development to his theory of moral development. His ideas were also based on the work of Dewey who believed that the goal of education was the development of children's innate abilities to think clearly and reason logically.

Kohlberg (1971) believed that the development of moral reasoning follows a universal and invariant sequence in all cultural settings, and that religious orientation is independent of moral development (1967, 1976, and 1981):

> Our evidence of culturally universal moral stages, then, is also direct evidence against the view that the development of moral ideologies depends on the teachings of particular religious belief systems. No differences in moral development due to religious belief have yet been found (1967:180).

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[13] These include studies of cognitive development in religious thinking, for example Lawrence (1965), Peatling (1974), Peatling and Laabs (1975), Peatling, Laabs and Newton (1975), Tamminen (1976), Peatling (1977), Hoge & Petrillo (1978), McGrady (1990, 1994) and Reich (1996); studies of the stages in religious thinking, for example Greer (1980), and Oser (1980); studies of the religious understanding of children, for example Jamison (1981); studies of children's understanding of Bible stories, for example Peatling (1973), Greer (1972, 1983), and Bucher (1991); and a study of religious thinking as a developmental problem, by Peatling (1979).

Kohlberg's most well-known study was of moral reasoning in seventy-five boys aged from early childhood to late adolescence. He investigated how boys of different age groups and cultures think morally when faced with hypothetical moral dilemmas. From this small study emerged an extended hypothesis of three moral levels each consisting of two stages. The first level (stages one and two) is pre-moral in that values are not involved. The orientation of the child at this level is the avoidance of punishment and the gaining of rewards. The second level (stages three and four) is the conventional level, where the child's behaviour is modified by social praise or blame. At this level the child conforms to the mores of the group and, later, the society in order to win approval or avoid disapproval. The third level (stages five and six) is the post-conventional level. The orientation of an individual at this level is a sense of justice based on human rights and, later, on universal principles chosen by the individual. These stages represent a progression from heteronomy (acting because one has to, out of fear of the consequences or because of convention) to autonomy (acting because one wants to, out of a sense of personal integrity and freedom). Stages are said to be invariant and universal, and the reasoning processes characteristic of each stage are said to be more sophisticated, more complex, and more adequate than the reasoning of earlier stages (1981, 1984).

Kohlberg's stage theory gained prominence in the 1970s and was described in some textbooks in developmental psychology as "the best or even the only credible account of moral development" (Reed, 1997:6). His insights sparked much debate about the nature of moral reasoning and moral development, and encouraged other scholars to investigate moral development in children and adults. This resulted in the production of a number of studies.[14]

FOWLER

William Fowler developed a theory of faith development that Jardine, (1992:74) believed "represents a major breakthrough in the integration of religion and psychology".[15] Fowler was influenced by the works of Erikson, Piaget and Kohlberg, whose contributions he acknowledged. Fowler (1981, 1991) claimed that there are underlying structures in the way people live in faith, and that these patterns, or systems of organisation, occur in a sequential, invariant, hierarchical, and perhaps universal fashion. He proposed that faith develops in six (later seven) stages which he named *Primal Faith* (the later addition), *Intuitive-Projective Faith*, *Mythic-Literal Faith*,

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[14] For example, Wright & Cox (1967, 1971), Greer (1972, 1984c, 1992), Francis & Greer (1990).
[15] Webster (1984), who reviewed the contribution of Fowler, noted that he became interested in faith development as a result of his counselling work.

Synthetic-Conventional Faith, *Individuative-Reflexive Faith*, *Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith*, and *Universalising Faith*.

Fowler's use of the term *faith* differed from the accepted definitions of the day. In fact, his definition is similar to the notion of spirituality as it is used today.[16] Fowler (1986:16, 21) believed that "faith is an extremely complex phenomenon to try to operationalise for empirical investigation" because it "is a knowing which involves both reason and feeling; both rationality and passionality". Despite this, for Fowler the essential process involved in faith development is thinking. He focused on the inner structure of faith, paralleling it with Piaget's focus on patterns of thinking and on Kohlberg's focus on the structures of thinking involved in justifying moral choices.[17] During interviews, he investigated the thoughts of his respondents, reporting very little data that dealt with the affective or active elements of faith.

Fowler's theory sparked great interest in faith development. This generated many studies. According to Fowler (1992:13), the theory and research methods in his 'Stages of Faith' gave rise to 220 research projects.[18]

CORRELATION STUDIES

Some studies generated by the work of the structural developmentalists were correlation studies, which were designed to determine the extent of the correlation between various stage development theories. One series of studies involved the relationship between faith development and moral development. Fowler believed that faith development is primary and prior to moral development: Kohlberg believed that moral reasoning precedes faith development and is a necessary condition for it. Gorman (1977) and Shulik (1979) both found a high correlation between faith and moral stages in their samples of young people and old people respectively, but neither analysed the nature of the relationship. Mischey's (1976) study tends to support Fowler's thesis, whereas Power, in association with Kohlberg (1980), produced some evidence for Kohlberg's thesis. In an effort to clarify this issue, both Kalaam (1981) and Snarey (1991) made detailed analyses of the relationship between faith and moral

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[16] Fowler (1981:14) saw faith as "an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and action". Faith "involves an alignment of the will, a resting of the heart, in accordance with a vision of transcendent value and power, one's ultimate concern" (ibid.). 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" (p. 16). For Fowler, "faith is always *relational*; there is always *another* in faith" (ibid.).
[17] This perspective is provided by Higgins (1983).
[18] These studies fall roughly into two categories. The first consists of studies that examine elements of Fowler's theory, for example Parks (1986, 1992), Simmonds (1986), Hamrick (1988), Barnes, Doyle & Johnsson (1989), Howlett (1989), and Rose (1991). The second category consists of studies that apply Fowler's theory to a particular dimension or phenomenon, for example Moseley (1978), Furushima (1985), Green & Hoffman (1989), Backlund (1990), Nipkow & Schweitzer (1991), and Nahavandi (1999).

stages, using far larger samples than previous studies. Their findings were mixed, leaving the issue unresolved. A later, more complex, correlative study was undertaken by Young, Cashwell, and Woolington (1998). This study investigated the relationship of spirituality to cognitive and moral development, and concluded that the spiritual dimension is central, and needs to be considered in any attempt at detailing psychosocial development. Another set of studies sought to determine the relationship between faith development and ego development or personality development.[19] Studies were also conducted to determine the relationship between religiosity and psychological factors.[20] These studies were interdisciplinary in nature.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS RELIGION

Scholars also studied attitude towards religion, seeing it as an indicator of the religiosity of their subjects. Thurstone (1929) was the first person to assess attitude to religion, administering his *Attitude to the Church* questionnaire to church congregations. Since then many tests which assess attitude towards various elements of religion have been developed.[21] These instruments take the form of a list of statements to which subjects react, and were used to assess attitude towards religion in different contexts and among varying subjects.[22]

Attitude involves an affective element. However, most researchers who investigated attitude focused on the cognitive dimension, eliminating from consideration one of its key determinants. Response was limited even further with participants being asked to select which statement in a list corresponded to their attitude. Often a participant's response was not accurately represented in the choices available.

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[19] Among these are: Thompson (1988), Raduka (1980), Bradley (1983), Chirban (1980), Broun (1984), Bassett (1985) and Johnson (1986).

[20] For example, self-esteem (Hanawalt 1963, Benson & Spilka 1973, Aycock & Noaker 1985, Watson, Hood, Morris & Hall 1985, Gill & Thornton 1989 (in Francis, Kay, & Campbell, 1996:196), Forst & Healy 1990, and Jones & Francis 1996); psychoticism and neuroticism (Schwab and Petersen 1990, Francis & Pearson 1991 and Francis 1992); introversion (Francis, Pearson, Carter & Kay 1981); happiness, empathy, impulsivity, and obsessionality (Francis & Pearson 1987, Pearson, Francis & Lightbrown 1986, Francis, Wilcox & Jones 1995 (in Jones & Francis, 1996:196), Lewis 1996, and Robbins & Francis 1996). The committed/consensual dichotomy and its counterpart the intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy were studied by Allen & Spilka 1967, Hunt & King 1971, Hoge 1972, Morris & Hood 1981, and Kirkpatrick & Wood 1990. Other studies were conducted by Smith, Weigert & Thomas 1979, Batson 1982, and Daniel 1982.

[21] In 1932 Likert produced an alternative scale which is still used widely today. In 1965 Hyde developed a scale of attitude toward religion. Cox (1967) developed a questionnaire to assess religious and moral attitude, and Turner (1970) developed an attitude toward religion scale.

[22] These included: Greer (1970, 1980), Greer & Brown (1973), Francis (1978, 1979, 1989), Francis & Kay (1984), Francis, Gibson & Fulljames (1990), Francis & Greer (1990, 1992, 1993), Francis & Montgomery (1992), Evans & Francis (1996), Kay, Francis & Gibson (1996), Lewis & Francis (1996), Francis & Wilcox (1998), and Dorman, Campbell, McRobbie, & Foster (2002).

CRITIQUE OF STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

The work of structural developmentalists excited and inspired a generation of scholars, resulting in an upsurge of interest in children's religious development, and a proliferation of studies aimed at replicating or furthering knowledge in this area. At first, many researchers took the work of the 'masters' as axiomatic to their own research, uncritically accepting the theories and methods pioneered by those before them. Eventually, however, the growing body of research was critically examined, revealing a number of inconsistencies and inadequacies. The majority of these criticisms belong to one of two groups, theoretical and methodological inadequacies, and bias.

Theoretical and Methodological Inadequacies

Some scholars found Piaget's theories inadequate for explaining the results they obtained in their studies.[23] One criticism of Piaget's theory is that he dealt mainly with thinking, logic, and reason, neglecting the influence of affect, experience and relationships. Reich (1996:135) made specific reference to this deficiency when he quoted Gilligan, Murphy, and Tappan:

> We have found it necessary to posit a different ideal of maturity [from Piagetian formal operations] to account for the transformations of thinking we have observed. These transformations arise out of the recognition of the paradoxical interdependence of self and relationship, which then overrides the pure logic of formal reason and replaces it with a more encompassing form of judgement, a polyphonic structure that is able to sustain the different voices of justice and care.

Concern with emphasis on the cognitive at the expense of all other influences is reported by several scholars.[24] It is also clearly summarised by Kegan (in Dykstra and Parks, 1986:139) who commented that the Piagetian paradigm is

> characterised as about *cognition*, to the neglect of *emotion*; the *individual,* to the neglect of the *social;* the *epistemological*, to the neglect of the *ontological …stages*, to the neglect of *process*; and what is *new*, *and changed* about a person, to the neglect of *the person who persists through time*.[25]

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[23] Klausmeier (1979) and his associates studied concept development from a Piagetian stance and from their own theory of conceptual learning development. Their findings suggested that development was unrelated to that described by Piaget, and the development of the cognitive dimensions proceeded independently and not as Piagetian theory would expect.

[24] Cohen (1983), in discussing criticisms of Piaget, noted that his theory is restricted only to the logical solution of problems and disregards differences of children's personality, gender, or emotional life. Hamlyn (1978) insisted that even cognitive development requires a social context of relationships with others which go beyond the cognitive.

[25] Yeatts (1992:49) concluding that the developmental paradigm is "helpful but inadequate".

Piaget's emphasis on cognition led to dismissal of the contributions of several important factors: Donaldson's (1978) research revealed the complexities of children's responses and their dependence on the context and language that was used.[26] In a review of experiments about children's thinking, Donaldson noted that children are not as ego-centric or limited in deductive reasoning as Piaget claimed. In her opinion, the use of familiar objects affected the child's ability to infer and deduce facts, a circumstance Piaget did not consider.[27] Ezer (in Hyde, 1990:17) criticised Piaget's studies of children's explanations of causal events because his sole criterion was that of age, whereas experience with the phenomena also has an effect. Brown (1983) suggested that stage may reflect the logical structure of the tasks rather than some basic principle. That cognitive development occurs in stages is questioned by a number of scholars.[28] Fernald (1997:391) concluded, "In focusing on stages, which are somewhat arbitrary classifications, Piaget underestimated the *continuity* in cognitive development". Flavell (1963, 1977) observed that cognitive development appears to proceed slowly and gradually, rather than abruptly.[29]

Inadequacies of the kind attributed to Piaget are also present in the work of the scholars who built their theories uncritically on Piaget's stage-development theory. Goldman's research is actually on *thinking about religion*. When 'thinking about religion' is confused with 'religious development' a difficulty arises since the terms are by no means synonymous. Kay (1980:36) believed:

> Religion itself involves and requires a large number of activities … which are much wider than the simple interpretation of biblical excerpts. The whole range of religious encounter is much larger than an encounter with a text, and for this reason Goldman's research, at best, deals only with one aspect of thinking about religion.

Goldman (1964:263) himself says "religion, of course, is so vast a topic that no test can claim to cover the entire field". Despite this admission, Goldman used the term *religious development* to describe his own work.[30] He came to the conclusion that he had developed a theory that is universal.

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[26] Siegal (1982) also compared linguistic and perceptual factors associated with the development of various quantity concepts. He concluded that in young children language and thought function independently, only becoming related as concepts develop, so that their abilities are underestimated by tests depending extensively on language.

[27] Hacker (1984) also found children of five or six able to make hypotheses about scientific phenomena and devise tests for their ideas. He remarked that Piaget was too pessimistic about the abilities of young children. Murphy came to the same conclusion in regard to the work of Goldman. His research (in Hay, Nye & Murphy 1996) showed that young children were capable of much more than Goldman had suggested.

[28] Hyde (1990) noted that Gelman & Baillargeon found little evidence to support Piaget's concept of major stages of development. In some instances the reasoning of young children about a problem, despite their limitations, could be similar to that even of adults.

[29] Siegal and Hodkin (1982) believed that young children's cognitive skills develop gradually.

[30] Slee (1986b:168) believed "Goldman's methods of data analysis are insufficient to establish the developmental theory he attempts to construct upon them".

A similar approach is present in the work of Kohlberg who asked respondents to say what they *thought* were the correct moral choices in a given scenario. This is different from actual moral decision-making because it excludes the emotive factor, and it differs from moral behaviour which includes other factors, especially the particular circumstances involved in the dilemma. Moore (1991:168) noted that "The level of moral reasoning attained is not necessarily matched by an equivalent level of moral behaviour".[31]

Fowler (1986:22) criticised Kohlberg's work, stating that his stages

> describe a succession of integrated structures of moral logic. He has given very little attention to the fact that we build ourselves through choices and moral (self-defining) commitments.

However, Fowler earned similar criticism.[32] Ford-Grabowsky (1992:109) stated that Fowler's model of faith development is theologically deficient, inadequate to account for the depths of the Christian faith life. He concluded, "Fowler's interview format asks only what a subject thinks, thus cutting off much of the person". Parks (1992:98) noted that "Fowler's definition of faith is criticised for being too exclusively linked with 'knowing'".[33]

A lack of openness to non-rational influences has been criticised by some scholars. Parks (in Dykstra and Parks, 1986:138), criticised Fowler's theory:

> Faith development theory ... [attends] to the underlying structure of faith in disproportionate measure to the power of image and symbol. ... [It focuses] on structures and stages rather than on the processes that give rise to the stages.

The same criticism is levelled at Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Dykstra (1981:4) asserted "The elegance of Kohlberg's approach is gained partially at the expense of a rich description of the manifold complexities of the moral life as we

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[31] Galon (1982:1) criticised Kohlberg's work: "it places moral reasoning in the foreground and construes moral growth as largely a matter of cognitive development". Sullivan (1982) found that Kohlberg's theory "is inadequate to provide a full understanding of the moral life".

[32] Oikarinen (1993:2) criticised Fowler's focus on structural, cognitive patterns, maintaining, "The structural approach of Fowler's theory does not do full justice either to the affective, dynamic, and paradoxical features of the Christian faith tradition or to the contextual dimension of faith development". Delaurentis (1985:1) also critiqued Fowler's "attempt to discuss faith in developmental terms".

[33] Others have expressed similar criticisms. For example, Moran (1986:88, 99) noted: "a survey of the literature on moral development reveals that it is conceived to be mainly a mental progression, sharpened by the discussion of hypothetical dilemmas. From the perspective of much of the world's culture and nearly all religions, this description of religion is remarkably narrow. ... Although Kohlberg and his associates slip into talking of their work as one of measuring moral development, what Kohlberg is actually measuring is stages of reasoning about hypothetical moral codes". Hyde (1990:369) believed that, "religious insight and understanding cannot be analysed neatly into cognitive and affective domains; religion is holistic, and intrinsic, extrinsic, or irreligious stances provide different perspectives from which individuals evaluate it". Batson (1971) argued that religious development was a process of creative growth through imaginal thought by which individuals would deal with an increasing range of needs with greater responsibility, rather than a process of cognitive development or socialisation.

actually experience it". Kohlberg focused on 'moral reasoning' and implied that this is the chief constituent of the moral life. For Kohlberg, morality is "the enterprise of social problem solving" (1981:7). However, human beings are feeling, instinctual, active beings who make compromises as often as free choices. Duska and Whelan (1977:6) noted:

> Moral behaviour is not consistent in one person from one situation to another. A person who doesn't cheat in one situation may cheat in another. The circumstances are the most important factor. There is no necessary relationship between what people say about morality and the way they act.

The crux of the inadequacies of work founded on cognitive stage development theory is identified by Farmer. In a study of adult reminiscences of childhood spiritual experience, Farmer (in Hay, Nye and Murphy, 1996:58) concluded:

> The basic mistake committed by developmentalists in this field is false philosophical categorisation. Religious knowledge is different from knowledge about religion in that it is much more akin to sensory knowledge.

Because they built their theories on Piaget's cognitive development paradigm, most of the criticisms aimed at the works of Goldman, Erikson, Kohlberg and Fowler reflect the criticisms levelled at Piaget. Curiously, this need never have happened. Piaget's 1932 study of the moral judgements of children indicated that in the sphere of religion and morality, his logical developmental model was inappropriate.[34] Had scholars heeded this observation, studies into the religious development of children would have taken a very different turn. Unfortunately, most scholars chose to base their work on Piaget's more famous developmental paradigm[35], thus limiting themselves to the cognitive sphere. [36] This led to problems, in that a phenomenon which should have been dealt with in an inclusive, holistic manner was restricted to the cognitive sphere. Heywood (1992:160) alluded to this problem:

> Kohlberg's description of moral development, while using the Piagetian model of hierarchical stages, departs from Piaget's description of morality. Kohlberg moves the province of morality away from social interaction, that is, in his interpretation, an affective sphere, toward a reasoned philosophical ideal. He explicitly claims that it is ways of knowing which lie behind ways of behaving.

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[34] Hull (1972/ 1998) discussed this issue. He agreed that Piaget's theory of the unfolding of intelligence is not adequate for religious growth.

[35] McGrady (in Greer, 1984a) was critical of Goldman's lack of justification for his use of the Piagetian framework, and for his presumption rather than demonstration that Piagetian categories were applicable.

[36] This choice is deliberate. Greer (1984b:27), reviewing the trend toward quantification in religious studies, noted that Goldman considered "the use of anecdotal psychology rather than findings based upon authentic research methods" a liability inherent in religious research.

Bias

Bias is a criticism levelled at the cognitive developmentalists. Erikson, Goldman, Kohlberg and Fowler, explicitly or implicitly, claimed universality for their theories, meaning that the theory accurately reflects reality for all people, regardless of gender, culture, race, class, religion or politics. If one begins with this assumption, results which indicate that a particular sub-group scores lower than their counterparts leads to the conclusion that the particular group is less developed or is deviant from the norm. Some scholars took exception to this conclusion, positing another possibility for the interpretation of the scores: bias of the theory, methods, or researcher.

One form of bias that is attacked is gender bias. Referring to Piaget and Erikson, Parks (1986:215) claimed, "The field [of developmental psychology] has been dominated by male theorists and suffers from the distortion inevitably arising when theories of human experience are composed by persons of a single gender". Brown and Gilligan (1992) noted a gender bias in Erikson's work. They believed that male development focuses on identity first, then intimacy. For women, intimacy develops first, followed by identity and independence. To theorise the relative immaturity of women simply because they differ from men is not acceptable to most scholars.

Broughton (1986:92) noted that Fowler "reports the superiority of the scores of male subjects over those of female subjects, a finding that he fails to account for". White (1985), who utilised Fowler's Faith Development Interview Guide, also reported that "Males' faith stage scores were significantly higher than females'". Slee (1996), who reviewed the research based on Fowler's theory, found that in some studies, female subjects score significantly lower than male subjects. She voiced her suspicion that the theory itself contains gender bias. Devor (1989) examined Fowler's theory in the light of feminist relational theologies and studies of women's psychological development, concluding that Fowler's description of the relational dimension excluded women's experience. Cowden (1992) also found that Fowler's representation of faith development was insufficient to describe women's experience.[37]

Kohlberg's research, in particular, laid itself open to the criticism of gender bias. Gilligan (1982) argued that, as Kohlberg's theory of moral development was developed

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[37] Slee (1996) noted that in the light of feminist critique of Fowler, some researchers specifically researched women's faith development. Cooney, Leary, and Mader (in Slee) all detailed the marked difference between the faith development of men and women, and demonstrated the inadequacy of Fowler's theory to name or measure women's experience. This bias led Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) to revise Fowler's faith development scoring criteria in order to make it responsive to women's faith development. DeNicola (1997) defended their work against male criticisms that it was unnecessary.

by a man using only male respondents, it is a juridical theory of moral development, concentrating on differentiation and the rights of individuals. In contrast, women's moral development focuses, not upon the differentiation of subject from object, but upon the *relation* that orients subject to object. However, because Kohlberg's theory is presented as being universal, women who are assessed using his theory are viewed as being less moral and of achieving lower stages of moral development than men. Instead of the 'different voices' of women leading to the suspicion of bias in the theory, it led to the denigration of women as moral beings.

Other forms of bias in the works of the developmental theorists are those of political, cultural, religious, and class bias. Slee (1996:83) found there is evidence to suggest a significant relationship between socio-economic status and faith stage. She claimed that a number of studies demonstrate a positive correlation between faith stages and higher levels of socio-economic status, or higher levels of education. Although this can be explained partly by the cognitive developmental framework of the theory, some critics suggest that the theory has in-built bias towards middle class patterns of reflection and lifestyle. Slee (1996:86) also noted that one of the criticisms regularly made of Fowler's work is that it has an in-built cultural bias to Western liberalism and to liberal Protestantism in particular. This criticism is also mentioned by Broughton (1986:92), who commented that in Fowler's research there is a "marked ethnic and religious bias of the sample". The essence of the criticisms of bias aimed at Fowler is expressed by Slee (1996:92):

> Fowler's theory is too susceptible to the charge that it maintains a Western, white, liberal and masculinist [sic] world-view, to the disadvantage of any who stand outside this experience. What little empirical evidence we have from samples representing a wider cultural and gender diversity begins seriously to call into question Fowler's claim to universalism.

Richards and Davison (1992) reported two studies they conducted. They concluded that Kohlberg's research contained cultural and religious bias as people in some cultures and religions used moral concepts and criteria which are not included in Kohlberg's theory or scoring system. Fernald (1997:394) observed another type of bias in Kohlberg's research. He maintained:

> Kohlberg's theory contains a political bias; it offers implicit support for people who believe in principles that may conflict with established laws. They should reach the upper levels of postconventional morality more readily than those who adhere to laws approved by the governing bodies.

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when the cognitive developmentalists were conducting their research, it was common to believe that scientific studies were objective and impartial, and led to the creation of universal theories. The unchallenged acceptance of researcher objectivity unwittingly led to personal bias in the works of theorists. The unchallenged assumption that what pertained to oneself applied equally to everyone else led to the belief that constructs which were valid for one group were valid for all groups. These philosophical and methodological assumptions resulted in considerable bias in the work of most researchers and theorists of the time.

CONCLUSION

Developmental theory had a significant impact on the study of religious development. A large amount of research was inspired by the theories of Piaget, Erikson, Goldman, Kohlberg and Fowler, leading to the creation of vast amounts of information about children's religious thinking. These studies set the standard for research in religious development for decades. Eventually, however, problems surfaced. Disconfirming evidence arose during subsequent research, leading to questions about the validity of research assumptions, methods of collecting and analysing data, instrumentation, the number and gender of the respondents, and the reliability and applicability of the findings. Concerns were also raised about the uncritical acceptance of these theories, and its consequences for religious education. Hay, Nye and Murphy (1996:48) summarised the general dissatisfaction:

> We suggest that an excessive concern with intellectual development has encouraged and perhaps led to an impoverishment of the meaning of the phrase 'religious knowledge'. In addition, there has been a tendency to focus on specific kinds of religious language as indicators of spirituality and an over-easy acceptance of the idea that the content of spirituality is primarily a socially constructed set of ideas. This has led to the neglect of roles played by emotion and forms of experience not confined to our rational, cognitive capacities. Such alternative interpretations might include arguments for a structural or biological basis for spirituality ... and accounts of spiritual or religious knowing which have explored a wider range of psychological functions than the solely intellectual contribution to spirituality. We believe that this neglect of broader approaches to spirituality as they might pertain to children's experience is a reason for the weakness of much that passes for religious education at the present time.

Dissatisfaction with cognitive development theories led to a search for ways of avoiding the pitfalls of this particular type of research. This, in turn, led to a broadening of the notion of what could be studied in the field, and of experimentation with other research paradigms.

SPIRITUALITY

"Why is there such a sudden interest in the spiritual search for meaning? ... People are on a genuine search for something real and compelling around which life can be oriented and ordered. ... They must find beauty, search for truth, and look for meaning" (Tacey, 2000:12).

UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUALITY

Interest in spirituality has increased greatly over the past fifteen years. Ault (2001:29) noted "The word 'spirituality' is widely encountered today". Fletcher (1990:5) commented, "We are in the middle of this spirituality shift – probably one of the biggest shifts in the history of Christian living". Erricker, Ota and Erricker (2001:3) believed "There is a concern with notions of spiritual wellbeing at an individual, societal and global level. These concerns relate to the spiritual health of religion, on the one hand, and the spiritual health of the world and its societies, on the other".[38] Wong (2001:170) stated, "It has often been observed that spirituality is becoming increasingly prominent as one of popular culture's preoccupations. At the same time the topic of spirituality has also featured more conspicuously in academic discourse".[39] Hamer (2004:6) expressed a scientist's fascination. He asked:

> Why is spirituality such a powerful and universal force? Why do so many people believe in things they cannot see, smell, taste, hear, or touch? Why do people from all walks of life, around the globe, regardless of their religious backgrounds or the particular god they worship, value spirituality as much as, or more than, pleasure, power, or wealth?

Before attempting to address Hamer's questions, it is necessary to come to some understanding of what is meant by the word 'spirituality'.[40] Berryman (2001:9) asked, "Why do we know 'spirituality' when we meet it, but can't define it?"[41] Priestley (1985:114) cautioned that "attempted definition [of the spiritual] is not only futile but totally counter-productive. ... It is a characteristic of spirit and the spiritual that it is dynamic". These comments are indicative of the general cautious attitude towards defining spirituality. Nevertheless, discussion of spirituality would be difficult without indications of what the word means for present purposes. In its broadest definition, spirituality is "a code word for the depth dimension of human existence" (Becker, 1994). Long (2000:147) believed "the term *spiritual* hints at all that is most sublime

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[38] This point is also noted by Eaude (2001:222).
[39] As seen in the writings of Elias (1991), Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, Hipp, Scott and Kadar, (1997), Bridger (2001), Marler & Hadaway (2002), and many others.
[40] Rose (2001:193), in his article "Is the term 'spirituality' a word that everyone uses, but nobody knows what anyone means by it?", emphasises the need for clarification of the term.
[41] Chater (2001:67) noted, "The spiritualities which reside in postmodernity defy umbrella definitions". Reich (2000:125) commented that spirituality is "a multivariate phenomenon".

and profound about the human condition".[42] These understandings outline the breadth of meaning of the word. Other descriptions highlight certain key elements within spirituality. For Schneiders (1986a:264), "Spirituality is understood as the unique and personal response of individuals to all that calls them to integrity and transcendence". Harper's Encyclopaedia of Religious Education (1990:607) defined spirituality as "a sense of relatedness to that which is beyond the self yet approachable. For some, the spiritual is around or within the self. This may be personal or nonpersonal, named God, power, or presence". Morwood (1997:97) defined spirituality in more religious terms. For him, spirituality refers to our concepts, experiences and relationship with God, and the way we allow these to direct the way we live. These three descriptions focus on the elements of relatedness and response of the individual to the depth dimension of life. Kraft (1983:14) approached spirituality from the psychospiritual perspective:

> Spirituality refers to the art of maintaining and growing in positive transrational experiences … [which] incorporate qualities of mystery, paradox, transcendence, unity, dependence, wonder, compassion, joy, salvation, creative suffering, faith, hope, and always love, the paramount dynamic of spirituality.

It is clear from these descriptions that spirituality is a broader term than religion. Fisher (2000:40) stated, "The notion of spirit (or spirituality) is not synonymous with religion (or religiosity). … [Spirituality is] part of a person's being and, therefore, prior to and different from religiosity". Alexander and Ben-Peretz (2001:35) noted that many people "like to distinguish between spirituality and religion, the former being more universal than the latter". Hamer (2004:213) stated his understanding of the differences clearly:

> Spirituality is based in consciousness, religion in cognition. Spirituality is universal, whereas cultures have their own forms of religion. I would argue that the most important contrast is that spirituality is genetic, while religion is based on culture, traditions, beliefs, and ideas. It is, in other words, mimetic.

Difficulties arise when spirituality is associated with religion. Hickman (2002:8) commented "It can be difficult for some people to acknowledge the importance of spiritual intelligence because they associate spirituality with religion. Religion has sidelined half the population". In addition, many people believe that religion has been debunked by science.[43] When spirituality is associated with religion, it is rejected along

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[42] Champagne (2001:82-3) found "what comes to mind is a mosaic of related elements: interior life, experience, meaning, expression, relatedness, transcendence, immanence, ultimate values, integrity, awareness, etc.".

[43] Consider, for example, these statements: "Science has proved [sic] that God doesn't exist" (Conversation with a 16 year old student in 2002). God is dead and "the Absolute is obsolete" (Gordon, 2002:964), paraphrasing a belief held by many of his contemporary academics.

with religion. Despite this, an increasing number of people are turning towards the spiritual and the divine for guidance. One possible reason for this phenomenon is that the decrease in popularity of religion, which traditionally attended to people's spiritual needs, has left in the lives of many people a spiritual void which they are seeking to fill.[44] The quest for spiritual fulfilment is a need within humanity that cannot be met by science.[45] Hickman (2002:11) commented, "The participation in the invisible spirit life of the world keeps us healthy. This is why people intuitively go out for drives and excursions to the country because they know they will return recharged". Hamer (2004:5, 6, 143) concurred.

> Although such experiences [of 'a divine and wonderful power'] were once regarded as signs of incipient psychopathology, recent research shows that they actually are associated with better adjustment and psychological health in most people. ...There is now reasonable evidence that spirituality is in fact beneficial to our physical as well as mental health. Faith may not only make people feel better, it may actually make them better people.

Some scholars believe that spirituality is an inherent part of human nature.[46] It is "something biologically built into the human species, a holistic awareness of reality which is potentially to be found in every human being" (Hay with Nye, 1998:57). O'Malley (1997:52) contended that spirituality "is in the grain. Except perhaps for the autist and sociopath, it cannot be excised from any human being. It is born in us." Hardy (1966, 1979) proposed that spirituality has evolved within humanity because it has survival value for the species.[47]

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[44] For example, Hardy (1979:3) believed that "modern man's [sic] craving for a spiritual philosophy ha[s] become frustrated, making him [sic] restless and uncertain." Francoise Darcy-Berube (1995:16) wrote of "the thirst for spirituality" and its influence on current religious education. Hill (2001:35) described the motivation for some students to take up theological studies: "Students enter the courses admitting to a vague sense of spiritual need. They are aware that their view of life is inadequate, and they hope that their studies will help them in their quest for personal meaning".

[45] Devenish (1997:26) concluded that "science cannot answer our most important questions, while religion, which used to answer these questions, no longer speaks to most people. This situation creates a vacuum in many lives today." Treston (1988:19) proposed, "The threats to spiritual values from national and international violence, world wars, secularism, marxism and capitalism, have provoked people to search for God with a new urgency".

[46] Myers (1997:101) stated, "Spirit is a biological condition of being human". Hay with Nye (1998:153) believes, "Spirituality ...grows out of a biological predisposition". Scott (2001) assumed spirituality to be a common human experience.

[47] This theory is endorsed by Hay (1987) and d'Aquili (1993, 1998, 1999). Hamer (2004:140) argued that "Over the ages ... the genes evolved. At every step, the genes that helped their owners survive and reproduce were most likely to be passed on to the next generation. Genes that don't successfully accomplish this don't survive in succeeding generations. If the organism in which such genes resided didn't have offspring, the genes soon would be lost from the population, discarded in the dustbin of failed evolutionary experiments. Only the genes that promoted our past survival and reproduction are still with us today". Hill (1997:33) believed that "spirituality is a universal human attribute"; Wanak (1995) mentioned that spirituality is an essential part of our being; Doyle (1986:33) stated that "Spirituality can never be something isolated from the rest of our existence". This belief is reinforced by Wilson (in Hamer, 2004) who presented evidence that the predisposition to religious belief has a genetic basis. There is evidence of religious belief more than 60,000 years ago among Neanderthal man. In fact, it is universal; every society, from hunter-gatherers to postindustrial democracies, has had some form of spiritual belief.

Science does not entirely reject the notion of an inbuilt spiritual dimension to life. Keating (2000:16) noted, "In the area of empirical science there is an increasing general acceptance that a spiritual dimension to life could possibly exist". The study of spirituality is attracting the attention of scientists in a range of fields, one of which is cognition and intelligence. In 1983, Howard Gardner released his theory of the multiplicity of the intellect and of intelligence. In the second edition of his book, Gardner (1993:44) suggested that in addition to his seven intelligences, some form of 'spiritual intelligence' may well exist. Bowling (1998) and Emmons (2000) explored the notion that spirituality is a form of intelligence. Emmons contended that there is an overlap between intelligence and spirituality, presenting evidence for viewing spirituality as a set of interrelated abilities and skills. He identified five components of spiritual intelligence: the capacity for transcendence; the ability to enter into heightened spiritual states of consciousness; the ability to invest everyday activities, events, and relationships with a sense of the sacred; the ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve problems in living; and the capacity to engage in virtuous behaviour (to show forgiveness, gratitude, humility and compassion). Zohar and Marshall (2000:3-4) drew upon neuro-scientific and psychological research to inform their theory of spiritual intelligence. They described it as "the mental aptitude used by human beings to address and find solutions to problems of meaning and value and to place their lives and actions into a wider, richer, meaning-giving context". They conceived of human intelligence as consisting of three distinct sets of neural wiring in the brain, giving rise to three distinct ways of dealing with external reality: *serial thinking*, also known as cognitive intelligence; *associative thinking*, also known as emotional intelligence; and *unitive thinking*, also known as spiritual intelligence. This unitive thinking integrates both cognitive and emotional intelligence and is the core of what it means to be human and to be connected to the wider, richer, meaning-giving context of the universe. This upsurge of interest in the concept of spiritual intelligence is evidence of both the acceptance of the existence of spirituality on the part of serious scholars, [48] and its imputed importance in the life of the individual.

The role of the imagination in developing and maintaining one's spirituality is mentioned by a number of scholars. Harris (1987a:8) wrote of fantasy as an "entrance into inwardness".[49] Erricker (1992:29) believed that myth and metaphor have an

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[48] For example, Hyde (2004:49) examined the case for spiritual intelligence and concluded that as "spiritual experiences apperceived by people enable them [to] creatively solve problems of meaning and value in life, then the notion of spiritual intelligence is ... plausible".

[49] English (1987:7) remarked, "Imagination lets the Spirit in, and you never know where the Spirit will lead us". Arthur (1988:123) declared that stories facilitate empathy, and "stories act to reverse the process of abstraction" and thus perform an integrating function in a person's life. Burke (1999:9) called imagination "medicine for the unconscious", noting that "through the power of the imagination children develop the

important function: "A sensitivity toward metaphor is a sensitivity toward depth in human experience". Watson (1993:81) mentioned the importance of the faculty of imagination in this way:

> Spirituality concerns a quality of life which transcends the natural plane. ... Spirituality is a genuinely different dimension to reality. To see it requires imagination, and yet it is not itself the product of imagination. Imagination is the faculty whereby we perceive it ... but imagination does not create it.[50]

The role of spirituality and its importance to the individual and to the community are explored by some scholars. Hay with Nye (1998:16-18) concluded that the effects of spiritual awareness include making people look beyond themselves, becoming concerned for a just society, losing racial prejudice, and becoming less materialistic. In their opinion, "these findings give support to the traditional intuition that spirituality underpins ethical behaviour and encourages social cohesion". Elsewhere, Hay (1987:216-217) made a persuasive argument for a greater awareness and development of spirituality, which at that time he called 'religious awareness'.

> We need to attend more openly to our religious awareness, so that at the very least its constructiveness and creativity can be used for the benefit of the species. ... People who become religiously aware seem to experience *directly* their solidarity with their fellow-human beings and their responsibility towards them. Tasks which had previously appeared impossible begin to look less formidable. They are less inclined to be seduced into the amassing of goods, because they perceive that there are other sources of security. Life gains meaning. These would appear to be advantages of our biological heritage not to be lightly ignored.[51]

The understanding of spirituality I adopt is derived from these scholars' notions of spirituality which I recognise as consonant with my experiences, and the experiences of students and friends who have shared something of their spiritual journey with me. I think of spirituality as having two interconnecting elements, the innate and the dynamic. The innate element is the depth dimension inherent in all humans. It is "that quality of being, holistically conceived, made up of insight, beliefs, values, attitudes/emotions and behavioural dispositions, which both informs and may be informed by lived experience" (Kevin Mott-Thornton, in Hay, Nye and Murphy,

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ability to incorporate an image of God as eternal presence and limitless consciousness". Farrell (2000) found that visual arts are related to the spiritual dimension.

[50] Kathleen Fischer (in Hill, 1988:108) explained that "Far from endangering faith, the imagination evokes and nurtures it; revelation occurs first on the level of the imagination and so does our initial response of faith to revelation. The imagination, properly understood, provides access to the deepest levels of truth".

[51] This point is also made by Hamer (2004:143): "I believe our genetic predisposition for faith is no accident. It provides us with a sense of purpose beyond ourselves and keeps us from being incapacitated by our dread of mortality. Our faith gives us the optimism to press on regardless of the hardships we face. But does faith meet more than just psychological needs? Might it affect physical aspects of life as well? ... Perhaps one needs to look no farther than religious texts to find an answer: the healing power of faith. One selective advantage [of spirituality] may arise from the ability of faith to improve human health and prolong life."

1996:59). This element is present in the lives of every human being. The dynamic element consists of the affirmation of the innate element within the self, together with the "unique and personal response of individuals to all that calls them to integrity and transcendence" (Schneiders, 1986a:264.). This element is partially conscious and is built up of the day to day choices of the individual in response to the vagaries of life, seen as one part of a larger, transcending reality. The ability to glimpse this larger reality, and to accept and respond to it, is enhanced by the use of one's imagination.

CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

The issue of children's spirituality is surrounded by questions and uncertainties. Nye (1996:108) noted "considerable confusion concerning the very meaning of 'spirituality' in childhood, and a paucity of guiding principles and relevant evidence to clarify our understanding". Hawkins (in Barnes and Hawkins, 1997:3) presented a very cogent reason to explain why this is so. She maintained that:

> We underestimate children. Respecting children as human individuals in their own right is still a novel idea. The idea that children may have deep spiritual awareness before they are taught a religious faith is only now starting to be acknowledged.[52]

There is even debate as to whether such a thing as children's spirituality exists. Slusser (1997a:24-25) commented, "I am often asked these questions: Do children have a spirituality? ...What is the origin of spirituality in a child? What are the characteristics of children's spirituality?" Slusser provided her answer to this questioning. "I know children have an innate spirituality. I know because of what I have heard children say about God and about their relationship. I also know because catechists have shared with me some of the profound insights of the children in their classes." One such teacher is Macdougall (1996:33), who asked her students to tell her about God. Her reaction to their responses was, "I realised yet again how infinitely wonderful and surprising children are, and became even more convinced that as adults we learn more from children than they ever learn from us". Champagne (2001:76) also wrote of "the unveiled richness of children's spirituality".

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[52] A similar point is made by Endean (in Endean & Hawkins, 1996:3) when he claims that "Christianity has displayed a curious attitude to children. The notion of original sin ...has encouraged parents round the globe to believe that their babies are somehow innately and irredeemably tainted until they are baptized. A contrasting tradition ... endows children with a simplistic innocence not borne out by psychological insights into child development. Fatally tainted or naively pure and innocent – neither image fosters the idea in adults that children might have something worthwhile to say for themselves about experiencing God. ...Further, in Judea-Christian tradition children have been regarded as the empty vessels into which adult religious wisdom is poured. ...Children are usually written about as objects of faith, not subjects." Marshall-Taylor (1996:67), in discussing Christian education, remarked that "The transmission of doctrine rules supreme. As a result very little thought has been given in the Church about ways of shifting the knowledge-heavy emphasis of Christian education and of cultivating children's existing spirituality. It is invariably assumed that this is a one-way process: children have always to be the recipients of adult wisdom."

Several religious educators have voiced concerns about the lack of spiritual development within religious education. Hill (1988) believed that spiritual development should receive more prominence.[53] McClure (1996:5, 8) noted:

> There is a necessary and important distinction to be made between spirituality and faith. … At the risk of being radical, I am much more concerned with the *spirituality or spiritual development* of young children than with their faith development. To focus on the first is consciously to create contexts where the child's level of awareness of the spiritual dimension of life is raised, and so to make possible the second, the development in faith. First there is spirituality: those encounters with the divine mystery. Then faith, like theology, comes as the result of reflection on those encounters. I propose that as religious educators, and potential animators of faith in young children, we direct our energies towards the promotion of spirituality in young children.

Despite these concerns, limited research has been undertaken in the field of children's spirituality. Hay with Nye (1998:v) noted "a shortage of detailed information about the spiritual life of children. When one considers the volume of research and theoretical reflection available on, for example, children's cognitive development, the lack of data is starkly obvious". Even fewer data are available about the spirituality of preprimary and early primary students. The chief difficulty is obvious: the lack of communicative skills in children of this age makes gathering reliable data problematic.

However, observations from scholars like Rizzuto (1979), Cavalletti (1983) and Coles (1985) and from teachers like Cram (1996), Endean (1996), Macdougall (1996) and Slusser (1997) make it clear that these children do indeed have a rich spirituality.[54] Hyde (1990:380) believed that the spirituality of these young children deserved investigation:

> One issue of great importance which requires further investigation concerns younger children in the first years at school. … It still remains to be seen what a sensitive study would reveal in this area. Much energy has been spent on debating the issue of the content of religious education for this age-group, but sufficient insight to give full guidance is still lacking.

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[53] Coles (1990) saw it as a mistake to give priority to cognition in our attempts to understand religious development. Schaeffler (2002) noted that the role of catechists is much more than the passing on of knowledge: it also should involve helping children discover God's presence in their lives. Myers (1997) wrote of the neglected but essential component of spirituality in the development of children. Richardson (1993) compared the Western concept of children with that of Tibetan Buddhists. She discussed the Western notion that children enter the world in a state of ignorance, with knowledge acquisition proceeding in an orderly and universal sequencing of cognitive and psychosexual stages. This assumption contributed to the idea that spirituality was to be regarded as regressive: it involved a move towards the unitive life, and away from differentiated separateness in the material world, a state considered to be the goal of development. Richardson believed that this perspective runs counter to appropriate and healthy spiritual development.

[54] It is, however, necessary to note that not all educators and researchers agree. Bosacki & Ota (2000:204-205) stated, "Whereas many researchers and educators portray children as innately spiritual … there is an alternative image and concern, found in both Canada and Britain, that points to a lack of response of young adolescents to the spiritual".

Hay, Nye and Murphy (1996:62) commented that much of the research that has been completed in this area focuses on God-talk. However, there has been some research that has avoided this pitfall. Cavalletti's 1983 research indicated that children of three to six years of age have deep, noetic, sometimes mystical experiences. She used drawings and conversations with the children as methods of data collection. Coles (1990) asked children to draw their ideas of God, and later (1996) where God lives. He then questioned them about their drawings. He found that the combination of drawing and conversation was very effective in uncovering the meaning of God in the lives of these children. Tamm (1996) asked children to draw their idea of God. She then talked to them about what they had drawn.

Hay, Nye and Murphy (1996:64) reviewed the research on children's spirituality. They explicated several elements that emerged from this research. They noted that, "in many cases overtly religious language is absent and children are adapting other cultural idioms to give a framework to their emerging awareness of spiritually significant experiences". In discussing the aspects of human experience that might constitute the realm of spirituality for children, Nye and Hay (1996) identified awareness, mystery, value sensing and meaning making as being four major dimensions of experience to which attention should be paid by researchers working with children in contemporary culture.

In 1998 Hay with Nye explored the spirituality of children in an effort to elucidate the essence of children's spirituality. They assumed the perspective that spirituality is a natural phenomenon not wholly dependent on religious teaching and understanding. They made a number of significant discoveries. One was that children's spirituality cannot be divorced from their individuality. They discovered that each child had an individual spiritual approach, a spiritual signature. This unique expression of spirituality had a markedly individual character that seemed to reflect the unique disposition of each child.[55] In fact, Hay with Nye claimed that the primary influences on a child's spirituality appeared to flow from his or her personality, with elements like age and gender being secondary (p. 94). Hay with Nye reported the need to consider two dimensions in the study of children's spirituality: the personal signature of each child and the grouped patterns.

A second and even more important discovery by Hay with Nye (1998) was what they considered to be the essence of children's spirituality: 'relational consciousness'. This compound term encapsulates two patterns perceived in the data: the first is an unusual

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[55] Nesbit (2001:137) also found in her studies "a spirituality with its own 'signature'".

level of consciousness, or heightened awareness, relative to the other passages of conversation spoken by the particular child; the second pattern relates to the fact that the conversation is embedded in the context of how the child related to other people, self, God, and things. Nye (in Hay with Nye, 1998:113) summarised her findings: "Children's spirituality was recognized by a distinctive property of mental activity, profound and intricate to be termed 'consciousness', and remarkable for its confinement to a broadly relational, inter-and intra-personal domain". Commenting further on this discovery, Hay (2000:39) spoke of the centrality of relationship within children's spirituality.

CONCLUSION

Scholarly study and debate, coupled with personal experience, indicate that there is within each person a spiritual capacity to perceive and relate to that which lies beyond the material realm. The value of this capacity for both the life of the individual and the life of the community is great: in the life of the individual it provides a sense of meaning, value, and inner cohesion; in the life of the community it provides an awareness of and compassion for others, and an impetus to act in an ethical manner. In our rapidly changing world, these qualities are urgently needed.

Children seem to possess their own spirituality. It is not a lesser form of adult spirituality, but a different type of spirituality that is not encumbered by adult notions of reality and possibility. It is important that as parents and educators we foster the growth and development of children's spirituality, and possibly learn from it. To do this, we must first accept and respect the spirituality of our children, and then learn more about it. This is the focus of the present study.

NEUROTHEOLOGY

"With its incredible new tools to look at things never before seen by humans ... science is now gazing [at] the human brain. There, some scientists are finding the divine. Or rather, they are finding that experiences of the sacred are literally wired into the structure of the brain" (Spencer-Smith, 2002:1).

THE BIOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

For many years, thinkers have pondered the origin of the spiritual impulse in humanity. Some have concluded that it has a biological basis. Starbuck (1899), who was interested in people's experiences of religious conversion, asked members of the public to write answers to a standard set of questions. His interpretations of their responses were psychological and physical. He conceived of the idea of changes in the neural pathways of the brain in his attempts to explain the phenomena he observed. Maslow (1964:xvi) believed religious experiences are characteristic of humankind and are a fundamental aspect of life. "Humans have a higher and transcendent nature, and this is part of their essence, i.e. their biological nature as a member of a species which has evolved." [Reworded to become inclusive.]

Hardy (1966, 1979) believed that spirituality is both widespread and intrinsic in humans. For him this indicated that its existence has biological survival value for the species. He explicated a biological interpretation of the phenomenon of religion, which expanded on the notion that spirituality is biologically natural to humans and that spiritual awareness or, as he called it, religious experience, has evolved through the process of natural selection because it has survival value to the individual. Essentially, his thesis was that there is a form of awareness, different from and transcending everyday awareness, which is potentially present in all humans and which has a positive function in enabling individuals to survive in their natural environment.[56] Hardy's theory was extended by Hay (1994:1), who explained why consideration of this theory was important.

> We live in a social context where post-Enlightenment, secular models of reality have come to dominate contemporary understanding. It is contended that this historical process has led to a failure on the part of many scientists to attend seriously to the phenomenology of religious experience. This has produced a distorted understanding and dismissal of what appears to be a widespread and normal field of human experience.

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[56] Other scholars concurred. Otto (1958), Lealman (1991), Myers (1997), and Hay with Nye (1998) all believed that spiritual awareness is innate within humanity.

Recently, theories about the biological basis of religious experience have been tested by scientists. Ramachandran, a neuroscientist, investigated the manifestations accompanying epileptic seizures that originated in the left temporal lobe. He discovered that epilepsy can lead to startling mental experiences, with patients reporting "deeply moving spiritual experiences including a feeling of divine presence and the sense that they are in direct communion with God" (1998:179). Ramachandran concluded that "there are circuits in the human brain that are specifically involved in religious experience" (ibid:188). Joseph (2001) concurred. He believed that mystical, spiritual, and religious feelings, experiences, and beliefs are worldwide and have been in evidence for more than 100 000 years; and that these behaviours and beliefs are related to activation of the amygdala, hippocampus and temporal lobe regions of the brain, which are responsible for religious, spiritual, and mystical trancelike states, dreaming, astral projection, near-death and out-of-body experiences, and the hallucination of ghosts, demons, angels and gods. Joseph concluded that there are neural assemblies in the brain that interact under certain conditions to produce hallucinations and feelings of God and the spiritual hereafter. He did not, however, conclude that religious experiences are simply hallucinations. He pointed out that certain experiences (for example, LSD experiences) are not hallucinations per se but the result of disinhibition and multisensory neurons processing signals from divergent sources simultaneously. As a consequence, one can see sound and feel colours: these are real stimuli that the brain can perceive but are normally filtered out. Joseph posed a provocative question: "Is it possible that gods, demons, or angels are filtered out?" (p. 132).

THE EMERGENT FIELD OF NEUROTHEOLOGY

"Neurotheology explores the links between spirituality and the brain. It is an attempt to explicate a biological theory that provides a neurological basis for the great human hunger for God" (Rause, 2002:22). An academic fascinated by the relationship between neurophysiology and religious/mystical states was Eugene d'Aquili (a psychiatrist and anthropologist), a pioneer investigator in the area of neuroscience. Together with Andrew Newberg (a radiologist), he set out to study mystical states. Newberg (2001:506) explained that their task was to develop "a constructive dialogue about the neurological interface between science and religion", because "it is at this interface that we think we have the best chance of integrating science and religion in such a way as to best comprehend and understand reality and, ultimately, our place within it". During their studies, d'Aquili and Newberg (1999) used an imaging technology called single positron emission computed tomography (SPECT) to map the

brain activity of Tibetan Buddhist monks meditating and Franciscan nuns engaged in deep, contemplative prayer. This method measures blood flow changes in the brain and is a way to assess changes occurring on a large spatial scale (i.e., 0.5-1cm) in the brain of a person. Their reasoning was that if religious mystical experiences had a physical, neurological component, this would be reflected in brain activity. D'Aquili and Newberg found that during meditation and contemplation, their subjects evinced increased blood flow in the prefrontal cortex and decreased blood flow in the posterior superior parietal lobe (the area they referred to as the orientation association area). This latter region is responsible for differentiating between the physical self and the rest of existence, a task that requires a constant stream of neural information flowing in from the senses. The significant drop in the amount of blood flowing to these areas during meditation caused them to be cut off from their normal sources of neural input. These processes are also accompanied by patterns of activity in the hippocampus, hypothalamus, and amygdala, areas of the brain associated with emotion.

D'Aquili and Newberg interpreted the data in this way: the orientation association area has the task of using visual and auditory input to create a three-dimensional image of the body in space (1993:33). This area is linked to "the 'self-other' or the 'self-world' distinction that philosophers and theologians have discussed throughout the ages" (ibid:34). When the right hemisphere's orientation association area gets cut off from its normal neural input, an experience of *pure space* ensues, which is labelled *absolute unity or wholeness*. When the left orientation association area is cut off, this results in the obliteration of the self-other dichotomy (ibid:112). These, when combined with events occurring in the hippocampus, hypothalamus, and amygdala, result in the subject attaining a state of transcendence and wholeness that conveys such overwhelming power and strength that the subject has the sense of experiencing absolute reality (ibid:113). D'Aquili and Newberg named this 'Absolute Unitary Being' (AUB), a state in which the subject loses awareness of discrete limited being and of the passage of time, and experiences obliteration of the self-other dichotomy (1999:109-10). AUB may be accompanied by blissful affect and is usually interpreted as the *unio mystica* of the experience of God or of the Void or Nirvana of Buddhism (ibid:110).

Holmes (1993:202), commenting on the 1993 work of d'Aquili and Newberg, believed that they meld neuroscience, philosophy, psychology and religion. They are concerned, he said, with the real mind, its two modes of functioning, and its two genuine experiences - everyday and mystical-religious. Religious experience is produced (though not caused) by the brain. It is an alternate reality produced not by everyday brain activity, but by an alternate activity of neural structures. D'Aquili and Newberg

(1999) offered a phenomenological argument that what is experienced in mystical states is just as real as or more real than what is experienced in our daily experiences, what they call baseline experience.[57] Newberg (in Rause, 2002:22, 23) stated:

> That's why religion thrives in an age of reason. You can't simply think God out of existence because religious feelings rise more from experience than from thought. They are born in a moment of spiritual connection, as real to the brain as any perception of ordinary physical reality.

Spencer-Smith (2002:1) concluded that:

> While this does not in itself prove the existence of God, it certainly shows that religion is as much a part of how our brains work as hunger or mathematics. In other words, science is teaching us that to ignore the sacred is to ignore a fundamental part of our being.

THE GOD GENE

Another scholar who investigated the biological basis of spirituality is Dean Hamer, a professor of molecular genetics. In 2004 Hamer published a book entitled *The God Gene*, subtitled *How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*. This book is the culmination of Hamer's study of the genetic foundations of spirituality. Hamer (2004:8) summarised his thesis:

> I propose that spirituality has a biological mechanism; that we have a genetic predisposition for spiritual belief that is expressed in response to, and shaped by, personal experience and the cultural environments. These genes, I argue, act by influencing the brain's capability for various types and forms of consciousness, which become the basis for spiritual experiences.

During the course of a non-related study, Hamer had discovered that 40 to 50 percent of spirituality (as measured by self-transcendence) is heritable. He decided to investigate further. In his subsequent studies, he used a scale called 'self-transcendence' which provides a numerical measure of people's capacity to reach out beyond themselves and to see everything in the world as part of one great totality. This scale is based on three distinct but related components of spirituality: self-forgetfulness, transpersonal identification, and mysticism. Hamer discovered that "Self-transcendence is part of a person's character. It's expressed every day of one's life. Although it may wax or wane depending on circumstances, it's always there to some extent" (ibid:84). Hamer noticed that all the subsets of self-transcendence

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[57] Ashbrook (1993), Holmes (1993), Peters (2001), Spezio (2001), and Delio (2003) investigated d'Aquili's theories and found them useful in explaining religious phenomena from a scientific viewpoint. Although they have a few minor criticisms, they are intrigued by the understandings and possibilities the theory presents.

involved consciousness. He explained this human capacity, noting that our brains receive, sort, process, and analyse

> an incredible volume of data with the greatest of ease to produce the most remarkable of all products: a seemingly coherent picture of the world that surrounds me. This is consciousness – our awareness of our surroundings and ourselves. It is at once both the most commonplace and the most mysterious of all life processes (p. 91).

Hamer explained how consciousness in humans arises. He noted that there are two different types of nervous system organisation. The first is the thalamocortical system, which receives signals from the outside world through the sense and coordinates motor movements and perception. The second system is the limbic-brain stem system, which lets the brain know what is going on in the body so that the brain can make the necessary adjustments. Consciousness arises through communication both within and between these two systems. Communication within the thalamocortical system is primarily about data from the senses and making sense of these. Communication within the limbic-brain stem system is different.

> The type of information conveyed is about values, not sights or sounds – whether something feels good or feels bad, not whether it is red or green. The limbic- brain stem system is about emotions, not about scenes. … What is unique about human consciousness is our ability to associate scenes and senses with emotions and values (Hamer, 2004:101, 102).

According to Hamer, the cells of the limbic- brain stem system communicate with the brain through neurotransmitters called monoamines, the biochemical mediators of emotions and values. They are what make us feel. Monoamines play a central role in consciousness. They lend value to perceptions by making us feel good or bad about other people, places, and experiences. Such evaluations are essential to our mental life. Without them, there would be no meaning to what we do or experience.

There are a number of genes involved in the production and transmission of monoamines. One gene in particular, named VMAT2, influences the ebb and flow of monoamines, specifically dopamine, serotonin, and noradrenaline. In so doing it helps to determine how we perceive alterations in consciousness. VMAT2 has a number of different formats, called morphisms. One of the differences in format is caused by a difference in one base pair within this gene. One morphism contains an A in the crucial point on the gene, and another morphism contains a C. Hamer (2004:73) explained:

> There was a clear association between the VMAT2 polymorphism and self-transcendence. Individuals with a C in their DNA – on either one chromosome or both – scored significantly higher than those with an A. The effect was greatest on the overall self-transcendence scale and was also significant for the self-forgetfulness subscale. With transpersonal identification and mysticism, the effect was in the same direction but just

> short of statistical significance. Somehow, this single-base change was affecting every facet of self-transcendence, from loving nature to loving God, from feeling at one with the universe to being willing to sacrifice for its improvement.

Apparently, by signalling a high level of value when confronted by transcendent perceptions of reality, the C-based morphism encourages an individual to focus on, to seek out, and to value such experiences. In contrast, the A-based morphism ascribes little value to such experiences which are consequently largely ignored by the individual. Approximately 47 percent of people possess the C-based morphism on one or both chromosomes, while 53 percent possess an A base on both chromosomes.

Hamer does not believe he has found the complete answer.

> The specific gene I have identified is by no means the entire story behind spirituality. It plays only a small, if key, role; many other genes and environmental factors also are involved. Nevertheless, the gene is important because it points out the mechanism by which spirituality is manifested in the brain (p. 11).

At the conclusion of this study Hamer was able to articulate his new understanding of spirituality.

> Spirituality … is a complex amalgamation in which certain genetically hardwired, biological patterns of response and states of consciousness are interwoven with social, cultural, and historical threads. It is this interdigitation of biology and experience that makes spirituality such a durable part of the fabric of life – a rich tapestry in which nature is the warp and nurture is the woof (p. 7).

Hamer (in Kluger, 2004:45) also asserted, "My findings are agnostic on the existence of God". For him, discovering a gene that facilitates spirituality neither confirms not disconfirms the existence of God.

CONCLUSION

The findings and interpretations of Hamer's and of d'Aquili and Newberg's work have several implications for this study. They indicate that religious and mystical experiences are real and natural phenomena that involve not only the mind but the brain of the experiencing individual; they hint at the validity of religious experience as a motivating force in the life of the individual; they reveal the centrality of affective perception and emotional reaction in religious experience. These points confirm my belief that what I am studying is real and meaningful, and that a study of the religious experiences and interpretations of children and adolescents needs to focus on, and begin with, the deep and affective elements of the participants' relationship with God. Hamer's work also offers some explanation for several findings of this study.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

"Religion begins with religious experience and is sustained by it" (Hyde, 1990: 164).

THE NOTION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

"At the heart of each religion is the religious experience of the community of believers" (Webster, 1995:21). The three great monotheistic religions of today, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, began with the deeply intense experience of God of their founders. These experiences were then communicated to followers and enshrined in both their way of life and their teachings. However, religious experience is not confined to so-called holy men; Hill (1988:109) commented, "Most people have had spiritual experiences but perhaps have not named them as such".[58]

Religious experience is not easy to define. It is better understood by referring to descriptions rather than definitions, for no definition can encompass the entirety of religious experience. Hyde (1990:164) commented that, "Religious experience is a term that has been used to describe a variety of affective religious happenings. …experiences of wonder, of awareness of an absolute, or of trance states". Robinson (1984) proposed that religious experience is an awareness, however momentary or imperfect, of an order of reality both beyond and yet capable of permeating the rest of life. Hay (1987:16, 155) understood religious experience as "personal experience of the presence or power of whatever is conceived as ultimately real".

Many scholars have emphasized the fundamental value of religious experience. Schleiermacher's *Addresses on Religion* is described by Proudfoot (1985:1, 3) as a seminal work in religion which maintains that religious experience is the core of religion.[59] James (1902/1982) is another scholar who investigated the phenomena of religious experience. James believed that it is experience, not philosophy, that is the real backbone of the world's religious life. He held that feeling is the deeper source of

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[58] Hay (1987:xi, 215) reported, "Research over the last fifteen years or so has revealed that such experience is much more widespread in British and North American populations than was thought likely. …Many people have religious experience". Hay, Nye & Murphy (1996:49) stated, "Morgan Polls and Gallup Polls have supported the findings of some researchers that there is widespread report of religious experience in the adult population of the U.S.A.". Maslow (1964) wrote about *peak experiences* (a term he coined). He discovered that peak experiences were very common among those he interviewed. Paffard (1973) believed that religious experiences were common. He compiled a questionnaire which he gave to senior students and undergraduates and found that over half reported some kind of religious experience. McCready and Greeley (1976) found that religious experiences were far more common than had been generally realised. Riley (1988:7) concluded that numinous experiences "occur more frequently than the merely casual observer would suppose". Hinde (1999:198) noted that "religious experience …appears to be widespread".

[59] "Friedrich Schleiermacher (1799) wrote what is regarded as being the first book ever written on religion as such – not on a particular kind or instance and not incidentally, but explicitly on religion itself as a generic something" (Proudfoot, 1985:1).

religion and that philosophical and theological formulations are secondary. Otto's (1958) study of the experiential dimension of religion led to the coining of the term *numinous*, which he called "the basis and background of religion" (p. 60). Tamminen believes "it is not possible to speak about religiousness without religious experiences of some kind. These experiences are central to religiousness" (1991:31). Hay (1987:72) stated, "Religions always intend to be the social expression of an inner experience of the sacred or the holy".[60]

Recently, scholars have begun using the term *spiritual awareness* when referring to what was once called *religious experience*.[61] It has been noted that many people have mystical, spiritual experiences without relating these to God. Hay (1992:352-353) commented that there are "agnostics whose personality is open and who when they come across experience in this realm, are …unable or unhappy to have it labelled as religious".[62] The latest convention, therefore, is to use the term 'spiritual awareness' when referring to all forms of mystical or transcendent experiences, and to use the term 'religious experience' when the experiencer relates the experience to the notion of God. In essence, the experiences are of a similar nature: the difference lies in the personal interpretation of the experience.[63]

Two strands of experience are deemed religious, 'numinous' and 'mystical' experience. 'Numinous', a term coined by Rudolf Otto (1958), refers to the feeling of being in the presence of someone or something sacred or holy.[64] Mystical experience includes the sense of the unity or oneness of things.[65] James (1902/1982) spoke of four 'marks' of a mystical or numinous experience: it defies expression, it has a noetic quality, it is transient, and the subject experiences passivity and a suspension of volition. James also arrived at two fundamental insights about the nature of religious experience: it is existentially transformative, in that it raises our centre of personal energy and gives rise to regenerative effects; and religious experience can radically change the outlook and lifestyle choices of the experiencer. Although the experience is transient, its effects can last a lifetime.[66]

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[60] Reyes (1994:1) stated, "Religious experiences are part of human life and human development. These experiences are embedded in many children's life experience".

[61] Lealman (1991:268) is one scholar who prefers to use the term spiritual awareness.

[62] Watson (2000) noted that the atheists in her study were reluctant to call what they experienced 'spiritual'.

[63] Tamminen (1991:34) stated, "Religious experience is experience to which a sense of dependency on or connection to God/the divine and the transcendent is connected".

[64] This is similar to the notion of spiritual awareness.

[65] This is an example of d'Aquili's notion of Absolute Unitary Being.

[66] It is validated by the profound changes of personality which followed them (Clark, 1968).

RESEARCH INTO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Tamminen (1991:32-3), in addressing the religious development of children and young people, concluded that a fundamental question to be asked was: Do children have religious experiences, and, if they do, what are they like? He disagreed with Ronald Goldman's opinion on the subject:

> Religious precepts and concepts are not based upon sensory data, but are formed from other perceptions and conceptions of experience. The mystics, who claim to have direct sensations of the divine, are exceptions, but …they are extremely rare cases, rarer in adolescence and practically unknown in childhood.

The findings of scholars who researched religious experience also overwhelmingly contradict Goldman's assumption. Klingberg (1959), who studied the religious experience of 670 Swedish children, noted that the responses of the children had an experiential, spiritual tone to them. Elkind and Elkind (1962), who asked 144 teenagers to write about when, if ever, they felt closest to God, found that most of the students reported such experiences. Robinson (1977) reported on some of the religious experiences collected by the Religious Education Research Unit in Nottingham, England. He was most interested in childhood experiences reported by adults. He was impressed with the clarity and vividness of the recollections, indicating to him the importance of the experiences in the lives of the respondents. Heller (1986) had conversations with children about what they understood about God and how they communicated with God. He discovered that even young children had personal ideas about God and real experiences of God. Coles (1992) interviewed more than 500 Christian, Muslim, and Jewish children regarding their religious and spiritual experiences. He found that when he really listened to what the children said, he heard the story of their lived experiences. His research indicated that children regardless of culture and religious upbringing have experiences of and strong convictions about God.[67] Hughes (1997) reported on research conducted by Knight into the religious experiences of high school students at three Australian secondary schools. 21 percent of the respondents reported having religious experiences.[68] Hay (1979) reported on a study he conducted with university students. He listed the different types of experiences that emerged from his data: 'awareness of a power controlling and guiding me', 'awareness of the presence of God', 'awareness of a presence in nature', 'answered prayer', 'experience of a unity with nature', 'ESP, out-of-the-body, visions, etc.',

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[67] Other scholars reported similar findings. Darcy-Berube (1974) contended that there was a capacity for religious experience in young children and an intuitive acceptance of God's revelation. Smith (1985) argued in both psychoanalytical and theological terms that in infancy children began to experience the existence of a transcendent reality. This can be seen in the work of Tamminen et al. (1988) who reported studies of Finnish children aged six to eight who described God as being very close to them at times.

[68] It is worth noting that all the researchers mentioned so far in this section are male (with the exception of Sally Elkind who worked with her husband, David). I wonder if there would have been different findings had the researcher been a woman.

'awareness of an evil power', and 'conversion'. These categories are similar to those reported by Elkind and Elkind (1962) and by Hughes (1997). Another point noted by Hay (ibid.) is that a majority of religious experiences occur during periods of solitude. Elkind and Elkind (ibid.) concur with this finding.

There seem to be three differing conclusions as to when religious experiences first begin. Hay (ibid.) noted that most of his respondents underwent their first religious experiences during mid-adolescence. [However, this finding comes from some of Hay's earlier work. In his later (1998) study with Nye, he noted young children reporting religious experiences.] Paffard (1973) also found that very few high school students reported religious experiences that had taken place before adolescence. However, Tamminen (1994) found that "religious experiences are relatively common, especially in childhood, but … decreased as pupils moved from childhood to adolescence". Farmer (1992) also reported that many of her respondents claimed to have had religious experiences as young children. In contrast, Munkachy's (1974) found that, of the respondents who remembered having peak experiences, half were between the age of six and eleven at the time, and half were between the ages of twelve and seventeen.

In the past, some researchers approached the issue of religious experience and spiritual awareness from the perspective of pre-conceived notions of the restricted nature of these experiences (that is, that they are rare), and of the ineligibility of certain sections of the populations for these experiences (in particular, that children were incapable of having such experiences). However, when researchers explored the phenomenon of religious experience from the desire to discover what experiences people have, very different findings emerged. It has been reported that many people claim to have experiences of a spiritual or religious nature, and that even very young children have these experiences. However, there is very little research that reports on the place of these experiences in informing spiritual concepts and in informing relationships with God. These issues are the subject of this research.

The researchers who noted difficulty in researching religious experiences approached the task from a quantitative perspective. Those researchers who approached the task from a qualitative perspective discovered that this more personal and involved approach encouraged children to reflect more deeply and to confide their experiences more completely to the researcher because of the personal relationship that had been built up. This is one of the reasons why I chose to use the qualitative approach of phenomenology during the course of this study.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

"Relationship to God is a crucial element of one's spirituality. This relationship provides a means to make sense of life, especially the incomprehensible and tragic elements of life" (Oser, 1991:6).

Komonchak, Collins and Lane (1987) explained that spirituality in its religious sense, refers to the relationship between the individual and God. Bentley (1992:61) noted that, according to a 1989 Australian National Study, 40% of young people consider that having a relationship with God is very important to them. Despite this, the issue of relationship with God has received little attention from researchers. One reason is that such an affective, constantly changing phenomenon cannot adequately be studied quantitatively, the method of investigation most favoured by researchers. Wakefield, (1975:122) stated that "a person's relationship to God does not come within the bounds of human measurement. Nor can it be quantitatively known".

Some quantitative research touched on relationship with God. Hutsebaut (1972) conducted an open question study which centred on "the meaning of God for male and female adolescents in an attempt to elucidate the content of the relationship with God" (p. 396). He then proceeded to categorize the content of his collected data, without attempting further descriptions or analyses of the significance of the data. Berryman (1985:120) inquired into the relationship children have with God. He stated, "The child's spirituality is assumed to be a comprehensive relationship with God that involves the whole person". He did not test this assumption or attempt any analysis or description of the children's relationship with God. Blombery (1991) studied the results of an Australian survey of the religiousness of Australians. She concluded that God concepts influence one's relationship with God. Nishikori (1999) studied the relationship between the God concepts of Japanese Christians and their relationship to God. He found that English-speaking Japanese Christians who had close relationships with God perceived God as the One who challenges them to grow, accepts them unconditionally and also responds to their prayers or to their life of faith. Eshleman et al. (1999) studied children's perceived distance from and involvement with God in relation to several factors.[69] They found that children who were older, or whose parents were less involved, perceived God as closer; when children perceived God as male, boys perceived God as closer; when children perceived God as female or in a non-anthropomorphic way, girls perceived God as closer.

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[69] These factors were parents' involvement in parenting, children's perceptions of God's gender, and God's involvement in problematic situations.

Two studies have qualitatively investigated children's relationships with God. Thackeray (2000) investigated children's relational perceptions of God. The purpose of the investigation was to examine what perceptions of a personal relationship with God children report, and what links existed between children's relationships with God and with their concepts of God. The respondents were six students aged five, nine and fifteen. The results indicated that children believed they related with God through interaction such as prayer, talking, reading the Bible, prayer and worship and spending time alone with God. There was a positive relationship between children's relational perceptions of God and children's concepts of God. However, one problem with this study is that, despite Thackeray's stated purpose to investigate children's perceptions of their relationships with God, what she reported on was the means or mechanism through which children related to God. This focus on mechanism is shared by most other scholars who reported on this aspect of religious experience. For me, investigating children's perceived relationships with God is akin to investigating children's relationships with their parents. It involves the degree of closeness and security a child feels, the material aspects of the relationship, and the degree of responsibility and reciprocity the relationship involves.

In 1999 I explored the reported relationship with God of 96 seventeen year olds attending a Catholic high school (Devenish, 1999). I discovered that each response was unique, and that there was a vast range of reported relationships. I described the data under broad groupings which were: a negative or antagonistic relationship with God; a null relationship with God, which included responses that implied that God was not a factor in the respondent's life; a 'background' relationship where God assumed a degree of importance only at critical times in life; a needs-based relationship where God's role was primarily that of providing for the needs of the respondent; and a reciprocal relationship where the respondent considered him/herself to be in an important, loving, two-way relationship with God. One limitation of my research is that it reported on the experiences of a specific group of teenagers, attending a Catholic school, at a specific point in time. One could ask whether these experiences are generally representative of seventeen year olds, and if they are indicative of the relationships of younger children.

It seems that relationship with God is one element of the spirituality of children that has received little attention from researchers. One reason for this lack is the difficulty of adequately measuring such an intimate, personal, dynamic, and unquantifiable phenomenon. However, if one foregoes the aim of measuring the phenomenon, and instead concentrates on exploring and describing something of its essence, and if one

converses with one's respondents and trusts their responses, the task becomes approachable. It seems to me that this is a worthwhile task. I think it would be useful to know: Do children in primary school also perceive themselves in relationship with God, or does their supposed lack of conceptual ability mean that they are incapable of conceiving of a relationship with God? If they do relate to God, are their relationships qualitatively different from those of older children? How do children's perceived relationships with God impact on their lives in general and their spirituality in particular? Further research addressing these questions is needed if a more holistic picture of children's spirituality is to be gained.

GOD-CONCEPT

'The concept of God is the pivotal concept of religion. ... [It] has often been considered crucial in the development of the form and emphasis of an individual's personal religiousness' (Tamminen, 1991:159-60).

THE NOTION OF GOD CONCEPT

God concept has been studied in the Western world more than any other religious concept during the past few decades. This is due to two reasons: the first is the centrality of God concept in the faith life of individuals, a point noted by De Roos, Miedema and Iedema (2001:607); the second is that God concept is a comparatively easy concept to research, being ascertainable through checklists and questionnaires. As such, it lends itself more readily to research than the more difficult aspects of religiousness such as experiences of God and the meaning of God in one's life.

The term *God concept* is frequently interchanged with the term *God image.* Although there is a difference between these terms, it is negligible judging by current usage. A third, related term, *God representation,* appears in the psychological literature. Rizzuto (1979:47) defined the terms:

> An image of god is a precise and dynamic element within the self. It is the reality within one's being with which one carries on a conversation. Moreover, one can have an image of god of which one is afraid or which one does not like. Atheists have an image of god in which they do not believe.

The concept or image of God is central to one's religious life: As it is not possible to directly apprehend God, one's God concept becomes the internal construct that mediates all one's experiences, knowledge, and beliefs about God, creating a constellation of meaning. McCloskey (1991:15) observed that most of us gravitate towards one or two images of God that help us make sense of life around us.

GOD CONCEPT STUDIES

Psychological Studies

Studies that investigate God concept can be divided into three groups: psychological, quantitative, and qualitative studies. Psychological studies differ from the other two groups in that the focus of investigation is the psychological formation of God concepts. Following Winnicott's (1953) description of *transitional space,* and the psychological theory of object relations espoused by Winnicott (1971), Rizzuto (1979) and others,

many psychologists have sought to show how a God representation is formed in the mind of a child.[70] Psychological studies are atheistic in their assumptions.[71]

Most psychological God concept studies are quantitative in nature and therefore begin with the postulation of hypotheses. Dickie, Eshleman, Merasco, Shepard, Vander Wilt and Johnson (1997) believed that there would be a positive correlation between children's perceptions of God and their perceptions of their parents. Their study indicated that their hypothesis was correct. Many researchers hypothesised that the God concept formed by children would be closely related to their self-concept.[72] The results of their studies confirmed the hypothesis. De Roos, et al. (2001) studied the relationship between the God concepts of kindergarten children and their relationships with their teachers, believing that they would find a positive correlation. Their study also confirmed their assumptions.

Other psychological God representation studies investigated various elements in the nature of, or formation of the individual's God representation. Hutsebaut (1972:405) concluded that children tend to conceptualise the God they need. He claimed that "relational patterns (father, friend, helper, benefactor) …are given by respondents who need help and support". Nelson (1996:1) investigated the human condition that causes people to form an image of God. He concluded that a primary image of God is formed by the age of three. Furthermore, it "is formed to satisfy psychological needs of their self formation, and it reflects their experiences with caregivers". Eshleman, Dickie, Merasco, Shepard and Johnson (1999) reported finding an inverse correlation between children's perception of their emotional distance from their parents and their perception of their distance from God. This finding supports Nelson's conclusion: when children have a close, loving relationship with their parents, they have no need of a close, loving God, whereas children who feel distanced and unloved by their parents, need the love and closeness of God. Hutsebaut and Verhoeven (1995) departed from the usual psychological study of God representation. They posed a methodological question: Which is the better way to study God representation – through questionnaires or open-ended questions? They constructed a study using both

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[70] These studies include the works of Vergote and Aubert (1972), Tamayo and Desjardins (1976), Rizzuto (1991), and Buri and Mueller (1987, 1990, 1993).

[71] Consider, for example, Nelson's (1996:22) understanding of the process. According to object relations theorists, human motivation and personality develop from relations with objects, which can be things, people, or conditions. The God image that infants create between their second and third years is unlike other objects that they internalize, being neither static nor something they can ignore. It is a lifelong structure constructed out of instructions given by caregivers and the internalized image and feeling states that characterize relations with parents and others. The image is formed to account for the world in which the child finds itself and is formed before religion is adopted.

[72] Among these studies are, Benson and Spilka (1973), Rizzuto (1979), Buri and Mueller (1987), Buri (1990), Lawrence (1991), and Penticoff (1996).

methods and concluded that the questionnaire "gives a good approach to the God representation, but in order to give the subjects the freedom to express their own representations …an open-ended question is recommended" (p. 59).

Quantitative Studies

A second group of studies is the quantitative group. This group is similar to the psychological studies group in that both are quantitative and both are psychologically based. The key differentiating factors are, firstly, that psychological studies assume that God concept is a needs-based mental creation of the child, while the quantitative group makes no such assumptions, occasionally implying an external reality to which the child's concepts relate. Secondly, psychological studies focus on the formation of God representation in children, and explore the various psychological factors that impinge on or are affected by the God representation; the quantitative group focuses on the nature of the God concepts of children and the influence these have on the children's faith and spirituality. Of this quantitative group, Kunkel, Cook, Meshel, Daughtry and Hauenstein (1999:194) noted:

> Research on God images …tends to fall squarely within the positivistic and reductionistic mainstream psychological tradition. Most research has attempted to measure God images within quantifiable domains selected by the researchers.[73]

Research into God concept concentrated mainly on the characteristics of God, as described by a series of adjectives. Several instruments were developed to measure this.[74] Many surveys have been completed using these instruments, including Greeley, Greeley, McCready, and Sullivan (1981), and Roof and Roof (1984) who surveyed the God concepts of Americans. Similar research in Australia was conducted by Blombery and Hughes (in Blombery, 1989, 1991).

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[73] This type of research is characteristic of the work of many scholars. Nelson and Jones (1957), Elkind (1962), Goldman (1964), Babin (1965), Wakefield (1975), Fowler (1981), and Bassett et al. (1990) investigated children's religious thinking and concept development, using Piaget's (1953) theory of cognitive development. Based on this research, other scholars investigated various elements of God concept: Potvin (1977) and Nieratka (1984) studied adolescent God images; Blombery (1991) and Nishikori (1999) reported on the God concepts of Australians, and of Japanese Christians, respectively; Nelsen, Cheek and Au (1985) examined gender differences in images of God, and Ladd, McIntosh and Spilka (1998) delved into the influence of denomination, age and gender on children's God concepts; Barrett & Keil (1996) analysed the androcentric nature of participants' God concepts; and Sohn (1986) explored the implications for curriculum development of respondents' God images.

[74] For example, instruments have been developed or adapted by Spilka (1964), Spilka, Armatas and Nussbaum (1964), Gorsuch (1967, 1968), Vergote (1969), Benson and Spilka (1973), Vergote and Tamayo (1981), Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls and Frease (1986), Gaultiere (1989), and Lawrence (1991). These measurements were essentially a list of God concepts from which subjects selected the ones that most reflected their own concepts of God.

These quantitative studies produced a broad overview of the way children conceive of God. Babin (1965) identified two distinct ways that adolescents conceptualised God: the 'God-in-himself' group (more frequently held by boys), and the 'God-in-relation-to-us' group (characteristic of girls' God concepts). Wakefield (1975), following Piaget's lead, identified four periods in God concept development: a foundational period (birth to two years), pre-conceptual period (two to seven years), concrete concepts (seven to eleven years) and abstract concepts (eleven to fifteen years). He proposed that "concept development actually is a progressive development moving from disorganized to organized, formless to form, concrete to abstract, literal to symbolic" (p. 123). Potvin (1977) discovered that 31% of youth aged 13 – 18 doubt or do not believe in a personal God. He also concluded that "no one theory explains God images among adolescents" (p. 51). Blombery (1991), who studied the religious life of Australians, commented that relationships exist between particular images of God, people's assessment of the purposefulness of their life and their degree of control, and their position as central or peripheral to the social mainstream. Bassett et al. (1990) gave their subjects pictures from which to select their image of God. They noted a clear preference for a male image of God. The strength of the traditionally masculine interpretation of God is also noted by Ladd et al. (1998), whose work suggests a linear progression from less to more usage of symbolism.

The approach adopted by these studies caused problems: Goldman (1965) spoke of "verbalism", a discrepancy between children's concepts and their ability to verbalize these; Blombery (1989) noted that respondents are limited to single words and simple descriptions which do not reveal the personal interpretations an individual places on a particular description of God; Rizzuto (1991:55) commented that there are discrepancies between 'the official God of religion' and 'the living God of religious experience'.[75]

In discussing God concept research, Kunkel et al. (1999:194, 195) claimed:

> The rational and empirical approach to scale construction has enabled reliable examination of research participants' response to selected items. It is unclear, however, to what extent these items capture meaningfully and completely the extent of participants' construals of God. … Research on God images … would benefit from attempts to capture individuals' meanings in a way that acknowledges and accommodates their ambiguity and variability. Such approaches would seek to discover and then clarify the meaning of these images for participants, without limiting response options to those specified a priori by the researchers.

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[75] She wrote, "When the imagery evoked by the God of official religion is not capable of linking up with the living God of personal experience, belief may become impossible" (ibid:59).

Qualitative Studies

Qualitative studies were completed by researchers who recognised the limitations of much quantitative research and who consequently employed affective and holistic methods in the study of God concepts. In contrast to the mainly cognitive and learned responses elicited by previous studies, the qualitative studies tended to evoke personal responses. It also can be differentiated from the previous two groups by its interest in, and focus on, the meaning of respondents' God concepts, and how these meanings facilitate relationship with God. Cavalletti (1983:13) spoke of the "changing field of relationships" between various aspects of one's religiousness, thus hinting at the complex, interdependent and dynamic nature of religious development. Because of this, Cavalletti used an informal, discursive approach to her interviews.[76] Other methods of elucidating the meaningful concepts of children have included: studies by Coles (1990, 1996), who asked children to draw for him and talk to him about their notions of God; a study by Hample and Marshall (1991) which required primary school children to write letters to God as a way of expressing their concepts of God, and research by Reyes (1995) which made use of observation and interviews to uncover the God concepts of preschoolers. A number of other researchers also used picture drawing as a method of enabling children to express their concepts of God.[77]

The results of qualitative studies are varied. They produced results that confirmed, but also contradicted, the findings of quantitative studies. Frequently they yielded insights about issues and meanings that were considered unsuitable for quantitative measurement. A number of feminist scholars investigated the negative effects on girls of the use of exclusively male concepts of God.[78] Barrett and Keil (1996:2), using story processing tasks, found that "students often used an anthropomorphic God concept that was inconsistent with their stated theological beliefs". Thom (1993) studied the images of God of children in Britain and Australia. She used picture drawing and/or verbal descriptions as methods of collecting data. She found a predominance of conventional images of God, including 'old man', 'loving father', 'king', 'Jesus', 'Judge'. However, Thom also received a number of unusual responses such as "I see God as a tree" and "infinite, eternal, unchangeable, supreme spirit and being. Cobwebs" (pp. 39, 44). These types of responses led her to report, "The idiosyncratic responses show that irrespective of age, sex, ethnic background or education level there is a uniqueness about the human person that is evident in the expressed image of God" (pp. 35-36).

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[76] Other researchers to use this more relaxed, open manner of questioning include: Foster and Keating (1992), Janssen, De Hart and Gerardts (1994), Hutsebaut and Verhoeven (1995), and Hay with Nye (1998).
[77] Notably Harms (1944), Heller (1986), Bassett et al. (1990), Coles (1990), Todd (1992), Thom (1993), Tamm (1996), Collins et al. (1999), Devenish (1999) and Gunther-Heimbrock (1999).
[78] These include Randour and Bondanza (1987), Darragh (1991), Trau (1992), Hide (1992), Curran and Ryan (1993), and Nolan (1996).

Janssen et al. (1994) investigated the images of God of Dutch adolescents. The results indicated that it was impossible to detect any common language used to talk about God; God is primarily described as acting, and is known in relation to the effects God produces; and most of the respondents were constructing their own kind of religion. Adato (1998) gave cameras to children aged eight to thirteen and asked them to photograph something that answered the questions 'Who is God?' and 'What would you ask God if you could?' She concluded that "all children, regardless of religion, or whether they were raised in a faith at all, depict the god they need. ...For a girl who had witnessed chaos, God was order". Despite similarities, the children's responses were highly individual and showed that they were capable of complex theological reasoning and questioning. Kunkel et al. (1999) investigated the God concept of a group of university students. They employed open-ended questions because they wished to discover the meaning of the images for the participants, and they also wanted to accommodate the multi-dimensional nature of God images. They eventually constructed a concept map of the participants' God images which graphically represented the clusters of meaning revealed, as well as the degree of intensity of the meaning. The findings were that "God images vary along the underlying dimensions of punitive versus nurturant and mystical versus anthropomorphic" (p. 193). They commented that the respondents' God images seemed to be highly personal and variable. I (Devenish, 1999, and Collins et al., 1999) completed two studies: one investigated the God concepts of 96 seventeen year old high school students; the other explored the God concepts of 158 primary school children in years one, four, and seven. In both of these studies I made use of drawing and writing as data collection methods. In both studies, the God concepts of the respondents were broadly grouped. In the first study, in which the respondents were year twelve students, the groups which emerged were: 'Does God Exist?', 'God as a Person', 'God as a Spirit', 'God as an Energy Force', 'The Mysterious Unknown', and 'Other'. The second study, in which the respondents were groups of primary school children, the concepts which emerged were: 'Creator God', 'Heavenly Being', 'Jesus God', 'Loving Carer', 'Earthly Male', and 'Mysterious Energy'. What struck me most about these studies was the vast range, both conceptually and theologically, of the responses, even among students of the same age, attending the same school. I was surprised by the sophistication and depth of thought exhibited by some of the eleven-year-old students, as well as by the variety and individuality displayed in the respondents' art and subsequent reflections. This present study seeks to discover not only the God concepts of the respondents, but how these concepts relate to the respondents' experiences of, and relationship with, God. One point clearly arising from this research is that to discover the nature of the meaningful concepts children have of God, it is necessary to let them communicate their notions in

their own way, with as little input as possible from the researcher. To hear children's own voices and to see their pictorial struggle to express who God is for them is more useful and meaningful than asking them to respond to a list of words developed by someone else.

Preschoolers' God Concepts

Few researchers have explored the God concept of preschool children.[79] Following the conclusions of Piaget (1953) and Goldman (1964), many researchers assumed that preschool children were incapable of forming individual concepts of God, being capable merely of repeating concepts taught to them.[80] However, many teachers and researchers who work with young children affirm that these children have individual, meaningful God concepts.[81] Few researchers have sought to discover these concepts.

The results of research that was conducted with preschoolers contradicted the assumptions of previous studies. Petrovich conducted structured interviews with three and four–year–old children and concluded that children of this age have quite sophisticated concepts of God, more sophisticated than those of many adults (in Watson, 1993:59). Tamminen (ibid:64) reported that "young children's concepts of God are entities with many levels and dimensions", and that "pre-school children have a readiness to understand God in ways that are not anthropomorphic".[82] Reyes (1994:1) believed that "how one perceives God determines how one develops a philosophy of the nature of human beings and the world". Her findings support the conclusion that "the preschoolers of this study have a definite concept of God".

Clearly, we need to recognize that children have their own spirituality and to respect their expressions of it. Thom (1993:48) expressed this well when she said, "If we continue to deny that young people are part of and interested in the mystery of life, we risk being lumped with the developmentalists, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and Fowler whom Edward Robinson says suffer from Acquired Immunity to Mystery Syndrome".

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[79] Tamminen (1988:59) claimed, "Most of the research excludes preschool-aged children, and the few studies that include them almost always describe their lack of understanding in contrast with the accomplishments of older children."

[80] Wakefield (1975:120) echoes this belief when he writes, "definite theological concepts do not appear to develop until in later childhood".

[81] This notion is present in the works of Rizzuto (1970), Cavalletti (1983), Endean and Hawkins (1996), Macdougall (1996), and Slusser (1997).

[82] Wilcox (in Tamminen, 1988:61) believed that preschool children may grasp fairly sophisticated theological concepts because they are not as concrete and literalistic as older children (ibid:61).

LANGUAGE ISSUES

"How can God be described or discussed using human language?"
(Thomas Aquinas, in McGrath, 1999:149)

METALINGUISTICS

Metalinguistics has fascinated scholars for many centuries. There have been numerous debates about the origin, nature and function of language, especially in the twentieth century. The peculiar nature of religious language also has received much attention. Essentially there are three approaches to the nature and function of language. The first approach is what Habermas (1968) called the 'correspondence theory'. According to this theory, language corresponds to a hidden reality and functions to express that reality. This notion can be seen in some of the earlier work of Vygotsky (1937). His theory implies that thought arises symbolically in children before language is assigned to it.[83]

An approach which opposes the above view is expressed by Whorf (1956) in the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis proposed that the real world is unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group, and thus functions to constitute reality. This perspective can been seen in the works of Wittgenstein (1958, 1969) who posited the notion of 'linguistic truth'; Cupitt (1998:22) who maintained that it is impossible to have experiences apart from language; and Keating (2000:19) who noted that nothing exists for a person until it is given linguistic form by that person.[84]

A third approach is one that combines both of the above viewpoints. In essence it states that language functions to both express and constitute reality. This approach is exemplified by Habermas' (1968) consensus theory of truth and by the modified form of the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis (in Moore, 1985). This view is developed by Chomsky (1972:102) who wrote of the 'recursive principle', the notion that language functions as both an expression of the human mind and the basis for a new creative act of the mind.[85] Slee (1987:61) used this approach when she stated that religious language

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[83] A later expression of this approach can be seen in the work of Polkinghorne (1988:26) who said, "Languages may be the device that allows reality to show forth in experience. Rather than standing in the way of the experience of the real, language may be the lens whose flexibility makes reality appear in sharp focus before experience", and of Reimer and Furrow (2001:8-9) who stated that "Language provides access to spiritual processes of thought and experience..."

[84] Ezzer (2002:17) explained that in radical postmodernistic thought, "'reality' is conceived to be indescribable, and there is a radical disjunction between reality and narrative".

[85] This view can also be seen in Vygotsky's later work (1987:250), in which he stated, "The relationship of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a movement from thought to word and from word to thought ...Thought is not expressed but completed in the word. We can, therefore, speak of the establishment ...of thought in the word".

constructs and interprets reality for the believer. This third approach is accepted in a variety of disciplines such as philosophy (e.g. Habermas, 1968), linguistics (e.g. Lindfors, 1987), theology (e.g. Kasper, 1989), education (e.g. Mitrano, 1990) and literature (e.g. Orwell, 1949). This is also the approach I take towards the nature and function of language.

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

In the theological field, the issue of the nature and function of religious language is of importance, as it is the key to communicating about God. Several approaches to language can be detected in theological writings. One of these, the literalistic approach, assumes that religious language is literally correct: God language describes God. This approach builds on Habermas' 'correspondence theory', in which language corresponds to a hidden reality and functions to express that reality. This approach is reflected in the writings of theologians such as Foh (1979), Oddie (1984) and Leonard (1989).

Another approach, the metaphorical approach, begins with the assumption that religious language is metaphorical.[86] God cannot be definitively known; however, language and other forms of symbols can allude to something of the nature and meaning of God for humankind. This approach is reflected in the writings of many modern theologians, such as Russell (1985), Johnson (1986), McFague (1987), Kasper (1989), Lane (1990), and Solle (1990).

McGrath (1999:149-155) reported Aquinas' view on religious language:

> How can God be described or discussed using human language? One answer is through analogies and metaphors – ways of thinking and speaking about God which are based on images. Analogies affirm that there is a likeness of correspondence between God and the image, which allows the latter to act as a signpost to God. …God is revealed in images and ideas which relate to our world of everyday existence, yet which do not reduce God to that everyday world. … A metaphor is a way of speaking about one thing in terms which are suggestive of another. Analogies seem to be appropriate (God is a father). Metaphors involve a sense of surprise (God is a lion).

Slee (1987:64-65) took the discussion about the nature of religious language a step further, summarizing its salient points. She found six characteristics of religious language: it is logically odd or distinctive (in that it has a distinctive religious

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[86] Trau (1992:310) states that "there is a strong tradition within Christian thought which supports the claim that religious language is at best metaphorical or analogical. Anthropomorphic descriptions of the divine are analogical or symbolic and are intended solely as a means of discourse and not as precise descriptions."

vocabulary which cannot be translated in non-religious terms); it is communal (in that it is rooted in a particular tradition, history, community and way of life); it is convictional (in that it is rooted within a context of commitment and conviction, and functions to express the commitment and conviction of the religious community); it is figurative and metaphoric (in that it uses the language of symbol, myth, metaphor, proverb, parable and story); it is narrative (in that it is associated with and grounded in certain paradigmatic myths and narratives which enshrine the identity of the religious tradition); and it is cognitive or reality-depicting (in that it implies certain convictions about the nature of reality which alone make sense of the attitudes and commitment of religious believers).

Halbfas (1971:58) explored the nature of religious language, raising the point that a specific, theological vocabulary is not necessary.

> To talk about God you do not have to use theological terms. The word "God" itself is often unnecessary, and (as so often used) awakens the suspicion that what is being talked about is really a very, very long way away. ... It is not the "what" that gives human [religious] language content, but its "how". Some people just speak about children, their house and garden, supper and bed, and yet their discourse is full of faith and hope, thanks and prayer. Others, of course, talk in a highly learned, theological manner, using the kind of concepts that would make you think they were on intimate terms with the Holy Trinity. But what does that kind of talk produce? Emptiness, helplessness, and often anger. ... The "content" of religious discourse is "God", but it is not this word, together with the vocabulary of Church doctrine, that communicates God, but only the life-revealing language of one's fellowmen [sic].

The importance and significance of God-language is mentioned by a number of scholars.[87] Slee (1987:60-61) commented:

> Researchers have indeed long recognized the peculiar significance of religious language for the individual's religious thinking, calling attention to the demands made upon the child by distinctive religious vocabulary and the largely figurative and symbolic nature of such religious language, and pointing to the problems of verbalism, literalism and confusion associated with such features.

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[87] The influence of religious language on religious thinking is mentioned by Chittister (1983), Harris (1987b), McGrady (1987), Marriage (1989) and Thom (1993). The notion that what one calls God affects one's relationship with God was mentioned by Gaden (1992) and Thom (1993). The preponderance of masculine religious language was commented on by Hyde (1990) and Foster and Keating (1992), and the difficulties of this type of language surfaced in the writings of Hyde (1990), Saussy (1991), Gaden (1992), and Spong (1992). The need for a revision of God-language was mentioned by Scharleman (1985), McFague (1982, 1987) Bulkeley (cited in Hyde, 1990), Treston (1990), and others. Russell (1985) and Moore (1989) spoke of the need to study the impact God-language has on people. Berryman (1985) mentioned the need for a more holistic approach to the study of religious language.

Few studies have been found that examine the kinds of language children use when communicating to or about God. Hay and Nye (1998) were interested in the issue of the language children use when communicating about God. They wondered whether the language of Christianity was an appropriate marker of children's spirituality, deciding that "it is important not to get caught into the assumption that spirituality can only be recognised by the use of a specialised religious language" (ibid:57). With this caution in mind, they listened carefully to the conversations of their respondents. They discovered that although some children used religious language, many did not. This led them to state that spiritual talk can be classified into two categories: dialogue that employed religious ideas and language; and non-religious dialogue that implicitly conveyed that the child was engaged in something more than the casual or mundane (ibid:101).

In 1999 I conducted a study that examined, among other things, the seventeen year old respondents' language about God. I analysed the written and spoken records of my participants, discovering five types of language. I named these types Factual, Personal/Contextual, Symbolic, Metaphorical, and Apophatic. What surprised me about this last category was that it was not present in any of the literature about language or religious language. In fact, the only place this particular type of language is found is in the writings of the mystics. I commented:

> The principle behind this form of communication is the understanding that God is essentially unknowable. Apophatic language has two main characteristics. Firstly, it asserts the essential unknowability of God. Secondly, the only statements it makes about God consist of comments about what God is not. The writings of 11 students [out of 96] in this study contain language about God that more closely resembles apophatic language than any other form of religious language. All responses in this group proceed from the premise that God is essentially unknowable, and state this belief in some form. Some of the responses also contain the second characteristic of apophatic language, that of asserting what God is not (p. 240).

This study seeks to build on my previous research in the following ways: by comparing the language employed by students of different ages, I can discover which types of language are common to all ages, and which types are utilised by students of specific ages; and by searching the data, I can discover to what extent my respondents used religious language, and to what extent they employ everyday language.

AGE DIFFERENCES

"As people grow in cognitive/affective maturity, they experience change in their concepts of God" (Nieratka, 1984:1).

McClosky (1991) explored the issues of how and why people's concepts of God change over their lifespan. She came to the following conclusion:

> What is true of personal or family relationships is also true of our relationship with God. Our perceptions may be accurate, or we may be misinterpreting the evidence, but in any case, we will act on the basis of those perceptions until we decide they are incomplete and that accepting new images is less risky than acting on the old ones. ...[If my image of God] is contradicted by the experiences of my life, I then need to consider seeking additional images of God that do justice to *all* of life as I have experienced it (pp. 9, 16).

This explanation provides a useful insight into what happens relationally in a person's life. It also explains many of the results of studies investigating God concept development. For example, Nieratka (1984) examined the development of religious concepts by age and by level of cognitive/affective maturity.[88] She concluded that age and religious complexity were related.

A trend in the development of God concept appears in Babin's (1965) study. Babin believed that pre-adolescents reply in impersonal ways and tend to repeat what they have learned. He found that in adolescence there was a feeling of insecurity and instability, expressed through doubts, agnosticism or refusal to accept God. In late adolescence Babin noticed there was an intellectual crisis concerning faith, expressed through irony, doubt, scepticism, agnosticism, and atheism. Babin reported that even those who still believed felt the need to be put in possession of serious reasons for belief. He found that in the period of late adolescence young people experienced a need for coherence and harmony between their beliefs in God and what they experienced. This trend toward greater questioning and doubt with increasing age is corroborated by several other studies. Potvin (1972) found that approximately 31 percent of youth between the ages of thirteen and eighteen doubt or do not believe in a personal God. Hutsebaut (1972:405) noted that more accepting and traditional images of God are held by younger respondents, whereas older adolescents show more doubt as well as individuality of expression. Tamminen (1994:83) reported, "the development during puberty and adolescence moves from a rather unreserved acceptance of Christian beliefs toward a more critical and doubtful attitude".

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[88] Characteristics of mature cognition employed in this study were: the acceptance of contradiction and ambiguity, the development of the self as referent, and the integration of real world knowledge with logic.

This trend is also found in a study by Nipkow and Schweitzer (1991) who reported on the changing conceptions of God from childhood into adolescence. They found that "The students perceived within themselves their movement from an unquestioning faith in childhood to a faith in adolescence based largely on questions" (p. 93). Analysis of the responses also revealed "a considerable range of ideas about God …from simple and concrete ideas about God to very elaborate, abstract, and critically considered descriptions" (ibid.). However, age did not seem to be an indicator of the level of abstraction in the data: "Even among the oldest students there were those who imagined God as a 'strong man with long white hair and a white beard'" (ibid.). Nipkow and Schweitzer explained their understanding of the patterns they discovered in their data:

> The adolescents' new sense of self, then, no longer can rest on identificatory participation in their parents' beliefs. Furthermore, their childhood images of God no longer fit their adolescent selves and, like the teddy bear of old, need to be put aside or only cherished in secret (ibid:95).

The evolution of God concepts throughout childhood and adolescence was reviewed by Tamminen (1991), who mentioned another trend. He reported that, according to Goldman, a child's concept of God is anthropomorphic up to the age of 10-11. From there, the child advances to the phase of the symbolic concept of God, which starts to develop at the age of 12. However, Tamminen's conclusions were very different: he noted that anthropomorphic, human descriptions of God were fairly rare in all the age groups, that anthropomorphic descriptions were no more common in later childhood than in puberty and adolescence, and that the anthropomorphic responses were scattered rather evenly throughout the different grade-levels (ibid:193). Tamminen (1988:64) also believed that "preschool children have a readiness to understand God in ways that are not anthropomorphic". Tamminen's conclusions, however, are not corroborated by other studies. Tamm (1996:39, 41) noted that "the concept of God as mystery increases significantly with increasing age" and that "older children draw symbolic compositions more frequently than younger children". This finding led Tamm to maintain that non-anthropomorphic God concepts increase within increasing age. Ladd et al. (1998:49) also found "a linear increase in the use of symbols with age".

Research presents two clear trends in the evolution of God concept: a movement from acceptance of what has been learned from others, to doubt and rejection of learned concepts in response to the need for personal coherence; and the movement from mainly anthropomorphic God images to more symbolic, metaphorical images. These trends appear in research I conducted in 1999 (in Collins et al.) during which I studied

the God concepts of year one, year four and year seven students. I found that year one students mainly conceptualised God as a young man who created nature and who can be found within it. This notion is anthropomorphic and derived from traditional images; it also presents an image of an immanent God. The year four students continued the patterns present in year one. However, some of the year four students took traditional images and combined them with their own interpretations, creating semi-personal images and concepts. Other students took images from myth and other forms of literature and begun exploring the interrelationship between these symbols and the concept of God. The year seven group of students also used traditional imagery and concepts to express an understanding of God as the creator and guardian of nature, or as an anthropomorphic being living in heaven. However, approximately half of these students appropriated traditional imagery and gave it a personal interpretation, or took various traditional symbols and brought them together in a new way, or created new symbols for themselves. Certain trends are apparent in the data. Anthropomorphic thinking is prevalent among the year one students, but decreases with age. This is linked to the idea of God as an immanent being. In contrast, the older students, who tend to think of God in more abstract terms, also tend to think of God as transcendent. The trend from lack of symbolic use in year one, to use of symbolism by 63 percent of year sevens, is consistent with increased ability to conceptualise God in transcendent, non-anthropomorphic terms. These trends are consistent with the findings of previous studies. However, the movement to more abstract conceptualisation and use of symbolism occurs at a much younger age than that claimed by Goldman (1964), Babin (1965), and Hutsebaut (1972).

Most research that examined the development of religious concepts with age has focussed on the elements mentioned above. These are the trend from greater to lesser anthropomorphic conceptualisation, the trend from less to more symbolic use, and the trend from acceptance of others' teachings to an individual search for meaning. I have not found any research that examined the similarities and differences in existentially meaningful concepts held by children of varying ages; I have not found research that investigated the similarities and differences between younger and older children's experiences of God; I have not found any research that compared the relationship younger and older children report having with God. What I wish to discover is the nature of the interrelationship between experience of God, God concept and relationship with God, and how this whole phenomenon, as well as each of its component parts, changes with age. This is one focus of the present study.

GENDER ISSUES

"Males and females embrace religion for a variety of reasons and express their spirituality and religious concerns in many different ways" (Lewis, 1988:5).

Blombery (1991:88) investigated the religiosity of Australians. She discovered that the individual's religion is not a carbon copy of the group's entire official teaching. She noted: "It is reasonable to suppose that a woman's religious experience, and what she holds most important in her religion, should reflect her personal situation". Lewis (1988:3) noted that "gender appears to be a powerful influence in shaping the way persons perceive religious experience".

Some researchers noted a gender difference in conceptualising God. The discovery of gender differences within his data led Babin (1965) to postulate two ways of conceiving of God: 'God-in-himself' (the way boys see God) and 'God-in-relation-to-us' (the way girls see God). These conclusions are similar to those found in other research, including my own (Devenish, 1999).[89] Hutsebaut (1972) found that the images of 'power' and 'helper' were important for boys, whereas girls tended to prefer images of 'father' and 'relationship'. This is echoed by Potvin (1977) who noted in his study that girls more than boys tended to believe in a personal God who loves and is non-punishing. Heller (1986) also found that boys related to God in a rational way, while girls related in an aesthetic way. He also reported gender differences in children's perceptions of God's involvement. Boys' and girls' categorizations of God seem to follow gender stereotypes with boys perceiving God as distant, active, omniscient and rational, while girls perceived a closer, personal, passive God. Girls felt closer to God than did boys. These findings are similar to those of Tamminen (1996) who found that boys tend to conceive of God as rational and pragmatic, an active agent in the affairs of humanity, and a relatively distant Being. Girls conceived of God as more safe, real, near, caring and forgiving; either passive, or engaging with passive humanity; an intimate God; and a more androgynous image of God (either by conceptualising God as female or with feminine attributes). Tamminen also found that boys more than girls gave responses

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[89] However, Babin then interpreted this finding as indicating that girls are much obsessed by subjective needs, reply in a banal manner, are content to repeat what they have been taught, have a poorly developed sense of the objective moral order, and are fickle and emotive in their relationship with God. In contrast, boys' replies are of a personal character, spontaneous, affective, and expressed in a charmingly unsophisticated manner, reveal a better developed sense of the objective moral order, show a sense of loyalty to a leader and relate to God in a rational, consistent manner. These interpretations are debateable and not supported by any other research. Babin seems to have allowed his sexist attitudes to colour his interpretations and thus contaminate an otherwise competent piece of research.

denying or doubting God's existence.[90]   Most of these studies showed that females conceive of God as being closer to themselves than do males.   They also noted that females tend to prefer warmer relational images such as ever-present helper, personal friend, and comforter, whereas males tend to prefer more powerful, distant images such as creator and sustainer of the universe or redeemer.

Nelson et al. (1985:397) remarked on the "masculine bias in images of God".[91]   The problematic nature of this bias arises in the writings of many scholars.[92]   For example, Clanton (1990:71-72) commented: "The way women conceive of God affects their level of self-confidence.   The women in my research sample who see and speak of God as more than masculine scored higher in self-confidence than those whose God is masculine".   Eshleman et al. (1999) found that for young children when God was perceived as male, boys felt closer to God than did girls, but when God was perceived as female or in non-masculine ways, girls felt closer to God.   As the children entered middle childhood, there appeared to be a shift in perception of God for girls: they moved away from a more male perception to a more androgynous perception of God.   This shift was accompanied by a greater feeling of closeness towards God for girls.   Eshleman et al. remarked, "In an age during which gendered references to God have become controversial, our research indicates that perceiving God as male may distance God for girls and women" (ibid:146).

Tamm (1996:42) reported that a greater percentage of girls think of God as mystery.   She also found that "considerably more girls drew anthropomorphic, archetypal God figures, while God as a modern male or cartoon figure was drawn almost exclusively by boys".   Ladd et al. (1998:54) found that "the traditionally masculine interpretation of the Christian deity is still quite strong among children of all the groups studied" and that girls appear to perceive the deity as more male than do boys.   Nishikori (2000) concluded that women are more likely than men to consider God as one who challenges them to grow, and as one who influences them.   In my 1999 study, I found that the most noticeable difference between girls' and boys' responses lay in differing patterns of thinking and talking about God (Devenish, 1999).   The boys tended to exhibit patterns of egocentricity and objectification of the other, along with notions of personal agency.   Conversely, the girls tended toward sublimation of the self, and theocentricity, along with a strong degree of reactivity.

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[90] Other studies that report on this aspect of religiosity are Vergote (1969), Vergote and Aubert (1972), Tamayo and Desjardins (1976), Nelson et al. (1985), and Blombery (1991).
[91] Hyde (1990) and Foster and Keating (1992) also mentioned the overwhelming preponderance of masculine language and concepts.
[92] For example, Randour and Bondanza (1987), Clanton (1990), Hyde (1990), Saussy (1991), Gaden (1992), Spong (1992), Trau (1992), Ladd et al. (1998), and Kunkel et al. (1999).

There is consistent reporting about one particular gender difference. Elkind and Elkind (1962:105) wrote, "Women do tend to be more religious than men", and that "more girls than boys report recurrent experiences". Thompson (1991:381) noted, "Women are more religious than men. Among women, religion appears more salient to everyday activities, personal faith is stronger, commitment to orthodox beliefs is greater, and involvement in religious ritual and worship is more common than among men". Farcasin (1992) found that women have higher levels of faith maturity than men. He noted that men and women demonstrated statistically significant differences in patterns of adult religiousness over the life span, with differences favouring women over men. Tamminen (1994:79) reported that "girls were generally at all ages religiously more committed than boys", "the difference between girls and boys was not only quantitative but qualitative", and "girls in almost all grades experienced God's nearness and guidance more often than the boys did".

The general conclusion that girls evince a greater degree of religiousness has been challenged by a group of male scholars. Thompson (1991:383) expressed their position succinctly when he proclaimed, "it is a feminine outlook, and not being female, which has a significant effect on religiousness".[93] Reich (1997:80) adopted this view and further suggested that "gender-sensitive research with adults should assess the degrees of masculinity and femininity in every respondent and evaluate the results also in those terms". Francis and Wilcox (1998) conducted their own research and concluded, "The present study adds to the growing body of evidence that psychological theories, concerned with factors like gender orientation and personality, are capable of accounting for individual differences in religiosity both between males and females and within males and females".[94] It is not only scholars who view the issue from this perspective. McDonald (2005) reported on a new men's group in Australia which believes that part of the solution to the problem of the churches' old, patriarchal attitude is for men to reclaim their feminine side, in an effort to redress the imbalance both within men's spirituality and within the churches. These men seem to accept Thompson's (ibid.) thesis.

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[93] He continued with the statement, "If there is a gender gap in religiousness, it should be between those who do and those who do not use feminine interpretations of self in the modern world" (ibid.).

[94] These scholars follow Erikson's 1968 exploration of the notion of gender modes, rather than gender itself, as being important in the formation of individual religiousness. Erikson believed that the different gender modes represent different ways of approaching the Divine, and lead to different experiences and images of God. Zock (1997:191) explained Erikson's idea: "The masculine mode tends to place God in outer space, more specifically, in the transcendent sphere, where man's domain ends, beyond the human space-time and human possibilities. God is characterized as infinite, eternal, transcendent, omniscient, and omnipotent. The feminine mode tends to place God in the inner space, in the here-and-now, in the material bodily world – in short, in the immanent sphere".

PREVIOUS SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH

Nothing we do is original. We build on what went before (Devenish).

Much research into children's religious development has been undertaken. Many of these studies were quantitative in nature, yielding large amounts of information about the ways children think about God. Some of the research was more qualitative in nature, revealing the underlying essence or lived experience of God. The research I am undertaking is also qualitative in nature and follows the paradigm used by these latter researchers. Some of this research has more closely informed the direction my own research has taken. An overview of these studies will locate my research, illustrate my assumptions and methods, and provide secondary questions to investigate.

In 1944, Harms asked children to draw a picture of God and to write a description of their drawings on the back. He also asked adolescents to draw what God meant to them and to describe their drawings. He determined that there existed three stages: the fairy-tale stage, the realistic stage, and the individualistic stage.

In 1986, Heller compared and contrasted the ideas of God held by forty children. He asked the children to tell him about the most important thing they believed in, and then focused the rest of the interview on that name or notion. The children were also asked to express the meaning of God for them through drawings and doll play, and to write an original story about God. Heller discovered that boys relate to God in a rational way, while girls relate in an aesthetic way. He also noted that the girls felt closer to God, conceptualising God in a more passive way. Heller used interviewing, artwork and written expression as forms of data collection, something no other researcher had done, at that point. This enabled him to acquire data that was meaningfully rich and full.

In 1990, Coles reported on research he conducted into children's ideas of God. He used interviews and drawings to elicit information from his respondents. He noted that the preponderance were pictures of God's face. Coles commented (p. 40), "I have accumulated 293 pictures of God; all but 38 are pictures of his face, with maybe a neck, some shoulders, but no torso, arms or legs. These pictures are made in response to my request for 'a picture of God' ". This problem seems to have arisen because of the language used by Coles in his request for information: he asked for "a picture of God", phrasing that the children interpreted as meaning that a portrait of God was required. More careful, less directive language needs to be used if the respondents' own images are to be elicited.

In 1991 Nipkow and Schweitzer reported on their study investigating adolescents' faith. In this study, students between the ages of 16 and 22 were asked to write down their reflections and feelings about God. The researchers found a pattern emerging: the data could be accounted for using the framework of fulfilled and unfulfilled expectations. They found that students' statements indicated four distinct conceptions of God, each referring to a different expectation. "Furthermore, whether or not expectations had been or were being fulfilled seemed to determine whether or not belief in God was sustained" (ibid:92). The four expectations of God that Nipkow and Schweitzer identified were: God as helper and guarantor for the goodness of the world; God as key to explaining the world; God as real and more than just a word or symbol; and the Church as God's witness.

In 1993, Thom conducted research into the conceptions of God of students of all ages. She instructed her participants to, "describe, giving characteristics where possible, or draw the God you pray to when alone or with a group". She then asked them to "describe the God you prayed to ten years ago" (p. 39). Thom gave her participants the option of drawing or writing, thus enabling them to communicate in their preferred manner. One slight problem is that she assumed that her participants actually prayed, an assumption that cannot generally be made. Thom obtained a variety of original responses, verifying that a carefully worded, non-specific instruction is an important factor in the collection of meaningful pictorial data.

In 1996, Tamm reported on her study of the qualitative differences in children's God concept as reflected in their drawings. In this study, consisting of 425 children, the respondents were asked to draw their response to the incomplete sentence, "When I hear the word 'God' I think of ...", and then to give a commentary on what they had drawn. The drawings were analysed and categorised according to qualitative differences noted in them. The methods of data collection and analysis were fruitful and elicited a variety of responses.

In 1998, Hay with Nye undertook research that intended to "develop a theoretical perspective – an interpretation – of children's spirituality, based on reflections on what they have to say in conversation" (p. 83). The participants were 38 primary school children who entered into conversations with Rebecca Nye. Nye noticed what she termed the 'signature phenomenon', that is, that the individuality and specific personality of each child was interwoven within their responses, leading Nye to postulate a close connection between a respondent's psychological makeup and their spirituality. These conversations were taped, transcribed and analysed. Eventually,

Nye and Hay came to the conclusion that the essence of children's spirituality lay in the notion of "relational consciousness", a term they used to describe the essential characteristic of the spirituality of the children. This term referred to the two patterns Nye observed in the children's responses: an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness, relative to other passages of conversation spoken by the child; and conversation expressed in terms of how the child related to things, other people, God, and him/herself. I am interested in this conclusion, and have adopted it as a point of comparison with the data collected during the course of this study.

In 1999, I reported on research I undertook that examined the spiritual lives of a group of adolescents. In this study, I asked 96 year 12 students to draw what came to mind when they heard the word "God". Next, they reflected on their artwork and wrote about it, noting what it revealed about the meaning of God for them. They then added any other ideas they had about God. Finally, those students who wished attended an interview with me where they discussed their relationship with God. The combination of methods I employed in collecting data, that is, artwork, writing and interviewing, is one that I had encountered only once before, in Heller's research. For this study I have chosen to employ all three methods because they proved valuable in previous research, and I want to maximise the information I collected.

The research I am undertaking was informed by the studies mentioned above and flows from my previous research. Previously, I studied the spirituality of seventeen year olds, examining their language about God, their concepts of God and their reported relationships with God. This research is a step forward in several ways: it examines not only the aforementioned elements, but also includes the element of experience of God; the respondents are ranged in age from four to eighteen, rather than being selected from only one age group; and the general intent of the study was to determine the nature of the development of God-concept, experiences of God, relationship with God and God-language throughout the schooling years.

CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF THIS STUDY

"Questions about God are best answered in qualitative research because, unlike quantitative research, it has the capacity to uncover the quality, value and meaning of students' understanding" (Dahlin, 1990:75).

THE ROLE OF QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

"Nothing is more difficult to express than who one's God is!" wrote Catherine Thom (1993:35). For a researcher to uncover who or what God is for children and adolescents, the selection of an appropriate methodology is crucial. Murphy (1978, in Hay, Nye and Murphy, 1996) commented that a major difficulty in investigating children's spirituality is in devising a plausible methodology. Brink (1995:467-469) investigated the use of quantitative and qualitative methods in studying religion. He concluded that quantitative methodology is "essential but inadequate. …It does not tell us about inter- and intrasubjective meanings. … It [is] guided by what is most measurable, not what is most relevant". Janssen et al. (1994) commented on the inadequacy of much previous research in the area of God image, noting the limited success achieved through the use of scales and questionnaires. They maintained that if researchers want to study the way adolescents think about God, they have to study the content of adolescents' thoughts and the meaning they ascribe to it, not just their precoded reactions to fixed lists of stimuli.

Kay (1996:37) commented on the apparent conflict between quantitative methodology and the study of spirituality:

> Why is there such a conflict between stage-developmentalists and the current pursuit of spiritual awareness? Possibly, there is a category mistake. For example, Fowler, Oser Goldman, and others have written about religion from within the context of the language of science about the material world. If such a scientific world-view could adequately explain religion and religious experience then developmental theories would be adequate. However, what is actually happening is that examining religion through this lens merely reduces religion to observable behaviours and verifiable facts. This is not to refute the finding of these theorists, merely to indicate that they only reveal a small part of religion, mainly the cognitive aspects, relegating the more fundamental element of experience and relationship with God to an insignificant position. We need to consider religion from the context of the religious worldview, that is, from within the phenomenon, to avoid category mistakes.

It would seem that qualitative methodology is more suitable than quantitative methodology for the study of students' experiences of God, relationship with God, and concepts of God because these phenomena do not belong to the realm of observable behaviours and verifiable facts, and they cannot be quantifiably measured. What was needed for this study was a methodology that allowed me as the researcher to enter the respondent's world and discover the nature and meaning of the respondents' experiences. Schwandt (in Patton, 2002:51) said, "The idea of acquiring an 'inside' understanding – the actors' definitions of the situation – is a powerful central concept for understanding the purpose of qualitative inquiry".[95] Patton (1990:13) elaborated on the advantages of qualitative methodology by noting that "qualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry".

Patton (1990:424) highlighted the key difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches:

> It is important to understand that the interpretive explanation of qualitative analysis does not yield knowledge in the same sense as quantitative explanation. The emphasis is on illumination, understanding, and extrapolation rather than causal determination, prediction, and generalization.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Berryman (1985:125) claimed that quantitative research could not adequately investigate relationship with God, suggesting that perhaps phenomenology's method might be more appropriate.[96] This is because, as Patton (1990:69) explained, phenomenologists focus on how people put together the phenomena they experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and develop a worldview. He also noted that phenomenologists operate on the assumption that there is no separate or objective reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and what it means for them. Phenomenology, then, is a form of qualitative research that specifically focuses on the lived experience of its respondents. Van Manen (1990:9, 41) noted that the chief aim of phenomenology is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or

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[95] Ezzy (2002:xii) explained that qualitative research "involves working out how the things that people do make sense from their perspective. This can be done only by entering into their world, so that their world becomes our world".

[96] Thorne (1991:182) described the assumptions of phenomenology: "Phenomenology is a philosophic attitude which derives from inquiry into the essential questions of ontology (the nature of being) and epistemology (the nature of knowledge). Its primary position is that the most basic human truths are accessible only through inner subjectivity. …Philosophic phenomenology, as well as its offspring methods, hermeneutics and heuristics, searches beneath the assumptions of the sciences in order to disclose its experiential roots".

meaning of our everyday experiences, and its task is to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience. Thorne (1991:182) commented that because of its existential focus, phenomenology is necessarily concerned not only with what is known but with how it is known and how it is expressed linguistically and behaviourally.

In order to discover the meaning of the participants' lived experience, the phenomenological researcher needs to become familiar with certain concepts and protocols pertaining to the methodology of phenomenology. Janesick (2004:117) commented on a very important point: "Qualitative work demands that the researcher avoid trying to prove something. …This means that you do not go into the field with the answers. You are always framing questions". Flick (2002:2) concurred, noting that instead of starting from theories and testing them, the researcher enters the field with 'sensitizing concepts', and later develops theories inductively.

Another point raised by phenomenological researchers is the role of the researcher. Piantanida and Garman (1999:139-140) explained this role:

> At the heart of the inquiry is the researcher's capacity for encountering, listening, understanding, and thus 'experiencing' the phenomenon under investigation. Rather than assuming the traditional stance of a detached and neutral observer, an interpretive inquirer, much like a tuning fork, resonates with exquisite sensitivity to the subtle vibrations of encountered experiences.

The engaged nature of the researcher's role in data gathering is one of the points upon which all qualitative researchers agree.[97] Patton (2002:50) explained the nature of this engagement when he wrote of "empathic neutrality" which requires one to remain focussed on the project at hand without being sidetracked by irrelevant points, while simultaneously engaging empathically with the respondents to the point that they are aware of being involved in an interaction with someone who cares about what they think.[98]

Another important point in phenomenological research concerns the assumptions one makes about the results of one's research. Qualitative researchers do not assume that

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[97] For example, Flick (2002:6) stated, "Qualitative methods take the researcher's communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge production instead of excluding it as far as possible as an intervening variable. The subjectivities of the researcher *and* of those being studied are part of the research process". Meloy (2002:145) noted, "Because qualitative research requires personal rather than detached engagement in context, it requires multiple, simultaneous actions and reactions from the human being who is the research instrument". Marshall and Rossman (1999:79) noted that "In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument: Her presence in the lives of the participants invited to be part of the study is fundamental to the paradigm." Drew (1989) commented that the researcher's feelings are a source of understanding, creativity and meaning-making.

[98] Glesne (1999:6) explained that "the researcher role is noted for its personal involvement and empathic understanding".

they present an objective, uncontested account of respondents' experiences. On the contrary, as Piantanida and Garman (1999:247) insist, "interpretivists do not claim that their research portrayals *correspond* to a general reality, but rather that interpretivist portrayals strive for *coherence*, which provides the reader with a vivid picture of the essence of the meanings of what is under study". Flick (2002:30) succinctly summarised the qualitative position when she explained that "theory produced by qualitative research methods … does not produce a final account of the nature of reality". Nielsen (1998:98) noted, "Our stories and the telling of them are always partial, always selective, always open to interrogation". Qualitative researchers, therefore, should aim for "a compelling picture of the phenomenon as it manifests within a particular context" (Piantanida and Garman, 1999:133).[99] McNiff (1998:14) believes that a study needs to pass the researcher's "personal test of truthfulness: will the study be of use to others and to ourselves? Will the process of inquiry help people in any way? And, most importantly, does the study resonate with the researchers' experience?"

This study was carried out as much as possible in accordance with the principles mentioned above. Firstly, I selected a respondent population. Then I used qualitative data collection methods to collect rich descriptions of the phenomenon in the participants' own words. Next, I analysed inductively, a process that involves "discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data. Findings emerge out of the data, through the analyst's interactions with the data" (Patton, 2002:453). I then attempted to create a core portrayal of the phenomenon. "This core portrayal must be richly descriptive, rendering a compelling picture of the phenomenon as is manifests within a particular context. The vibrancy – the believability of this core portrayal contributes to the verite of the dissertation" (Piantanida and Garman, 1999:133). Finally, "the qualitative researcher attempts to elaborate or develop a theory to provide a more useful understanding of the phenomenon" (Ezzy, 2002:5), a task I have attempted as well as my limited expertise permits.

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[99] Flick (2002:9) explained what happens during the qualitative research process: "Qualitative research becomes a continuous process of constructing versions of reality. The version somebody presents in an interview does not necessarily correspond to the version he or she would have formulated at the moment when the reported event happened. It does not necessarily correspond to the version he or she would have given to a different researcher with a different research question. The researcher, who interprets this interview and presents it as part of his or her findings, produces a new version of the whole".

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

'Theories shape both how qualitative data analysis is conducted and what is noticed when qualitative data are analyzed. ... Research often begins with a general theoretical orientation' (Ezzy 2002:4).

The theoretical framework orienting this research is a combination of insights that stem from several sources: the philosophical and theoretic assumptions of phenomenological interpretivism, especially as understood from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics; feminist standpoint epistemology, specifically from the standpoint of liberal, feminist theology; the conclusions and theories arising from phenomenological research into spirituality; and the conclusions and insights arising from the scientific field of neurotheology.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERPRETIVISM

Phenomenological interpretivism and its companion, philosophical hermeneutics, form a qualitative paradigm built on a number of epistemological assumptions. One assumption is that there is no objective, absolute truth, but only an individual's relative truth.[100] This assumption has consequences for the way researchers approach the research task. Operating from within this paradigm precludes them from searching for objective reality, and orients them toward searching for the meaning an individual ascribes to a particular phenomenon. It thus includes a respect for the perspectives and subjective theories of one's respondents (which is reflected in the use of the terms 'respondents' and 'participants', rather than 'subjects').[101] There are several consequences of this assumption for researchers. The first is the understanding that the task undertaken is one of shared meaning-making. This refers to the process by which the meaning of a phenomenon for the respondent is reported to, and interpreted by, the researcher, leading to the explication of understandings of the respondent's meaning-making. Both the researcher and the respondent's voices merge in a new understanding.[102] Another consequence is the assumption that the researcher's task consists primarily of elucidating meanings so that others may enter into an empathic understanding of the phenomenon as it is experienced by the respondent.[103] This is

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[100] Van Manen (1990:185) stated, "According to semiotics, there is no innocent, pure or pristine experience of a real external world. We encode our experience of the world in order that we may experience it; there is no neutral text".

[101] Another assumption of this paradigm is that "subjective reality [is] central to human experience" (Thorne, 1991:183).

[102] Ezzy (2002:27) found that "interpretation involves an ongoing circular process of moving between one's own perspective and the perspective of the other person".

[103] Patton (2002:477) explained the task of phenomenological analysis: "Qualitative interpretation begins with elucidating meanings. The analyst examines ...a set of interviews ...and asks, 'What does this mean? What does this tell me about the nature of the phenomenon of interest?'".

done through the use of symbolic forms of representation aimed at elucidating meaning. Ezzy (2002:27) commented that "the hermeneutic route to understanding is through the iterative use of patterns, metaphors, stories, and models to amplify understanding". Van Manen (1990:79) explained the phenomenological hermeneutic task:

> Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning.[104]

FEMINIST THEOLOGY

The second strand comprising the theoretical framework of this study arises from feminist standpoint epistemology, in particular from the standpoint of Christian, liberal, feminist theology. Standpoint epistemology assumes that all knowledge is knowledge from where a person stands. Feminist standpoint epistemologies "reject the white, male, scientific standpoint of objective knowledge with its modernist assumption that there is a single ideal knower and that he (it is typically a male) can know or describe one true and final correct representation or reality" (Ezzy, 2002:20). Christian, liberal, feminist theology operates from the standpoint that traditional theology requires a critical appraisal to expose the ubiquitous and discriminatory assumptions and practices it promulgates. Feminist theology presents evidence that traditional theology is masculist, leading to the denigration and exclusion of women and their ways of knowing, which in turn leads to the lowering of female self-esteem. It critiques the worship of exclusively male God concepts, noting that this leads to the divinisation of male authority. It highlights the absence of feminine, nurturing, loving concepts of God with the consequent devaluation of these qualities. It criticises the acceptance of a dualistic attitude toward the nature of humanity, which devalues the body and its functions, an aspect of being traditionally associated with women. It decries the promotion of an attitude of overlordship in regard to the earth which has led to the legitimisation of humanity's plundering of the planet. It calls for a revision of hierarchical power structures which place women and children at the bottom of the ladder, powerless and voiceless.[105]

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[104] Piantanida and Garman (1999:247) explained their understanding of the research task: "Phenomenological, interpretivist works grow out of a hermeneutic orientation based on interpretation and the search for deeper understanding. ... [They] are concerned with symbolic meanings and various forms of representation that help the reader better understand the phenomenon under study".

[105] McGrath (1994:101) noted, "The most significant contribution of feminism to Christian thought may be argued to lie in its challenge to traditional theological formulations. These, it is argued, are often patriarchal (that is, they reflect a belief in domination by males) and sexist (that is, they are biased against women)".

Liberal feminist theology aims firstly at raising the consciousness of both women and men about the critical gender imbalance in the hierarchy of the churches, an imbalance that is detrimental to all people. Secondly, it aims at exploring and teaching about ways of redressing this imbalance. One of the foundational beliefs of feminist theology is the value, dignity and equality of all people. It therefore strives for a return of the Christian churches to the state of being communities of equals. Thirdly, it aims for praxis - reflecting on, and putting into practice - its beliefs about respect and equality for all.

The key proponents of Christian feminist theology who have challenged and informed me most are: Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1984, 1985, 1993), who coined the term 'hermeneutic of suspicion' to describe the feminist critique of the assumptions upon which traditional theology is based; Elizabeth Johnson (1986, 1988, 1990), who articulated a feminist critical principle for judging theories, and who explored feminist hermeneutics, revisionist Christology, and God images;[106] Elisabeth Moltman-Wendel (1986, 1989), who set out the foundations of feminist theological understanding;[107] Sally McFague (1982, 1987), who wrote passionately and intelligently about ecological and nuclear issues, and challenged Christians to take a nurturing approach to the earth; Sandra Schneiders (1986b, 1991) who articulated the purposes and concerns of feminist theology;[108] Mary Daly (1973:19), who made the famous statement "If God is male, the male is God" and who criticised the derogation of women in the church (1985); Anne Carr (1988), who argued that the exclusive worship of a male divinity constituted idolatry;[109] Carolyn Osiek (1986), who addressed the problems of feminine self-esteem within patriarchal religions;[110] Regina Coll (1994), who explored the effect of the masculinisation of religion[111] and offered an alternative perspective on these;[112] Rosemary Ruether (1983), who critiqued the sexist nature of God language, and advocated the use of inclusive language when communicating about God; Letty Russell

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[106] Johnson (1990:103) stated that "Feminist theology has developed a criterion or critical principle for judging structures and theories: … the value of the full humanity of women. Whatever enables this to flourish is redemptive and of God; whatever damages this is nonredenptive and contrary to God's intent".

[107] Moltman-Wendel (1986:68-73) explained, "The starting point … is the experience of oppression in society. … The centre … is human worth, being a person in a just order of society. … Theology is praxis. Action and reflection affect each other reciprocally".

[108] She proposed that "Feminist studies are a necessary complement to and criticism of the heretofor unconsciously masculinized theological enterprise" (1991:1). "The masculinity of God and of Jesus has been used, in the practical sphere, to deny the likeness of women to God and to Christ and to exclude them from full participation in the life of the Church" (1986b:6).

[109] Carr (1988:138) wrote, "The idol of a male divinity in heaven issues in a divinizing of male authority, responsibility, power, and holiness on earth".

[110] Osiek (1986:10) reported that "The effect [of the 'subtle programming' of female subordination] on a woman's self-perception can be devastating".

[111] Coll (1994:3) claimed that "Images of God and interpretations of doctrines about God affect not only our relationship with God but also the way we view the universe and ourselves. … A person's image of God and image of self are so closely related that to alter one is to radically alter the other".

[112] Coll (1994:75) argued that "Feminist spirituality takes the body, the flesh very seriously. There is no unnatural split between body and spirit; no separation of the person into soul and body; no division of life into sacred and secular. It is almost impossible to speak of spirituality and sexuality separately".

(1985, 1987), who set out the standpoint of feminist theology on the issue of authority; Virginia Mollencott (1977), who critiqued the use of biblical material by traditional theologians to uphold the authority of men over women; Jan Clanton (1990), who challenged the implicit assumption of traditional theology that God is male, and therefore that females are not made in the image and likeness of God; Joan Chittister (1983), who presented an idealisation of women, ministry and the church; and Bishop John Spong (1992), who wrote "Women: Less than Free in Christ's Church".

Feminist theological assumptions impacted the direction and conduct of this study in several ways. Firstly, feminist theology stresses the holistic nature of spirituality. Secondly, feminist theology recognises the importance and role of feelings and imagination in coming to know God, rejecting the masculist emphasis on cognition. Thirdly, feminist theology has a metaphorical approach to religious language, and the acceptance that there are multiple perspectives from which to view and understand any religious phenomenon. Fourthly, feminist theology holds that one's understandings and beliefs are not formed in isolation from the culture and family environment in which one is raised, but that these influences contribute to the formation of concepts, beliefs, interpretations of experiences, and relationships, including those with God. A fifth influence from feminist theology is that it has sensitised me to the issues involved, so that when I come across evidence in the data that relates to the concerns raised I will recognise it and comment on it rather than ignoring or dismissing it. A sixth influence from feminist theology apparent is reflected in my attitude toward my respondents. Miller-McLemore (2001:463) commented that feminist theologians view the child as

> A fully recognized human creation of God, deserving of immense respect and empathy all too often unjustly and wrongly denied them. Society has tended to infantilize children as fundamentally incapable of constructive thought and action. While children are not adults in body or mind, in their potential personhood they deserve the same recognition as adults.

This particular feminist attitude is one which influenced the way I treated my respondents. I showed interest in their communications with me, I treated them with respect and attention, and I expressed my gratitude for their contribution to my work. In fact, several of my older respondents commented that I was the first person to show an interest in what they believed, a sad indictment coming from seventeen year olds. Another way my feminist inclinations affected this study is in my attitude toward God images. Hide (1992:14) explained: "Feminist theology does not promote any one image of God, but would rather support children in understanding how they imagine God and how their image affects their lives". During interviews, I did not use masculine language to name God and I encouraged my respondents to articulate their concepts,

especially when they prefaced their disclosures with statements like "This probably seems stupid, but ...". Miller-McLemore (2001:472) provided an overview of feminist theology's stance in relation to children that reflects my own assumptions and values:

> The study and appreciation of children in feminist theology exemplify the immense benefits of some of the basic presuppositions of feminist theological method: the incorporation of daily life as a central analytical category and respect for the voices of the underside, the marginalized, and the outcast as a central guiding norm. Children are a large part of daily life for many women and a rich source of theological inspiration for some scholars. And children represent one of the least heard of all marginalized groups. Feminist reflection on children embodies the theological conviction that the divine manifests itself in the mundane and that genuine liberation must occur in the most commonplace of places – in the embodied life of the child.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH INTO SPIRITUALITY

In the field of phenomenological research into spirituality, the works of Robinson (1977), Heller (1986), Coles (1989) and Hay with Nye (1998) in particular have influenced my approach and my conduct of this study. I was impressed with the simplicity of Coles' relationship with his respondents. He entered into their worlds and attempted to see reality through their eyes. The consequence of his approach was a perception and record of children's spirituality that was refreshingly real and revealing. Robinson's report of his research into adult memories of childhood spiritual experiences struck me with its openness to the interpretations and meaning-making attempts of the study's respondents. Robinson did not impose his theoretical assumptions on their reports of their experiences, but allowed their voices and meaning-making attempts to be heard. This shows true respect for his respondents. Heller was the first to utilise interviewing, artwork and written expression as forms of data collection within the one study. To me it makes sense to approach data collection this way.[113] Hay with Nye explored the spirituality of children as expressed through their conversations. They identified 'relational consciousness' as a term that encapsulates the essence of children's spirituality. For me, this research exemplified the use of intuition and creativity in concept development, coupled with attentiveness to and respect towards one's respondents. Phenomenological research into the spirituality of children has uncovered elements of a rich, complex, multi-layered spirituality that is as varied and individual as the children themselves. This body of research also has revealed the importance of one's life experiences and of relationality as central elements in spirituality.

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[113] Different people communicate better in different modalities. Some express themselves better orally, others pictorially, and others linguistically. By employing all three methods of data collection, the respondents' ability to communicate effectively was maximised.

NEUROTHEOLOGY

Neurotheology is a new science that explores the links between spirituality and the brain. D'Aquili and Newberg (1993) discovered the biological changes that occur when an individual experiences a mystical state. This discovery led them to propose that the brain possesses two natural modes of functioning, the everyday and the mystical-religious. They believed that what is experienced in mystical states is just as real as what is experienced in our daily experiences. Hamer investigated the genetic basis of spirituality. He discovered that a variation in a particular gene causes individuals to feel either more or less valuing of transcendent experiences, leading them either to pay attention to these experiences, or to ignore them. Although the conclusions of d'Aquili, Newberg, and Hamer are speculative, as a person who has on many occasions experienced the mystical-religious state, I find their explanations realistic and credible. For me it accurately names the range of subjective experiences, as well as providing a plausible explanation of the data.

The findings and interpretations arising from d'Aquili's, Newberg's, and Hamer's studies have several implications for this study. Firstly, they lead to the conclusion that spiritual experience, feeling and thought is intrinsic to humanity and is a necessary element for its health and survival.[114] Secondly, these findings indicate that religious and mystical experiences are real and natural phenomena that involve not only the mind but the brain of the experiencing individual. By paying attention and giving voice to these experiences, researchers can validate for others the reality and importance of their experiences,[115] thus enabling them to draw on the inner strength, conviction, and purpose these experiences bring. Thirdly, these conclusions reveal the centrality of affective perception in spiritual experience. Such perception needs to be accepted and understood as a meaningful element of one's way of knowing about reality, and as a healthy counter-balance to the overly cognitive and materialistic nature of most Western people's perception of life. These points confirm for me that what is being studied is real and meaningful, and that a useful study of the religious interpretations of children and adolescents needs to focus on, and begin with, the deep and affective elements of the participants' experiences of God and relationships with God.

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[114] This explains the spiritual hunger apparent in today's society, especially among Western nations that have abandoned the spiritual in preference for the rational. It also highlights the importance of the spiritual dimension in the well-being of the individual, and the need to understand and foster this dimension of being.

[115] Several of my respondents were tentative in discussing with me their spiritual experiences, afraid that I would think they were mentally unbalanced. They were relieved and grateful when I told them this was not so and when I took their recollections seriously.

CONCLUSION

Drawing together the pertinent features of these sources, the basic theoretical assumptions upon which this study is predicated are presented below:

*   Spirituality is an intrinsic quality of one's being, as intrinsic as one's sexuality or personality. It is an important part of a person's being.

*   Spirituality is influenced by many factors, including feelings, imagination, sensory input, thought, personality, life experiences, age, gender, and culture.

*   Spirituality is holistic. Elements to be studied must be seen in relation to each other, and in the context of the lived experience of the individual.

*   Spiritual experiences involve changes in the physiological and psychological states of the individual. They result in an altered state of perception.

*   Spiritual experience is widespread, and is accompanied by a noetic, ineffable quality, and by "relational consciousness".

*   A spiritual experience is an experience of God if it involves an awareness of an Other who is thought of as a Divine Being.

*   Children and adolescents have something important to communicate about their experiences and concepts of God.

*   Concepts of God and language about God are predominately male. This may cause girls to experience difficulty with self-esteem.

*   When dealing with issues relating to God, there is no right answer. Instead, there are many different perspectives, each with its own validity.

*   The purpose of this study is to reveal the respondents' understandings of the meaning of God in their lives, not to report on any objective truth.

*   This study reveals what <u>I</u> understood from my <u>respondents'</u> communications, <u>given at a particular point in time</u>. It is, therefore, limited and incomplete.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"A conceptual framework, which is derived from the theoretical background, should indicate the interaction or interrelationship between the concepts and constructs under consideration" (Goetz and Le Compte, 1984:27).

The conceptual framework which guided this research is derived from personal observation and experience, and from a review of the relevant literature. I believe that many factors combine and interrelate to form the spirituality of the individual. This study focuses on some of them. The understanding of the interrelationships of the elements of spirituality addressed by this study is pictured on the following page. At the core of the diagram is the holistic and reciprocal relationship among experience of God, concepts of God, and relationship with God. These three elements change and evolve, influenced by factors such as age, gender, and life experiences. These factors influence the interplay among the core elements, leading to the creation of an idiosyncratic spirituality. Individual spirituality is expressed in several ways. The main way is through one's individual values; a second, more conscious way, is through symbolic expression (for example, art) and linguistic expression (as in the spoken and written word).

This study is primarily concerned with the core elements of spirituality. I set out to understand the nature, meaning, and evolution of these elements. Secondly, I used the age and the gender of the participants as lenses through which to examine the data. I examined life experiences, which I gathered indirectly as part of the interview data, to see if there were any patterns or particular points of interest. The symbolic and linguistic expressions were the means through which the participants communicated, and I inferred personal life stance from the spoken and written records.
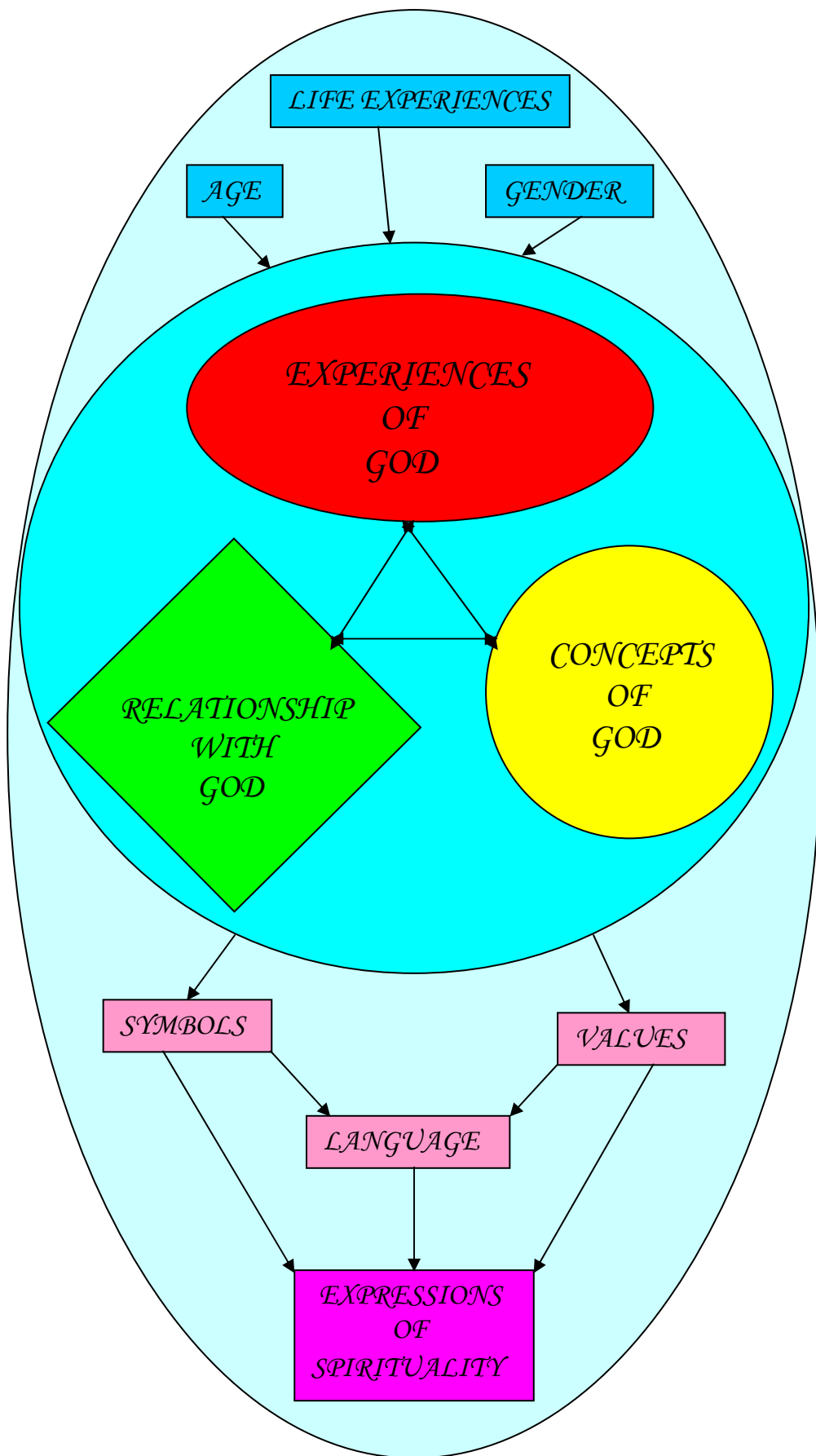
Fig. 3:1 – Conceptual Framework

CONDUCT OF THIS STUDY

POPULATION AND SITE SELECTION

It is usually impractical to study all people of interest, so researchers select a smaller group of respondents that in some way represents the larger population (Weinbach, Grinnell, Taylor, and Unrau, 1999). For me it was not feasible to study each year level, yet I wanted to explore the progression of concepts and experiences present from the beginning to the end of students' schooling, so I chose to begin with the first schooling year, preprimary, and to proceed at regular, close intervals of three years to the last schooling year in Western Australia, year twelve.

Flick (2002:70) commented on another of the selection decisions to be made. "Sampling decisions always fluctuate between the aims of covering as wide a field as possible and of doing analyses which are as deep as possible." In discussing sample size, Patton (2002:244) commented that less depth from a larger number is helpful in exploring a phenomenon, especially when trying to document diversity or understand variation. Although in this study I wanted to collect meaningful, in-depth data, I also wanted to cover as wide a field as possible so that I could "represent the field in its diversity", so I selected a population size that compromised between depth and breadth – 100 respondents. This enabled me to collect enough cases in which to search for patterns of meaning-making, yet still probe for the individual sense and meaning conveyed through pictures and interviews.

Qualitative research usually makes use of purposive sampling, with the objective of obtaining information rich data. I chose my population from Catholic schools because religious education is a subject taught every day in primary schools and at least three times a week in secondary schools, resulting in students who are sensitised to this dimension of life, thus providing information-rich data. The purposive sampling technique I implemented was typical case sampling. According to Glesne (1999:29), typical case sampling "illustrates or highlights what is typical or normal, with the purpose of being illustrative, not definitive". The schools I selected were located within average socio-economic areas. The primary school was a single stream school, so I collected data from all the students present in preprimary, year three and year six on the days I was in these classrooms. The secondary school had several year nine and year twelve classes, so I asked the teachers who were interested in the study to nominate average classes. They conferred among themselves and suggested one year nine and one year twelve class that fulfilled my criteria.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Meloy, 2002:145). Hay and Nye (1998:90) commented on the process of gathering data from children:

> The researcher is not a neutral sounding board. A more appropriate analogy might be to consider the 'total awareness' of the researcher as if it were an instrument engaged in understanding and interpreting the information that emerges as a result of the bond that is created with the child.[116]

The first decision I had to make in this role was to select appropriate methods of data collection. Each method reveals some aspect of the phenomenon being studied, but also allows other aspects to remain hidden. For this reason, qualitative researchers employ a technique known as methodological triangulation to enhance the depth of data collected and to strengthen the trustworthiness of a study. Between-method triangulation refers to the inclusion of two or more methods for the collection of data. Flick (2002:227) explained:

> Triangulation was first conceptualized as a strategy for validating results obtained with the individual methods. The focus …has shifted increasingly towards further enriching and completing knowledge and towards transgressing the (always limited) epistemological potentials of the individual method.

Tamminen (1991:164) explained the value of utilising between-method triangulation in the study of children's God concepts: "A child has a concept of God that is a totality with many dimensions, and different measures and their wordings bring out different traits of it".

Heller (1986) employed the techniques of interviewing, artwork and written expression (in that order) as forms of data collection. This enabled him to acquire data that was meaningfully rich and full. As I wanted to obtain data of this quality, I also used these three methods of data collection. However, the order in which the tasks were performed in my study differed from Heller's because I think Heller's data would have been more accurate and meaningful had he begun with the artwork. It seems to me that if one begins with a rational, verbal task, there is more likelihood that taught responses will emerge. I believe that by beginning with the artwork task, students are more likely to access the deeper, more personally meaningful aspects of their notions and relationships with God first, and then build on these through their thinking, reflecting, and speaking tasks.

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[116] Drew (1989:240) also reported, "Inquirer-respondent interactivity …makes it possible for the inquirer to be a 'smart' instrument, honing in on relevant facts and ideas by virtue of his or her sensitivity, responsiveness, and adaptability".

Artwork

The Role of Artwork

Artwork has played an important role in the religious and spiritual development of peoples since ancient times.[117] Tickle (1987:1) commented on "the contribution of the arts to spiritual sensitivity, the expression of feeling, and the visual and auditory perception of the world", claiming that this is "essential to the survival and well-being of society". Furth (1988:1) wrote of Jung's emphasis on the importance of symbols, noting that "one way symbols manifest their significance is through drawings from the unconscious". Despite this, the role of art receives less attention today mainly because of the supremacy of linguistic forms of expression prevalent in the Western world.

Artwork should have a special place in children's spiritual expression. The inadequacy of language alone to express an individual's ideas, feelings, and experiences of God has been frequently noted by researchers and theorists, most notably by James (1902) who wrote of the ineffable quality of religious experience. The role of artwork in the expression and development of children's spirituality is explained by Stewart (1996:46):

> Art is a language children use to express their feelings, images and questions of what they hold sacred. What is to be considered is that art is a form of communication ... with what they hold sacred. The language of words, sentences, concepts and ideas follows, and becomes a way of communicating and forming relationships with others and God.

Another element of the art of young children is mentioned by Tovey (1972:3):

> Young children see the world in a manner different from that of adults. From their painting, prose, and poems it would seem that up to the age of about ten years most of them are concerned with their inward involvement with what they see rather than with outward appearances. Even among those whose work emerges as a record of outward appearances there is usually a strong element of self-identification with the object.

Children seem to use art as an expression of their involvement with the artistic object, rather than as an artistic object in itself. This makes artwork a valuable tool for collecting information about children's involvement with God.

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[117] McNiff (1998:15) wrote of "the primary place of artistic knowing in the history of human understanding".

Artwork in Previous Research

Harms (1944) said that the concept of God is a deeply psychological one which cannot be matched with the use of words; Goldman (1965) wrote of the problem of "verbalism", the problem of a discrepancy between children's concepts and their ability to verbalise these; Hyde (1990:72), in commenting on the respondents to White's 1970 survey, claimed that "their cognitive knowledge about God did not guarantee conviction, since their exposure to 'rote theology' resulted in their knowing about God, but not knowing God. They had an academical [sic] rather than an existential faith, and ...they practised nominal theism".[118]

Some researchers found that artwork provides a better indicator of real understanding than verbal evidence. For them an "advantage of using the pictorial approach is that general deficits in children's verbal responses are ostensibly ameliorated when children are encouraged to describe their thoughts about God using pictures" (Ladd et al., 1998:49). For this reason they employed artwork as an important method of data collection.[119]

Coles (1990) commented that many times children he was interviewing were unable to explain what they thought or felt. However, when he made paper and crayons available to them, they were usually able to draw. These drawings frequently provoked comments and descriptions by the children. In my 1999 study and in this study I also found that some students did not know what they were drawing; they simply drew what felt right. When they had completed the artwork and had reflected on its meaning for them, they were able to describe it to me.[120]

Artwork in This Study

The first method of obtaining data from the participants was artwork. Thom (1993) noted that: art needs to be used as a medium of expression, not as an illustration; drawing God-concepts needs to be an activity by itself; instructions given must be carefully worded to avoid specifying to the participants the type of response expected by the researcher; and data collection should begin with the drawing process in order to

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[118] Hyde, (1990) also noted that our concepts of God are related to what we feel about God.

[119] Among these researchers are: Harms (1944), Pitts (1976, 1977), Heller (1986); Bassett et al. (1990); Coles (1990); Thom (1993); Tamm (1996), and Devenish (1999).

[120] These descriptions were usually accompanied by surprise at what was revealed by the artwork; they had been unaware of their thoughts and feelings until the artwork revealed it to them. McNiff (1998:54) commented on this phenomenon. It is, he wrote, possible that the artwork itself might tell stories about how and why it came into existence. "These accounts might have varied considerably from what their maker described. Even if the art objects do not contradict the statements of artists, they will always expand the discourse about origins and perhaps we would discover how at various phases of emergence they might have influenced and motivated the person making them".

minimise the possibility that participants will trot out the correct answer. My experience with children leads me to strongly agree with Thom. Therefore, I structured the data gathering procedure so that artwork was the first activity I undertook; artwork was a separate activity used as a medium of expression; and the wording of the instructions was as non-specific as possible.

The analysis of children's art needs to be approached with care. Kellogg (1969, 1972), an art teacher of young children, explained that it is difficult for adults to appreciate and understand children's art because the minds of children and of adults are so different. This point is a valid one: a person interested in knowing about the meaning of children's works of art should beware of placing too much emphasis on their own interpretations of what they see. For this reason, the foremost experts in children's art to whom I appealed during this study were the children themselves. I asked each child to tell me about their artwork, and recorded and used their own words in describing the meaning of their artwork. In this way I hoped to gather accurate and relevant data.

Guided Open-Ended Interviews

The Role of Interviewing

Interviewing can be a powerful tool in the collection of meaningful data. Keats (1988:18) commented that interviewing "is most useful when the emphasis is on the qualitative aspects of the data [or] when the topic is difficult conceptually". Both these criteria apply to this study. Janesick (2004:71-72) presented an understanding of the nature of the task when she wrote, "Interviewing is an act of communication. … Interviewing is a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic". It is this point about joint construction of meaning that is most important. Researchers need to understand that they are the learners, and they need to listen to their respondents' ideas, understandings, and explanations with an attentive and respectful ear. In this way the meaning of a phenomenon for the participants is heard, and their voices are present in the study, instead of being subsumed within the overwhelming voice of the researcher. Janssen et al. (1994:107) believed, "If the concept of God has any psychological meaning at all, it will appear in the utterances of the subjects themselves, in their own language". Skilful interviewing is required to enable respondents to express, in their own language, the meaning of God for them.

The purpose of interviewing, according to Patton (2002:341), is to allow a person to enter into another's perspective. Open-ended interviewing is explained by Kvale (1996:1-2):

> The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest.

This notion of *mutual interest* leads ethical researchers to consider in what ways their respondents are benefiting from the research process. It is inappropriate for researchers to focus only on the benefits they gain from their research, without considering whether it is possible for their respondents to also benefit. Ethical conduct requires that researchers aim at enabling respondents to gain as well as give something useful or meaningful to them.

Patton (1990:295) describes crucial considerations of qualitative interviews.

> The basic thrust of qualitative interviewing is to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data. When using qualitative interviewing strategies for data collection it is critical that questions be asked in a truly open-ended fashion. This means that the questions should permit respondents to respond in their own terms.

This approach takes seriously the notion that the respondents have something valuable to contribute. It also allows the researcher access to the respondents' subjective theory about the phenomena being studied. The term 'subjective theory' acknowledges the fact that the respondent has considerable, complex knowledge about the topic of discussion. Flick (2002: 80) described this knowledge, noting "it includes assumptions that are explicit and immediate and which he or she can express spontaneously in answering an open question. These are complemented by implicit assumptions". Interviewers need to be sensitive to this dimension of the interviewing process, and aware of ways they can facilitate the articulation of the respondents' subjective theories. Showing interest in the respondents' comments and encouraging them to elaborate on these is one way to foster meaningful communication. Another way is through the judicious use of different types of questions.

Interviewing in Previous Research

Flick (2002:74) reported that semi-structured interviews attract much interest and are widely used. "This interest is linked to the expectation that the interviewed subjects' viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in a relatively openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview". Flick noted the advantages of the guided

interview: it "increases the comparability of the data and …their structuration [sic] is increased" (ibid:93). Many researchers have applied this method of interviewing. Erricker (2001) and Erricker found that this method led to the children taking some initiative in the development of the interviews. This allowed the researchers to focus on the particular experiences of the children, expressed in their own words. Erricker (ibid:160) and Erricker experimented with various group sizes, interviewing in groups of between four and six children, and discovered that four was the optimum number of participants. They used friendship groups because they wanted each group to be made up of children who were as open to one other as possible. (Following Erricker and Erricker's lead, I conducted two interviews of four students. I found that groups of four were difficult to manage, given that I needed to ensure all students responded to each topic, that the dominant member/s of the group did not overshadow the quieter members, that I named each respondent every time s/he spoke so that I could identify them when transcribing, and that I needed to be attentive and involved in the interview. I interviewed in smaller groups from then on.) Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989:40) stated that "groups are not just a convenient way to accumulate the individual knowledge of their members. They give rise synergistically to insights and solutions that would not come about without them".[121] Glesne (1999) noted that often children feel emboldened to talk when in a group, and that certain topics are better discussed in small groups.[122]

Interviewing in This Study

As an interviewer, my respondents' relationships with me are important and affect the type and quality of data gathered. Therefore, it was necessary for me to consider the type of relationship that would most foster an appropriate rapport with my respondents.[123] Primary school students, especially the preprimary and year three students, like to please their teachers and generally work well for them. I decided, therefore, to present myself as a teacher in the primary school. In the secondary school, however, I knew that if I presented myself as a teacher, my respondents' 'us and them' attitude toward teachers could cause a distancing effect. I therefore chose to

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[121] Other researchers have reached a similar conclusion. Blumer (in Flick, 2002:114) observed: "A small group of individuals, brought together as a discussion or resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample. Such a group, discussing collectively their sphere of life and probing into it as they meet one another's disagreements, will do more to lift the veils covering the sphere of life than any other device that I know of".

[122] Flick (2002:112) concurred. She claimed, "Particularly when studying opinions and attitudes about taboo subjects …the use of the dynamics of a group discussing such topics was more appropriate than a clear and well-ordered interview situation". For all of these reasons, I decided to make use of group interviews.

[123] Keats (1988:6-7) noted that "both the respondent and the interviewer are influenced by the affective relationship that develops. The interviewer needs to be aware of the nature of that relationship and must control for its effects in such a way as to maximize the desirable outcomes and reduce the undesirable".

present myself as a university student. This caused the dynamics of the situation to change. I became one of them, a student, and I intrinsically showed respect for them by asking for their help. I felt that this type of relationship had a better chance of eliciting spontaneous and personal responses from my secondary students.

The primary school teachers thought the children in their classes would enjoy group interviews. Accordingly, these students were interviewed in groups of two or three. I gave the secondary students the option of being interviewed alone or with one or two others in order to accommodate students who wanted the privacy and the freedom to express themselves openly, as well as those who felt more comfortable or more inspired conversing with me in a group. All the secondary students elected to come in pairs.

Before the beginning of each interview, I welcomed the respondents and thanked them for consenting to be interviewed. Next, I explained the structure and process of the interview, including what was to be discussed, the method of recording the interview, what would be done with the data after it was collected, who would have access to the data, and the degree of confidentiality I would maintain. Finally, I asked each respondent for permission to record;[124] I informed them of their rights, including the right to decline answering any question they felt unwilling to answer; and I outlined my expectations of them, for example, that they would respond openly and honestly.

During interviewing, my role became that of managing the interview process. My main tasks were: preventing single participants from dominating the interview; encouraging reserved members to become involved in the interview; ensuring that I obtained answers from each member of the group in order to cover the topic as far as possible; and balancing my behaviour between directively steering the group and non-directively moderating it. As there were certain key ideas I wished to cover with each respondent, I used an interview guide and covered the topics on it with each participant.[125] If any respondent did not offer these insights spontaneously, I asked a question to stimulate further discussion. Several students said they did not believe in God. With these students, I asked questions to determine whether they believed in the non-existence of God, whether they primarily doubted or were unsure about God, or whether they were mainly rejecting the God they had been taught. I also asked what it was that fuelled their convictions.

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[124] Four year nine students were uncomfortable about being taped, so I briefly interviewed each one and made notes afterwards.

[125] The guide consisted of the following prompts: Tell me about God. Have you ever felt God near to you? Do you talk to God? Does God talk to you? If God were here now, what would God say? Does God expect anything from you?

Writing

A third method of collecting data was writing. This method enabled the participants to reflect on what they had drawn and said, and to capture this reflection in a piece of written expression. The preprimary children were asked to think about what they would like to tell God in a letter. This was then scribed by the adults present. The year three children were asked to write a letter to God. The remaining participants were requested to reflect on their experiences and ideas of God, and to write whatever they liked that captured their reflections. The students were asked to complete this activity the day following their initial art activities, to give them time to reflect on their ideas and experiences.

GATHERING THE DATA

Preliminary Considerations

Before data gathering could begin, preliminary matters had to be attended to. In both schools I met with the principal or acting principal and the teachers who had agreed to participate in my research: I explained the purpose of my study, the possible advantages for religious education and for themselves, the procedure I would follow, and what was required of them and their classes; I sought their permission to become a part of their classes for a short time; I arranged for letters of information and consent forms to be sent to the relevant parents, seeking their permission for their children to be involved in the research; and I made arrangements for the care of any students who might be adversely affected during data gathering.

During the time I was in the schools I was aware of the fact that it was important ethically to treat the teachers and students with consideration and respect. I was aware of the fact that I was a visitor to each classroom, and that the teachers and students were doing me a favour by extending to me their time and help. This led me to voice my appreciation to each teacher and again to her/his class for their cooperation and participation; to act as far as possible in a friendly, interested, encouraging way; to help around the classrooms when not directly involved in data collection; to spend a half day as teacher's assistant with the two youngest classes so that they could become familiar and comfortable with me; to offer to share with the teachers the data relevant to their classes; and to offer to give them a copy of my completed thesis.[126]

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[126] There was a drawback to this approach. Although most of the teachers were pleased that I was aware of my obligation to them and expressed my thanks, two teachers seemed to interpret my demeanour as lack of authority and were consequently unhelpful in their approach to me and my work.

The Respondents

I began gathering data from the preprimary group (17 four and five-year-olds), mainly because that coincided with the timetabling commitments of the teachers. I spent one morning taking part in the class so that the children were familiar with me. For the following two days I took the religious education classes, guiding the children through the picture drawing activity and the letter writing activity. With both of these activities, the children's comments were scribed. Interviewing took place in groups during the week. With the preprimary children, I felt it necessary to record their ideas as quickly as possible because of their short attention span. The children enjoyed the novelty of a new teacher, different activities, and having their ideas tape recorded. I allowed them to listen to segments from our interviews, so they could hear their own voices.

The second group with which I worked was the year twelve group (19 sixteen and seventeen-year-olds). They were preparing for their tertiary entrance examinations in November and I did not want to distract them by intruding into their lives close to the examination time, so I scheduled my data gathering with their class in May. I introduced myself as a tertiary student interested in their ideas. I explained that I was going to conduct the next two religious education classes which were compulsory, but that I also wanted to interview each of them to clarify and extend the ideas I had gathered, an activity that was optional. I conducted the drawing activity and the written expression activity during the following two religious education periods (one day apart), and I asked the students' permission to keep their finished products, to which they all agreed. I then spent a month or so interviewing all the students, usually in friendship pairs. It took a while to interview the students as I was able to gather data only during religious education classes which consisted of three, 50 minute sessions per week. I was able often to interview two groups in one session, but four of the groups took 45 minutes to interview. I found these students interested, curious, willing to openly express their ideas, and fairly ready to trust me and converse freely with me.[127]

The third group with which I worked was the year nine group (20 thirteen and fourteen-year-olds). As I was familiar with the school and its routine, I decided to continue gathering data from this group before returning to the primary school. The

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[127] With this class, several students felt confusion and mild anger, emotions I discussed with them after the interview, in the hope of dealing with these emotions in the context in which they had arisen. This time alone expressing their feelings with an experienced adult had a cathartic effect on these students. Several other students were unsure about the reality or validity of their experiences, something I discussed with them in an accepting, encouraging manner. They seemed mostly relieved and encouraged by our discussions. One girl had recently experienced the death of her cousin. I expressed my condolences for her loss and my concern about her feelings. She assured me that being able to talk about her cousin, especially in the context of discussing ideas about God, gave her the opportunity to examine her thoughts and feelings, and to gain some clarity. No other problems of this nature were encountered.

procedure I followed was similar to that employed with the year twelve class. The same time restrictions also applied. I found this class less willing than the year twelve class to share their ideas openly with me. They were more private and less expressive in their dealings with me. One possible reason for this was the class environment, largely the result of the personality and teaching style of the teacher: she emphasised traditional knowledge and teaching styles, as compared with the year twelve teacher who had a very open, discursive, interactive teaching style. Four respondents in this group were reluctant to interview with me, and refused to be recorded. I suggested a compromise: that they would speak to me briefly about their pictures and a few related ideas, and I would not tape record them. This was acceptable to them. We met as a group so that they could derive support from each other's presence, but I spoke with them individually as they did not want to discuss their ideas with each other. There was a sense of privacy and reluctance with this group of four respondents.

The fourth group with which I worked was the year three group (24 seven and eight-year-olds). This class was a friendly, welcoming group of students. I stayed with them for one morning, joining in their activities and familiarising myself with them. On the following day, I conducted the religious education lesson, involving the children in the artwork phase of their expression. This was followed by the written expression task. During the next week I interviewed the students, usually in pairs. This class was characterised by its friendliness, acceptance, and willingness to co-operate.

The last group of students with which I worked was the year six class (12 ten and eleven-year-olds). In this class I was left to my own devices and worked without the presence, and implicit support, of the class teacher. She also gave me very limited time in which to complete my work with her class. To add to my difficulties, it was late in the year and the students were becoming restless, a state exacerbated by the turmoil of the school's imminent move to new premises. Most students in this class evinced a lack of interest in my project and were willing to give only what was asked.[128] As usual I began with the artwork lesson, followed by the written expression activity. Over a period of two days I interviewed the students in pairs. With this class I collected only 12 sets of data, due to low class numbers and absences. I wanted to collect approximately 20 sets of data from year six children, to be more comparable with the other year groups. Consequently, I approached a third school and asked to work with eight volunteers from the year six class. Permission was given and the volunteers worked privately with me over a period of a week.

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[128] I feel that this class would have become more involved in the work if the teacher had introduced me, explained my presence and her endorsement of my work, and implicitly given weight to my work through her presence.

Comparing the five classes with which I worked, one characteristic stood out clearly for me: the teacher's personality and teaching style had a strong impact on the students' responses to me and on the data itself. The preprimary, year three, and year twelve teachers were friendly, open, engaging people who encouraged an enquiring spirit in their students: they were student oriented. The year six and year nine teachers saw their task as teaching the curriculum: they were task oriented. The classes of the former group of teachers were characterised by their enthusiasm, their openness to engage in the task, and their willingness to explore and express their insights. The classes of the latter two teachers were focused on doing what was required of them, and no more. They were comparatively reluctant to explore or express their ideas, possibly because they were concerned about giving the wrong answers.

The Lessons

The artwork lessons followed a similar procedure with all the classes. Firstly, I introduced the session by explaining that we would be involved in artwork as an expression of the ideas and feelings of each member of the class. I emphasised that I was not looking for pieces of great artwork: for me the criterion of a good piece of art was how well it represented the inner thoughts and feelings of its creator. Next, without explaining precisely what we would be doing, I distributed the materials, coloured pencils and sheets of white A4 paper. I decided to use these items following Furth's recommendations.[129] I explained the concept of pseudonyms and asked each student to write their pseudonym or their first name and their age on the back of the sheet of paper. Next I asked the students to close their eyes and relax. In a low, rhythmic, slow voice, I suggested that they imagine themselves in a relaxing, secure place where they felt happy. After a few moments, I asked them to observe what thoughts, ideas, words, pictures, sounds, and symbols came to mind when they heard the word 'God'. After a minute, I told them to gather together everything in their minds, to return to the classroom, to open their eyes when they were ready, and to get down on paper as much as they could of what had occurred to them, in whatever form they chose.[130] As the students worked, I went around the class prompting and encouraging those who were unsure how to start. I would ask questions like "What did you see in your mind?" "How could you draw that?" "What would be a good colour to

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[129] Furth (1988:28) explained, "I have found that a box of standard colored pencils should be used instead of bulky crayons. Pencils allow greater detail." He also commented, "Standard white typing paper is used since it makes drawing easier. If the paper is too large, it is difficult for a child to handle, and if it is too small, a young [child's] manual dexterity may not be developed enough to express his or her ideas within such limited space" (ibid:29).

[130] Furth (1988:27) cautioned "The conditions - which include the materials at hand, the directions given, [and] lighting … may have a profound effect on the way pictures look and what they reveal". As I wanted to access the deep feelings and concepts of the students, I attempted to create an atmosphere of relaxed isolation, and of contemplation.

express that?" I was mindful of Furth's (1988:29) observation, "A person needs time to draw at his [sic] own pace. ...It is important to have patience, to give the [child] ample time to draw, and to keep instructions short and open-ended". The students took their time in completing the activity, and when students informed me they had finished, I asked them to closely observe and reflect on their drawing to sense whether it felt complete. I did this because my experiences led me to agree with McNiff (1998:59), who found:

> I tend to stop working on a painting when there is a sense that any additional movement will hurt the image. When the picture feels 'just right', I stop. There is a sense of completion and satisfaction that I perceive within the image and correspondingly feel within myself".

Finally, I asked the students' permission to keep their finished artwork.

The second lesson I conducted with the whole class was the written expression activity. With the preprimary class, I reviewed the previous lesson and the artwork they had done. Then I asked the children to tell me what they would like to say to God. I next suggested they draw a picture of what they wanted to say, and while they were engaged in this task, the class teacher, the teacher assistant, and I went from child to child writing their comments and questions. With the year three class, the procedure was basically the same. However, instead of asking the children to draw, I invited them to write a letter to God. While they were engaged in this activity, I walked around the classroom helping the students with problems like spelling.

With the year six, year nine, and year twelve classes, I asked the students to write whatever they liked about their ideas of God, suggesting possibilities like a letter, a reflection, and a poem. Of the three methods of data collection, this was the least satisfactory. In an attempt to allow for maximum flexibility and creativity, I deliberately kept my instructions open. However, the result was that the majority of students were unsure what to do and so contributed very little. One change I would make if I were to take on a similar project would be to alter the writing activity from a reflective piece, to a creative piece of writing. Creating a story about God would have generated data that was deeper and more revealing than that achieved through recording one's ideas.[131]

The third phase of data gathering was interviewing. The procedure was essentially the same for all classes. Two or three students were assigned to me by the teacher who often chose one student and allowed her/him to select one or two friends. I then took

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[131] Heller (1986) had the right idea in introducing as much creative activity as possible into his data gathering procedures.

my respondents to a quiet room set aside for our use, explaining that I was going to begin by asking them to tell me about their pictures, and then we would talk about their ideas of God. I explained what I would do with the data, and that their contributions were confidential. Then I would show them the tape recorder, demonstrate it if requested, and ask their permission to record their conversations. I began with the easiest task, that of describing and explaining their pictures. During the interviews, I found a way to name each person who spoke, so that I knew to whose ideas I was listening when it came time to transcribe. I made sure everybody's ideas were expressed, usually by personally inviting the quieter students to voice their ideas.[132] Sometimes, the interviews became conversations among the group members, especially with the year twelve class. These lively conversations fostered the process of clarifying ideas. This enabled everyone involved to develop a deeper understanding and expression of their ideas.[133] Even with the younger students, listening to another class member's notions enabled them to develop their own ideas to a degree not possible when alone. Interviewing in groups also had another advantage: it provided a sense of security for the more reticent members of the class. When I had gathered all the data I needed and the students fell silent, I ended the interview by turning off the recorder and thanking my respondents for their helpful contributions.

I was pleased with the data gathering phase of the research. I was able to achieve rapport with most of my respondents, and in some cases I felt that I was helping them deal with some important issues. Most of my respondents were happy to discuss their ideas with me, and several asked my opinion on related matters. Many of them were pleased that someone wanted to hear what they had to say, making their experience an empowering one.[134] More experience would have made me a better interviewer (a skill teachers do not regularly practise with their students, unlike artwork and writing). However, when I compared my performance this time with the interviewing I conducted during my 1999 study, I realised that I was more relaxed, focussed, and encouraging during this study.

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[132] During the interviews, few notes were taken. This enabled me to become more fully immersed in the conversation. Attention to what my respondents were saying was a sign of respect. It also had other benefits: it was necessary to the rapport I wished to establish, it encouraged the students to confide in me, and it enabled me to monitor the course of the interview and prompt more reticent respondents to contribute their ideas.

[133] Erricker (2001:163) noted, "When children talk [especially in groups] they express their spirituality, work out their moral positions and opinions and develop their emotional skills".

[134] Keats (1988:41) expressed his conviction that "the completion of the interview should bring with it a sense of satisfaction in both the interviewer and the respondent. Each should feel that the purposes of the interview have been served. It should leave both with the feeling that they have participated in and assisted each other in something each regarded as worthwhile".

DATA ANALYSIS

Theory

Data analysis needs to be conducted carefully in order to present the data in a way that addresses the questions of the research, to be true to the respondents, and to heighten the validity of the study. This study employed inductive analysis, a method favoured by qualitative researchers. Patton (2002:453) stated that "Inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data. Findings emerge out of the data, through the analyst's interactions with the data". This notion of discovering themes and categories within the data has several consequences. Firstly, the analyst cannot set out to prove an a priori theory: any theories that eventuate must be an extension of what was discovered in the data. Secondly, the analyst must take measures not to impose preconceived ideas or assumptions on the data. To do this, the analyst should employ a strategy known as 'bracketing', which Patton (ibid.) described as a mental stance which holds in suspension the preconceived ideas of researchers, enabling them to bring openness and curiosity to the task of discovering what is embedded in the data. Thirdly, the imagination of the analyst plays an important part in identifying patterns and themes. The term 'imagination' does not mean inventing reality, but having eyes to see the reality that is silently being expressed in the data. Patterns do not leap out of the data by themselves: the analyst must approach the data like a child, with curiosity and imagination, in order to perceive the buried treasure.

As with many qualitative studies, this research engendered large amounts of data. Two of the key functions of data analysis for this study, therefore, were to highlight the essential patterns present within the data, and to reduce, explain, and structure these patterns. The first of these functions was performed by applying the technique of global analysis. Global analysis, according to Flick (2002:193) is "A pragmatically oriented supplement to other analytic procedures. ... Here the aim is to obtain an overview of the thematic range of the text which is to be analysed".[135] The second function of data analysis for this study involved rendering the mass of data into a pattern of categories and subcategories that reflected the meaning embedded in the data. Content analysis was employed in performing this task. Patton (2002:453) explained, "Content analysis is used to refer to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify

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[135] The steps of global analysis presented by Flick (ibid.) which I found most useful were: 1) Read through the text and note key words alongside the transcript. (I preferred highlighting). This structures the large passages of text. 2) Refine this structure by marking central concepts or statements. (I preferred to note these in the margins so that I could begin to develop a consistent nomenclature.) 3) Produce a list of the key words and concepts, the patterns and themes, and the ideas and insights that arose during the analysis.

core consistencies and meanings". Flick (2002:190) noted two essential features of qualitative content analysis: the use of categories, which are always repeatedly assessed against the data and modified if necessary; and the goal, which is to reduce the data. Flick (ibid.) further identified three specific techniques of content analysis: summarising content analysis, explicative content analysis, and structuring content analysis. In summarising content analysis, data are paraphrased (which involves eliminating superfluous words or phrases) and then paraphrases with the same meanings are bundled together and summarised. Explicative content analysis refers to the process of clarifying diffuse, ambiguous or contradictory passages by involving the analyst's understanding of what was meant coupled with the use of textual material. Structuring content analysis refers to the search for types or formal structures in the data. Salient features can then be identified and described more exactly. I employed all three techniques of content analysis when analysing the data of this study.

Content analysis did not proceed in an orderly, linear fashion. The process was more spiral in its execution, with the various techniques of analysis being applied at different phases of the task, and with these phases being revisited at different levels of analysis. The different phases of the analytic task involved single case analysis, comparison of cases within a field, comparison of fields, and comparison of groups. A single case consisted of one type of data (pictorial, written, or oral) produced by one respondent. A field consisted of the three data types of one respondent. A group consisted of all data types and all respondents within a specific year level.[136] The first phase of data analysis was single case analysis. Each datum by each respondent within a group was analysed using global analysis. Comparison of cases within a field followed. This involved searching for similarities and differences between the data types (that is, artwork, interview, or writing) presented by one respondent. This was a useful step to take. When a certain idea or feeling was repeated through a different data type, it indicated that the idea was a core concept or was something firmly held. However, sometimes students would reveal concepts, feelings or thoughts in one data type that differed from those of other data types. These differences became significant because they indicated when a respondent held multiple perspectives, was caught between two opposing explanations from two different sources, or held one view but was experimenting with another. When all the fields within a group were analysed, comparison of fields was undertaken. This means that the similarities and differences between the respondents within the group were analysed. Categories of meaning making became evident. After writing up the findings from the first group to be analysed, the procedure was repeated until all five groups were analysed. The final stage of analysis remained, that of

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[136] There were 300 single cases, 100 fields, and 5 groups.

comparing the findings of each group to discover in what ways there was a progression or development of ideas from younger to older groups. This involved searching for concepts and feelings that were present in one group but less obvious or non-existent in the later groups, as well as searching for the emergence in later groups of concepts or feelings that were non-existent or incipient in earlier groups. These progressions were structured into a meaningful pattern.

Practical Considerations

The most difficult aspect of data analysis for me was analysing the artwork. Artwork accesses deeper parts of the mind, and is a more abstruse and individual form of communication than written material, and my natural abilities and experiences are much more linguistically oriented than pictorially oriented. To overcome my diffidence in this area, I firstly consulted with an academic specialising in art and art therapy. She helped me to gain an understanding and orientation toward my task. Secondly, I consulted books about children's art and learned about the subject. Thirdly, and most importantly, I asked every respondent to talk to me about their artwork. I also asked specific questions about elements of the artwork that had struck me.

Furth (1988:34-36) provided me with some useful guidelines in understanding children's art. He said that one should always begin by noticing one's initial impression of a picture. It is important not to analyze straight away, but to concentrate on one's initial feelings and impressions arising from the artwork. Furth (ibid.) next discussed the elements of pictures of which one should be aware when attempting to understand artwork. These were: the person or object that is central; the proportion of objects and people; anything that seems odd or out of place; anything that seems to be missing; any words in a drawing; movement and direction of movement; and filled in versus empty.

The first data I examined in each year group was the artwork. This first examination was preliminary: I wanted to get a feel for each picture, to note my reactions to it, and to note anything unusual, striking, or idiosyncratic about each picture. I then made notes about the artwork. The results of this preliminary examination enabled me to ask for explanation or clarification on certain points from the artist during our interview. When all the remaining data was collected, I commenced the core analytical task. This began with returning to the data of the preprimary group and reading the written work of each respondent. I highlighted words or phrases that seemed significant to me, either because they addressed the central research questions, or because they revealed something individually meaningful. After each piece of writing was examined, it was

compared with the artwork of the respondent and my initial notes about the artwork to find reinforcing, complementary or contradictory notions. Notes about the written work were added to the artwork notes and points of interest were set out. I also began noting the core God concept contained in the pictorial and written data of each respondent. The next step involved reading through the transcripts of the interviews, highlighting significant points, and making notes about anything that impressed me. I then compared each picture with the explanation of its meaning given by the respondent, in light of my notes about my initial reactions. These notes were then added to, with particular attention being paid to discrepancies between my sense of the picture and the interpretation of the artist. I also paid attention to any discrepancies between the artwork, written work, and interview material of each respondent.

When the analysis of the artwork was complete, I focussed on the God concepts. I paid particular attention to the core God concepts that I found, using these as the basis of my God concept grouping scheme. I sorted the data (both pictorial and written) into these categories. The next task was to examine the data for evidence of the respondents' experiences of God and relationships with God, which I categorised according to their nature. After writing up my findings, I next examined the gender preferences and differences that I perceived for each of the three elements of God concept, experience of God, and relationship with God. I next analysed the data of the year three group, the year six group, the year nine group and the year twelve group in that order, repeating the above procedures for analysing and categorising the data. This was followed by examination of the similarities, differences, and evolution of God concept, of experience of God, and of relationship with God between the different groups. Finally, other patterns like language usage, rejection of teachings, and influences upon God concept, experience and relationship were discussed. During the analytical task, I discovered categories, themes and patterns that fit my data. In writing up what I had found, I kept as true as possible to the voices of my participants, and to my intuitive grasp of what I was seeing.

GROUNDING THE RESEARCH

Flick (2002:222) claimed, "The question of the validity of qualitative research turns into the question of how far the researcher's constructions are grounded in the constructions of those whom he or she studied". The issue here is not whether a researcher's findings are true, but whether they accurately reflect the lived experiences of the participants. There are methods a researcher can utilise for ensuring that the research is grounded.

Guba and Lincoln (1982:238) noted, "Inquiry is always value-bound". Inquiries are influenced by the attitudes, values, and assumptions of the inquirer, by the paradigm that guides the investigation, and by the theory and methods used to guide data collection and analysis. Ezzy (2002:10) declared, "The first step towards dealing with the influence of preconceptions is not to deny or hide them, but to formally state them". Transparency is created when researchers acknowledge bias, and record their values, assumptions, guiding paradigms, theories, methods and procedures. This process results in researchers becoming aware of their biases and taking steps to diminish the effect they have on the work. One way of achieving this is through 'bracketing', which Patton (2002) described as a mental stance which holds in suspension the preconceived ideas of the researcher.

According to Patton (1990:55), neutrality means that the researcher does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths. His notion of 'empathic neutrality' (2002:50) refers to the stance of neutrality in regards to the data, while maintaining an understanding, empathetic stance regarding the participants. During this study I maintained as far as possible a stance of empathic neutrality. The purpose of the study was to discover the lived experiences of participants; I had no preconceived ideas about what I would find, and no theories to prove; my study was not funded by any organization; and there were no outside interested parties for whom I was researching. Rather, I was deeply interested and curious about aspects of children's spirituality and wished simply to document, understand, and explain what I discovered from my participants, and I treated my respondents with understanding and respect.

Trustworthiness refers to the degree of trust that can be placed in a study. It is enhanced by certain verification procedures. These include triangulation, the combination of two or more theories, data sources, methods or investigators, contrasted with one another to cross-check data (Denzin, in Kimichi, 1991). I made use of between-method triangulation, the inclusion of two or more methods for the collection of data. Another verification procedure I used was negative case analysis, which consists of a conscious search for negative cases and unconfirming evidence. I did this by following Janesick's (2004:118) advice to "Look for points of conflict, tension, and contradiction. [Look] for what does not make sense in a study, what does not quite fit". A third verification procedure I employed was repeatedly checking with my respondents during interviewing that my understanding of what they were saying was consistent with the meanings they intended.

'Confirmability' deals with the degree of idiosyncrasy evidenced in a study. In qualitative studies the personal voice of the researcher should be apparent. However, as Sandelowski (1986:33) mentioned, another researcher should be able to "arrive at the same or comparable but not contradictory conclusions given the researcher's data, perspective, and situation". I have provided sufficient information about my research assumptions, population, site selection, and data gathering and analysing procedures, that another researcher could complete a similar study, without reaching contradictory conclusions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are a number of limitations inherent in this study: The first is the essentially ineffable nature of spiritual experience making it impossible to fully express. The inclusion of three forms of data collection helps to provide a more complete picture, but the basic experiences can never be known. Therefore, what are studied are the participants' fragmentary, context-embedded expressions of their experiences. The second limitation is temporal in nature. This study captures the expressions of spirituality of the participants at the particular time of data collection. As these expressions are dynamic, the data only captures something of the spirituality of each participant at that particular time. A third limitation is linguistic competence. This factor influences the degree to which students can adequately communicate their experiences, feelings and concepts. Especially with the younger children, lack of sufficient language was a barrier to communication. Restricted site and population selection is another limitation. The population was limited to five groups of students in three Catholic schools within the Perth metropolitan area. The degree of generalisability, therefore, is unknown. The schools selected, however, were average schools, so it is hoped that the picture presented by the study is fairly typical of Catholic school children. The study, however, does not consider the expressions of students in non-Catholic independent schools or in state schools. It cannot be known, therefore, to what extent the findings of this study are typical of all children.

ETHICAL CONDUCT

Theory

Glesne (1999:113) stated, "Ethical considerations are inseparable from your everyday interactions with research participants and with your data". As regards interactions with research participants, Glesne (ibid:118) commented, "It is ethical to treat your respondents with respect and dignity, to listen to them carefully". For me, a part of

being engaged in the research process is being aware of and attentive to the impact my research has on those around me, especially my respondents, and to take steps to minimise the negative impacts and to maximise the positive impacts. Hay with Nye (1998:83) maintained that "If we are to behave ethically in the role of researchers we need to record the other person's point of view as accurately as possible".

Ethical considerations in relation to my data meant that I could not discount or neglect any data that do not fit neatly into whatever categories or schemes I had created. Jackson (2000:70) summarised the ethical viewpoint of most qualitative researchers when he claimed, "The main point about quality is that of transparency. Researchers need to be frank about any deficiencies in their data or weaknesses in their methodology, as well as being judicious in interpreting results".

Ethical Conduct of this Study

In this study, confidentiality was an important factor because it gave the respondents freedom to express whatever they wished without fear of being ridiculed, of being told they were wrong, or of being scolded for giving unorthodox answers. [137] I invited them to be open and honest with me, and I provided them with the environment to do this by assuring them that whatever they said to me remained confidential; by not using surnames or any identifying labels, and encouraging them to use pseudonyms; by explaining to them that they had the right to express or withhold any information; by asking the respondents' permission to record our conversations, and to keep their drawn and written products.[138] In addition, although I foresaw little possible harm for my respondents in working with me, I made provision for this eventuality by seeking parental permission, and informing the school counsellors about the data collection process, which occurred when they were present, in case their skills were required in dealing with any distress arising during the interviews.

Glesne (1999:126) wrote about another ethical issue, that of reciprocity.

> The interviewing process particularly provides an occasion for reciprocity. By listening to participants carefully and seriously, you give them a sense of importance and specialness. By providing the opportunity to reflect on and voice answers to your questions, you assist them to understand some aspect of themselves better. If your questions identify issues of importance to interviewees, then interviewees will invariably both enjoy and find useful their roles as information providers.

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[137] I don't wish to imply that any of these things would have happened, only that some students may have harboured fears that they could.
[138] If any student had wanted to keep any item they had created, I would have asked to be allowed to take the item home, electronically record it, and return it to the student.

During the course of this study I had many opportunities to observe the truth of this statement. Especially in the preprimary, year three, and year twelve classes, I observed students who were clearly pleased that they had something of significance to contribute which was publicly acknowledged with gratitude. Many of them also voiced their pleasure at being able to explore and discuss significant issues with an adult who listened to them. The behaviours that fostered this reaction were my expressions of my appreciation and gratitude toward each respondent and to the classes as a whole, my attentive listening to what was said to me, and the fact that I engaged in conversations with my respondents, instead of merely listening to them.

The respondents were not the only group with whom I worked during my study. Without the good will and co-operation of the school authorities and the class teachers I would not have been able to gain access to the respondents. Most of these school personnel were more than co-operative; they were open to my needs and very helpful and obliging. In response, I made a point of expressing my genuine appreciation to principals, receptionists, and teachers for their welcome, their effort, and their time; I helped around the classrooms whenever possible; I accommodated my data gathering activities into the teachers' schedules; I offered to share with the teachers and principals information I had gathered that pertained to their particular class, or their school; and I offered to provide a copy of my completed thesis to each school.

There remained one last ethical issue to address. It was important for me to maintain an ethical stance in regard to my data. This meant firstly being careful to record fully and accurately my respondents' words and images, using these in context, and confirming my understanding of these by checking with my respondents. In this way I allowed the voices of my respondents to be heard, and I was faithful to their meanings. Secondly, during data analysis I was careful to consider each datum, finding out where it fit and what it contributed to the overall study. Awkward data that did not seem to belong was not disregarded, but was carefully considered and, if necessary, emerging categories or theories were revised in response to the information contained. In this way, the theories and categories that were eventually documented were representative of <u>all</u> the data I had gathered and of the voices of <u>all</u> my respondents.

CHAPTER FOUR - PREPRIMARY CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

Experiences of God, concept of God, and relationship with God are closely interwoven elements of an individual's spirituality. They each inform and modify the others. For the purposes of this study it was necessary to examine each element separately. However, the key findings for each of the three elements are presented together. The following is a brief explanation of my procedures for analysing and presenting the data of the five groups, and applies to chapters four through to eight.

My purpose was to uncover as much as I could of the children's lived experiences of God and to present these as accurately as possible. The best way to do this was to take the totality of each child's response, link the information this yielded with my sense of the child gained during the interview, and extrapolate from these an explanation of each child's experience of God, concept of God, and relationship with God. The first element of the respondents' spirituality on which I focussed during analysis was their God concepts. I read the data from each group of respondents, searching for the metaphors the respondents employed to name or describe God. Next I determined which of the several metaphors used by each respondent was the core metaphor and which were ancillary metaphors. The core metaphor was the one that made sense of the other metaphors, the one referred to most often, or the one that formed the basis of the individual's response to God.[139] The ancillary metaphors supplemented or circumscribed the use of the core metaphor. I used the core metaphors as the basis of my categorisation. Following this, I returned to the data, searching for the respondents' experiences of God, and for indications about their relationships with God. By examining these elements and noting the impact they had on the child's overall approach to God, I developed a way of naming and categorising these data.

In presenting these data, I firstly examined the artwork of the respondents within each category and selected the picture that best captured its essence. This picture was then presented, along with the understandings of each child within that category. (The remaining pictures appear in the appendix, in the order in which the accompanying responses appear in text.) I presented the children's ideas in italics, followed by my own sense of the meaning of what was communicated to me, which was typed in

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[139] Sometimes, the respondent personally identified the core concept or provided the word or phrase used as the category name. As much as possible I eschewed more sophisticated nomenclature in favour of employing the children's own words.

normal script. Finally, I commented on each child's experience of God and relationship with God, relying as much as possible on the respondents' own words. The categories were presented in order from the one containing the greatest number of responses through to the ones containing the least number of responses. Following the presentation of all the categories within a group, I summarised the data by tabulating the various types of concepts, experiences, and relationships within the group, followed by a commentary on pertinent aspects of these elements.

There are several linguistic conventions which I apply in a particular way. One of these is the use of quotation marks. When I state the children's own words, I utilise double quotation marks (""); when I encapsulate my perception of what is being communicated to me, I use single quotation marks ("). Another convention which I adapted involves the presentation of numbers. As far as possible, all numbers are presented as words. However, when two numbers are presented together, the first is presented as digits, for example, 17 four-year-olds. A further convention that I apply somewhat atypically involves the tenses of verbs. Most of my presentation of the children's work is written in the present tense because the various recordings of the children's responses have frozen their communications in time, making them ever present. Using the present tense makes real and immediate the children's responses. The main exception to this usage occurs when I refer to an event that took place at a specific time, for example, "the child drew a picture".

THE PREPRIMARY GROUP

The preprimary group of participants was comprised of 17 four and five-year-old children. These children were delightful, curious, open-minded, and eager. Their responses were candid and they showed enthusiasm for our work. The greatest difficulty I faced was the inability of this group to verbalise their experiences and concepts. This is a difficulty faced by many researchers before me.

The first part of the analytical task was determining the **God concepts** of the children. Their pictures expressed their concepts, so I began with these. The children told me about their pictures and what they meant. By combining this data with my own impressions of the pictures, I was able to arrive at an understanding of the God concepts of these children. I found eight core concepts: 'Jesus', 'friend', 'watcher', 'caretaker', 'provider', 'protective power', 'young man', and 'alien'.[140]

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[140] The word 'alien' is a term I use to denote a sense of extreme difference, akin to the difference between humans and other species. This perception may be accompanied by a feeling of alienation.

Determining the experiences of God and relationships with God was a difficult task. Many of the categories I derived, therefore, are based on my sense of what I perceived, not on clearly stated responses. Children's concepts of God hint at their experiences of and relationship with God. Therefore, the pictures and conceptual comments of the respondents were the first data I examined. In addition, I found that the children's letters and accompanying pictures often corroborated or modified the original pictures. The children's comments during interviews also provided insights into their experiences and relationships with God. I viewed all these data together to gain an impression of the experiences and relationships, and their meanings for the children.

With **experiences of God**, I distinguished four types of responses which I called 'none', 'subliminal', 'occasional', and 'everyday' experiences. These categories were derived as follows: When asked whether they had ever felt God near to them, the children usually responded with a "no" or a "yes". Within the 'no' responses, I distinguished two different types of response. The first occurred when children said they had not experienced the presence of God and when their other data corroborated this conclusion. I called this lack of experience 'none'. The second response occurred when children were not aware of experiencing God, but their data suggested otherwise. I called these experiences 'subliminal'. Within the 'yes' responses I also detected two different types of response. The first was a casual, occasionally felt experience of the presence of God. I have called these experiences 'occasional' because the children speak of them occurring only at specific times or on specific occasions. The second response is spoken of as a part of everyday life. These experiences occur more frequently, sometimes with more intensity, and without the need for a particular occasion to promote their occurrence. These experiences also tend to be more involving and to evoke a sense of reciprocity within the child. These 'everyday' experiences have a strong impact on the ideas, the relational notions, and the behavioural expectations of these children, in a way that is quite profound. These four experiential categories are found in the responses of all the groups, so what is written here of this group applies to the other year levels as well. Also, these categories refer to the nature of the experiences, not to the circumstances that foster them. These vary and are presented within the responses of each child.

In examining **relationships with God**, I observed six types of relationship which I called 'Null', 'Background' 'Needs-Based', 'Separate Lives', 'Parent', and 'Reciprocity'. These are comprised of loose groupings of responses based around an essential quality of each response and their meanings will become clear when they are viewed in the context of the children's responses. These categories vary with each year group.

FINDINGS

FRIEND

Makayla (Fig. 4:1)
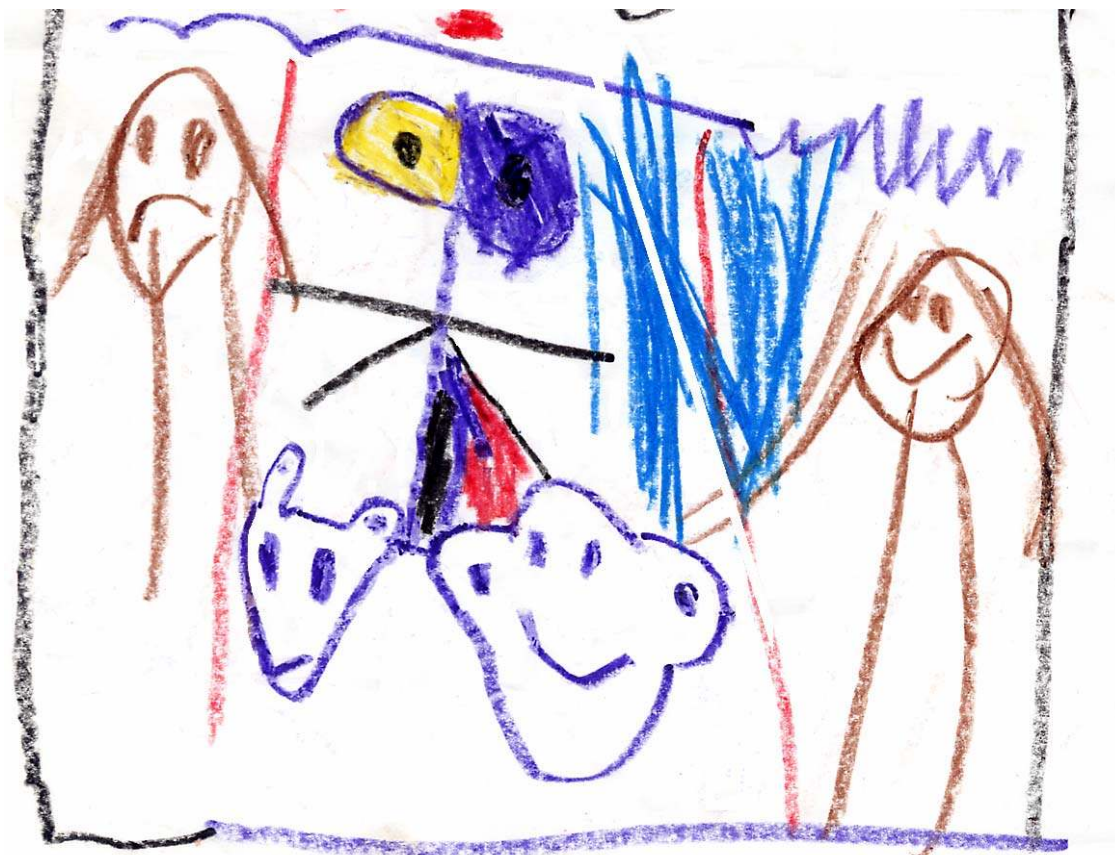
Makayla drew herself (the brown figure on the right) with her pets (the purple figures at the bottom). God (the unhappy brown figure) has decided not to stay and play with Makayla, but to go home to "his" mum (the alien figure looking through the window). To Makayla, God is a 'friend' whom she invites to play with her. God is associated with happy times. She experiences God in a 'subliminal' way and her relationship with God is one of living 'separate lives'. Makayla captures the otherness of God through her portrayal of "his mum". Makayla says, "God didn't want to play with me. He wanted to go home to his mum." There is a sense of rejection in Makayla's comments.

Mario's picture is of himself bouncing balls, an activity of which he is particularly fond. God is associated with the things that make him happy. Mario feels that God is with him when he plays. God speaks to Mario in his heart and tells him that God "plays with him everyday". (Mario had conviction in his manner, his answers were quick and sure, and he spoke with intensity, indicating that he was speaking about

something of which he was certain.) In his letter, Mario asks God to "help his wolves" to be happy and healthy. Here Mario enters the world of myth; God belongs to a real world that differs from this one. Mario has 'occasional' experiences of God and a 'separate lives' relationship. When Mario thinks and speaks about God in a conscious manner, he seems to be adopting the God concepts of his family. He speaks about God being associated with the cross and "living in the cross", his way of incorporating the strong beliefs of his family. Mario's experiences of God and relationship with God, something unconsciously lived, are being brought into question by the 'wisdom' of older, more experienced adults. This is evident in the fact that what he says reflects his family's beliefs not his own lived experiences.

Harry *drew a picture of God and himself going to the zoo. Harry comments that God likes wolves, spiders, horses, and birds (which Harry also likes) and that God likes football, especially the Maggies (Harry's favourite football team).* [It seems that God is made in Harry's image.] *Harry's letter features a picture of God with "his ten holy friends". Harry asks if he may join them.* [It is as if Harry is asking to join an elite gang.] *In his interview Harry talked about God being with the skeletons. This idea was suggested to him by a video game he plays.* It seems that in Harry's mind God is a powerful friend who looks after the dead and is 'the same as me'. Harry has 'subliminal' experiences of God. To him God is an immanent being, a friend who likes him and who lives a 'separate life'.

Daniel *drew a picture of God "playing catching balls" with him. His letter thanks God for coming to his birthday party and seeing all the presents.* These are the acts of a friend. Daniel has a 'subliminal' awareness of God in the world. He relates to God as to a casual 'friend', who lives a 'separate life'. Like Daniel's other friends, God "comes over" for a while then leaves to get on with his own life. At the same time, Daniel is aware that he is special to God. In his interview Daniel says that "God is in heaven and in church". This seems to reflect his religious education lessons because it appears only here and is not reinforced by anything else Daniel drew or said.

JESUS

Nikki (Fig. 4:2)

Nikki's picture is of Jesus on the cross in a cloud. Jesus lives in heaven and therefore is transcendent. Below the cloud is a mass of swirling colours, which seem to represent the chaos of life on earth. This is where Nikki lives, she says. The blue dots are raindrops falling, depicting God caring for the earth. Nikki says she has never felt God near to her and her responses all corroborate this.

Her picture represents a God concept she has been taught (Jesus on a cross), living in heaven, a place far removed from her. Nikki lives in the chaos of life on earth, dramatically different from the abode of Jesus/God. To all my questions, Nikki responded "I don't know". She also walked around the room, apparently uninterested in talk about God. Nikki goes along with the notion that God exists and has a role in the human saga, but from her point of view there is no connection between them. Nikki has no experience of God and a 'null' relationship with God. The distance implied in the transcendent image of Jesus/God depicts the gulf between Nikki and God.

Ross drew a rainbow and said, "Jesus is making a rainbow. He likes rainbows". (Jesus is like Ross who also likes rainbows.) Ross also speaks about Jesus being a "good guy" whom the "bad guys" killed. Ross offers the suggestion that "God rides on his rainbow dragon", in the same way that Ross rides on his bike. For Ross, Jesus is God incarnate, a God he can imagine because God is human, like Ross. Essentially, God is a larger, more majestic, powerful version of Ross. To Ross, God is an immanent being, someone who loves him, who would like to play with him, who shares his interests. God's interest in him gives Ross a sense of harmony and rightness with the world. Ross has 'subliminal' experiences of God that appear in his sense of familiarity with God. Ross' relationship with God is 'background' in nature, in that it is there in the background of his life, but it has no bearing on his life.

Domenic thinks of God as 'my friend, Jesus', but for him Jesus is an immanent, larger-than-life "good guy". Domenic says, "Jesus ran from the bad guys but ended up on the cross where he died". The picture that accompanies Domenic's letter features two almost identical figures, Domenic and God, eating ice-cream. The sense is of familiarity. God is the 'same as me'. Domenic has 'occasional' experiences of God. He says that he feels God near to him sometimes when he is in church, and also that God plays with him at home. God speaks to Domenic and tells him that God loves everyone and wants everyone to know it. Domenic's relationship with God belongs to the 'separate lives' category. This means that, for Domenic, God is a friend who is a part of his life, but in a restricted way; a friend who comes to visit and play, who shares his interests and activities, then goes home to live a separate life. Anomalies appear in Domenic's responses, indicating that he is attempting to incorporate outside concepts into his own. At odds with Domenic's experiences are some of his statements, like "God lives up in heaven coz my mum said. Heaven is the clouds?" "My sister said he put some nails on him" [in reference to Jesus dying on the cross]. "His father put him on the cross". These concepts of a transcendent God and of Jesus/God dying on the cross seem to reflect the God concepts of Domenic's mother and sister. His own sense of God and relationship with God are different from these.

Jessica drew a picture of Jesus on the cross. She and her mother are standing nearby. Jessica's mother seems to be a part of the Jesus story for her, perhaps the person who tells her about Jesus. Jessica's role is to be supportive of Jesus, like the women at the foot of the cross, on whom Jessica is modelling herself. The picture says that Jesus/God is an immanent being, a part of her life. *Jessica comments that God is "going to have a stay over", that is, spend extended time with her. Her letter says, "Dear God. I would like to give you kisses. I love you. Love, Jessica." Jessica feels the nearness of God, especially when she plays, that is, when she is happy and her mind is unoccupied. She hears the voice of God speaking to her "in her heart", telling her that "he loves me and wants me". Jessica says that God loves everyone and wants everyone.* God's love supports Jessica in her life and Jessica's love supports God in "his" trials (as symbolised by her presence beside the cross). Jessica invites God "to come over" and be an essential part of her life and God tells Jessica that God loves her and wants her. Jessica understands that God is a part of her life and that she is a part of God's life. Her 'everyday' experiences of God's presence in her life are intense and involving, they seem to be quite frequent, they have an impact on her life that extends beyond the moment of the experience, and they invite response and commitment. Jessica responds to God and her response exudes a sense of love, acceptance, and joy, and of belonging in a 'reciprocal' relationship with someone she loves deeply.

CARETAKER

Jade (Fig. 4:3)

Jade's picture features God (the central orange figure with a penis), Jade (the orange figure on the left), Jade's puppy (on the right), and Jade's birds (in yellow). There are flowers, the sand, the sea, a dark stormy sky, and rain, representing nature. Jade is happy because God is taking care of nature and of her pets. The red and yellow boundary of the picture implies a sense of security and rightness with the world that Jade associates with God. There is a sense of tranquillity, happiness, and wellbeing in this picture. Jade declares, "God is in the whole world", "God looks after flowers to make them grow", God looks after "everything in the whole world", "God likes all the children", and God talks to people through "fairy dreams", telling them what to do.

Jade also says that she feels God close to her at times, especially when she is alone and quiet in her bedroom. Jade conceives of God as a loving 'caretaker', she has 'occasional' experiences of God, and she has a 'parent/child' relationship with God. There is a feeling of warmth, of security, and of friendly familiarity in Jade's responses. Note that God is different from Jade in form, but similar in colour. Jade recognises that she is different from God, yet there is a connection, a likeness, between them.

Emily drew a picture of God with enormous hands in the garden at home, looking after her puppy because the family has gone away. God is smiling. The large hands indicate that God works with "his" hands, taking care of the animals in a hands-on approach. For Emily, God is associated with nature, caring for all creation, an immanent, benevolent 'caretaker'. *Emily also says that God lives everywhere "all over the world", and that God talks to us and tells us what to do, "when to go to bed, to look after our pets".* For Emily, God is intimately involved with her life, someone upon whom she can depend. Emily has 'subliminal' experiences of God and has a 'parent/child' relationship with God.

WATCHER

Reesha (Fig. 4:4)

> *God dominates Reesha's picture, with a big, smiling face, a small body, and rudimentary arms and legs. Clearly highlighted are the eyes which see all and sparkle, and the lips which smile with pleasure and love.* This emphasis stresses the important qualities of God as far as Reesha is concerned. In contrast, the body is atrophied because it is not needed. Altogether, these features emphasise the passive, static, watching quality of God. God is 'the one who watches and sees all things'. Almost indistinguishable in the picture are some small, yellow flowers, representing nature. God watches over "his" creation. God is a transcendent 'watcher'.

For Reesha, God is a big, powerful, loving, caring person who watches out for her. Although Reesha does not mention experiencing the nearness of God, in her responses there is a sense of warmth, familiarity, contentment and love that indicate a 'subliminal' awareness of the presence of God in her life. Reesha has a 'parent/child' relationship with God, indicated by the feelings of being protected and cared for, which she seems to feel in relation to God.

Renae *drew a picture of herself about to get into a boat on the water. In the boat is a ball for her to play with. In the sky above and behind her is a large figure, different in form, colour, and size from Renae, whom she says is God "looking down" on her and "thinking of doing stuff" (that is, of playing) with her. For Renae, God is someone who watches over her in a loving, protective way. Renae speaks of God talking to people in their hearts, telling them that God loves them. Renae says that she hears God talking in her heart.* Renae has 'occasional' experiences of the presence of God, acting in a loving, supportive, guiding way. Renae has a 'parent/child' relationship with God: she thinks of God watching over her and looking after her, and she hears God speaking in an intimate, loving way to her, as a parent would. Her responses carry with them a sense of happiness, contentment, and security.

PROVIDER

Kyle (Fig. 4:5)

Kyle drew a butterfly, a ball, and a rainbow, things that make him happy. He says, "God always brings me things, so we can have lots of toys and things, houses". For Kyle, God is the 'provider'. God gives things to make Kyle's life comfortable and happy, and God is associated with these things. The colourful border implies a sense of happiness and security. Kyle seems to have a 'subliminal' sense of a mighty being in his life, interested in him and supplying his needs. His relationship with God is 'needs-based' in that the relationship rests upon God supplying Kyle's needs. Whether God is immanent or transcendent is immaterial to Kyle.

POWER

Christopher (Fig. 4:6)

Christopher's image comes from his Space Invaders game. The large, red mass is the alien's ship. The yellow spaceship is controlled by God. The uncoloured rocket is controlled by Jesus. God and Jesus are fighting the aliens and protecting the earth. The aliens are coloured red, for danger. God is represented by a figure that looks like an ankh, an ancient Egyptian symbol. Christopher uses this symbol to represent God, without knowing what it means. For Christopher, God is a 'power that protects' the good and defeats the bad. Christopher feels that God is sometimes watching him. This concept of 'watcher' is Christopher's ancillary God concept. Christopher's responses contain a sense of his own vulnerability and his dependence on the goodwill and protection of God.

Christopher displays a 'subliminal' sense of the existence and of God in his life, and an existential dependency on one whom he admires, looks to for protection, and relates to as a powerful father. His relationship with God is a 'parent/child' relationship.

YOUNG MAN

Annabel (Fig. 4:7)
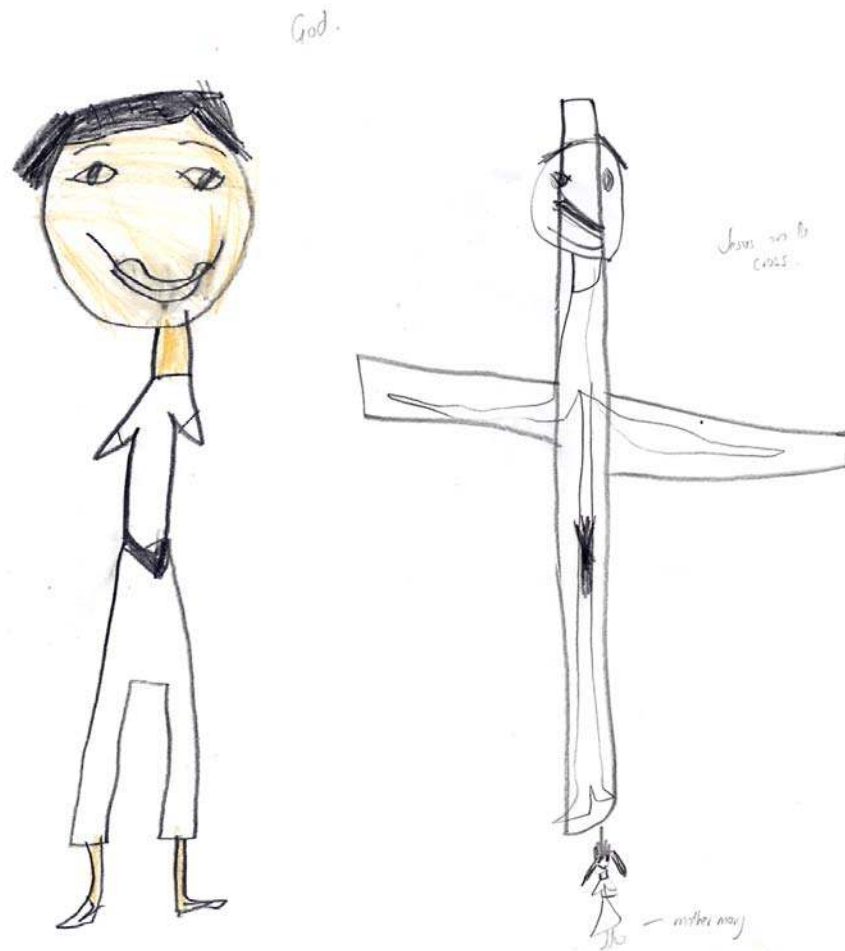
Annabel drew two pictures. The first is the figure of a 'young man', smiling because he loves Annabel and is happy with her. There is no background, denoting that Annabel does not know where this man is. The man's head is disproportionately large, and he has large eyes and lips. This emphasises the seeing, loving aspect of God. In contrast, the body is small and uncoloured, indicating that God does not use his body; God is not an active or corporeal being. *On the reverse of this picture is a picture of Jesus on the cross with his mother beneath. Annabel comments that God (the young man) is Jesus' father.* Mary is very small, reflecting Annabel's unconscious observation that God and Jesus are male and that women play a very insignificant role in the divine life. This notion is reinforced by the fact that the only well formed feature of the figure of Jesus is his penis. In her letter, Annabel asks God if God loves her. It seems that Annabel relates to God as to a young, adult male whom she looks up to and wishes to please, like a father. At the same time, she is not sure of his love. There is an uncertainty about the degree of pleasure and acceptance God feels for her. Annabel's experiences of God are 'subliminal' and her relationship 'parent/child'.

MULTIPLE IMAGES

Em (Fig. 4:8)

Em presents two different images of God. Both images seem to be held equally. The first picture was drawn during the artwork activity. The second picture accompanied Em's letter and was drawn on the following day. *Em's first picture is of Mummy in the garden. There are beautiful flowers, a puppy and a swimming pool.* This is the image of the earth mother, the creator and sustainer of life. The picture exudes a feeling of happiness, harmony and security. Em associates God with Mum, the personal 'caretaker'. Clearly, Em feels happy, safe, and cared for; these feelings accompany her relationship with God as a loving mother. (It seems to me that Em is able to hold this image because she has not yet learned that 'God is a loving father' and that God is not spoken of as mother.) 'Parent' is the ancillary concept. *With her letter, Em presented a totally different concept of God. She drew a picture of her puppy and of God in the shape of a boy, hidden from the waist down behind a cloud, descending to earth to play with her. With him is his Gameboy. Em asks him to play with her and to sleepover. This boy is her 'friend', the core concept in this picture.* Em seems to have 'occasional' experiences of the nearness and love of God that do not involve her beyond the moment. Her relationship with God is that of 'parent/child'. Em's two pictures are opposites. One is of an adult woman with the caring, loving attributes of a mother; the other is of a young boy, a childhood friend. One shows God as immanent; the other is of a transcendent God descending from heaven. It seems that Em is aware that God is many things at the same time. One day Em recognises the immanent, maternal qualities of God; on another day Em experiences the companionship of a friend who comes to play, then goes back home again.

Chelsea (whose picture appears on page 117) also presents two very different concepts of God that she seems to hold simultaneously. The first is of 'Jesus dying on a cross'. She comments that "the green dragon bit him". Obviously, Jesus belongs to the realm of myth and magic. This is not to say that Jesus is not real, only that Jesus does not belong to Chelsea's everyday world. He lived long ago and far away. This seems to reflect Chelsea's learning about God. *Chelsea's second picture, which accompanied her letter, is of God in the shape of a green 'alien', with a large, orange head and no legs or feet, floating down from the sun (Fig. 4:9). On either side of this being are Chelsea and her friend, asking God if "he" would come and play with them.* Clearly, to Chelsea God is very different from herself. God is transcendent (needing no legs or feet with which to walk), and other (a green person), yet friendly, available, and trustworthy. Chelsea is prepared to overlook "his" differences and treat "him" in a friendly manner. In response, "he" comes to play with her and her friend. There is a sense that Chelsea has her own friends and her own life, but that she is willing to accommodate God into these. Chelsea seems to have a 'subliminal' sense of God impacting on her life, but she and God obviously have 'separate lives'.

DISCUSSION

CONCEPTS

Analysing the God concepts of these preprimary respondents has convinced me that at the age of four, children have already formed distinct, idiosyncratic understandings of the nature and role of God in their lives. Like Hawkins (in Barnes and Hawkins, 1997:3), I found that these children display "a deep spiritual awareness". As with Reyes (1994:1), I found that my preschoolers "have a definite concept of God". These children are not bereft of theological concepts, a belief expressed by Wakefield (1975:120) who stated that "definite theological concepts do not appear to develop until in later childhood". Indeed, my findings indicate the opposite. I agree fully with Cram (1996:55) who stated, "The process of sophisticated theological thinking in children begins at an early age." Petrovich (in Watson, 1993:59) also concluded that children of this age have sophisticated concepts of God, more sophisticated than those of many adults.

From this group of seventeen children come eight different core concepts, including both of Chelsea's and Em's concepts. These represent the central idea of God for the children and act to integrate the diverse fragments of life experiences, observations, teachings, and personal meaning making attempts.

Table 4:1 – Core God Concepts of the Preprimary Group

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Friend	2	3	5
Jesus	3	2	5
Caretaker	3	0	3
Watcher	2	0	2
Provider	0	1	1
Protective Power	0	1	1
Young Man	1	0	1
Alien	1	0	1

The most important God concept for this group is 'friend'. Five children imagine God primarily as a personal friend. In addition, eight of the remaining children hold the notion of 'friend' as an ancillary concept. Altogether, twelve respondents, more than two thirds, understand God as 'friend'. This indicates that this concept is the most powerful and useful one for these children, who conceive of God as a familiar element in their lives, interested in them and their activities, approachable and reactive towards them. This 'friend', however, is not an adult, parental friend, but a childlike friend; one who is like them, understands them and is on their side.

'Jesus' as the face of God is the core concept of five of this group. At the time of data collection, in late April, the children had recently learnt about Good Friday. The idea of Jesus, God incarnate, coming to earth and dying on a cross formed a powerful image in the minds of these young children. However, two points need to be made here. Firstly, although all the children had recently learnt about Jesus, less than one third of the class make use of this image. If young children merely repeat what they have learned, something that is widely believed of this age group, a much larger proportion of the class would have employed this image. Secondly, although five of the group used this image, no two concepts are alike; each concept is unique and seems to incorporate the idiosyncratic personality, orientation and life experiences of the child. This is an example of Nye's "signature phenomenon", the notion that the character of each child is uniquely imprinted on their spiritual concepts and expression (in Hay with Nye, 1998).

The next two concepts are held only by girls. Three girls conceive of God as a 'caretaker' who cares for them and their beloved pets. This image closely associates God with nature, presenting God as the one who cares for "his" creation. God is seen as warm, supportive, involved, and caring. The concept of 'watcher' is related to that of 'caretaker' in that it presents an image of a God who is intimately involved, caring, and looking out for those "he" loves. The watching is not a Big Brother type of watching, but a caring, parental, watching over. The difference between these two concepts is that the 'caretaker' concept conceives of God as immanent, whereas the 'watcher' concept involves the notion of God being separate and transcendent.

Two boys conceptualise God as either 'provider' or 'protective power'. Kyle thinks of God as the one who provides for his needs and wishes, responding to him like an indulgent parent. In this scenario Kyle is the one who is active and God is reactive. Christopher imagines God as an enormous power that guards and defends the good, and opposes and defeats the bad. This image seems to provide its owner with a sense of relief from anxiety at his own powerlessness in the face of evil in the world today. In this sense, the concept of God as power and as protector fulfils a psychological need for this child.

The two remaining core concepts are 'young man' and 'alien'. Annabel imagines God as a young man with a large head and smiling face, emphasising the wisdom and love of God. Chelsea seems to be expressing her awareness of the otherness of God by representing God as an alien being.

The ancillary concepts of the respondents play a somewhat different role from that of the core concepts. The core concepts seem to be more consciously held, to the extent that the respondents are able to say something about them. The ancillary concepts, on the other hand, tend to be more unconscious and implicit, and have the role of complementing, extending, or modifying the core concepts of the respondents. The ancillary concepts also tend to name the felt quality inherent in the core concepts, or to present idiosyncratic understandings of the core concepts.

Table 4:2 – Ancillary God Concepts of the Preprimary Group

Ancillary Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Friend	6	2	8
Jesus	0	2	2
Good Guy	0	3	3
Hero	0	2	2
Saviour	1	0	1
Creator	1	2	3
Guardian of Creation	0	1	1
Protector	0	1	1
Guard	0	1	1
Guide	1	0	1
Parent	1	0	1
Same as Me	0	2	2
Different from Me	4	0	4

The concepts of 'friend' and 'Jesus' have already been discussed and much of that information is applicable here. However, there is a slight difference. As an ancillary concept, 'friend' means something like 'God, who is Jesus, is my friend'. 'Jesus' means 'God is to be found in the cross, and is intimately related to Jesus'. 'Good guy' and 'hero' are terms that several of the boys use when talking about their God concepts. These terms obviously originate in the culture of the respondents; they make use of cultural understandings and language in accessing the meaning of God for them. 'Saviour' is my terminology. I selected it as the most appropriate word to name the significance for Jessica of the image of Jesus dying on the cross. 'Creator' and 'guardian of creation' are the roles that are implicit in the core concept of 'caretaker' held by Jade and Emily. The concepts of 'guard' and 'protector' are associated with Christopher's concept of God as a mighty power that concerns itself with the preservation of the good. Clearly, God is associated with goodness and therefore "he" guards and protects what is good because they are "his" own. 'Guide' refers to the interview response of Emily who feels that one of God's chosen functions in her life is to guide her to do the right things. 'Parental' named the quality of Em's 'caretaker' concept.

The two remaining ancillary concepts, 'same as me' and 'different from me' name an understanding of God that became apparent to me as I familiarised myself with the concepts of my respondents. Two boys speak of God as if God were an older and more powerful version of themselves. Ross mentions God "riding his rainbow dragon" in the same way that Ross rides his bike. There is a sense of familiarity and likeness in this concept. Harry imagines God as 'a friend who likes the same animals I do, and who barracks for the same football team as I do'. In other words, God is so like Harry that they share the same tastes and interests. These boys plainly perceive their likeness to God, and this perception is empowering to them.

In direct contrast is the perception, apparent in the work of four girls, of the dissimilarity between themselves and God. This dissimilarity is expressed in various ways which are accompanied by a variety of reactions. Below is Chelsea's picture which clearly portrays this notion of dissimilarity.

Chelsea (Fig. 4:9)

Chelsea and her friend are the two outside figures, with transparent faces, eyes in the usual place, ears, arms, well-developed legs, and necklaces. The legs represent the physicality and active occupation of the girls, while the necklaces represent their femininity. Plainly contrasting with these two figures is the central figure of God. God's face is coloured in, God has no ears, God's eyes are on stalks, God's torso is green, and God has no legs or feet. The lack of legs and feet indicate that God is a non-corporeal being who does not need them. The remaining features indicate that, to Chelsea, God is like 'a little green alien', very different from herself and her friend.

Makayla's picture (Fig. 4:1) expresses her understanding that God is both like and unlike her. God is a 'friend' who is like her, as represented by the colour and shape of the figures. However, the 'friend' wants to go home to "his" mum, an alien figure watching them through a window. The friend is caught between his desire to play with Makayla and the need to obey his mum. The alienness of the mother implies that the son also is different in some aspect. Makayla is expressing her understanding that in some way she is not like God. The disapproving mum is an indication that her dissimilarity is unacceptable.

Jade demonstrates her perception of her similarity to and dissimilarity from God in an implicit way. In Jade's picture (Fig. 4:3) of herself and God in a garden, the figures are both brown and of comparable size, indicating similarity. However, in composition the figures differ: Jade has a torso, arms, legs, feet, two noticeable ears on top of her head, and is coloured in; God, in contrast, has no clearly defined torso, no arms, no ears, and is not coloured in; God also has a set of antennae-like appendages and a phallic-like appendage in the middle of "his" body. The lack of colouring indicates that God is spirit, in contrast to Jade's corporeality; the antennae indicate the alienness or otherness of God; the phallus indicates the maleness of God. These symbols lead me to conclude that it is God's maleness that makes "him" alien, that is, different from Jade. Jade's picture shows no indication that the dissimilarity she perceives between herself and God is distressing to her.

Annabel perceives her dissimilarity from God. Annabel's pictures (Fig. 4:7) portray God as a young man, and Jesus with "Mother Mary" at the foot of the cross. God is wearing trousers, which accentuates "his" maleness, and Jesus, who is naked, is endowed with a very noticeable penis. "Mother Mary" wears a dress emphasising her femaleness. Both male figures are very large, occupying most of the length of the page. In stark contrast is the figure of Mary whose comparative size (she is less than one sixth the size of her son) implies her lack of importance. Annabel perceives that God and Jesus are male, and that being female implies inferiority. (The metaphorical concept of stature is implied in the physical representation of stature.)

The perceptions of these four girls would not surprise feminist theologians, many of whom have written frequently about the problem of the masculist nature of religion which leads to the denigration and exclusion of women; some have commented on the problems of feminine self-esteem in a patriarchal religion;[141] and several have written about the negative effects of the assumption of traditional theology that God is male and therefore that females are not made in the image and likeness of God.[142] I was surprised at the strength and clarity of the expressions of dissimilarity between God and themselves found in the responses of four of my female participants. It concerns me that these girls have already formed the conclusion that they are not "made in the image and likeness of God" in the same way that boys are, and that their femininity makes them less acceptable to God than males. This can contribute to the formation of

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[141] For example, Clanton (1990:71-72) commented, "The way women conceive of God affects their level of self-confidence", and Osiek (1986:10), reported that "The effect [of the 'subtle programming' of female subordination] on a woman's self-perception can be devastating".

[142] For example, Sandra Schneiders (1986b:6) believed "The masculinity of God and of Jesus has been used, in the practical sphere, to deny the likeness of women to God and to Christ".

an inferior self image and lower self-esteem among these girls than would otherwise be the case. Coll (1994:3) argued that

> Images of God and interpretations of doctrines about God affect not only our relationship with God but also the way we view the universe and ourselves. … A person's image of God and image of self are so closely related that to alter one is to radically alter the other.

Unfortunately, this condition can only deteriorate with further religious education: with the heavily masculine emphasis on God concepts prevalent in the churches and taught in Christian schools, it seems unlikely that these girls will ever have the benefit of exposure to feminine concepts of God.

A second point of great interest to me was this group's use of symbols. Conventional cognitive development theory holds that the ability to use symbols coincides with the development of the ability to think abstractly, at about the age of twelve. If this were so, children of four and five years of age would be incapable of communicating symbolically. Analysis of the data produced by the preprimary cohort of this study indicates otherwise. There are many examples of the application of symbolism in the communication of these children. I see two types of symbolism, which I call general and specific symbols, evident in the pictures of my respondents.

General symbols are those associated with the colour, shape, size, and features of the pictures. Nikki's picture (Fig. 4:2) features Jesus in a cloud that is yellow, representing light and hope. In contrast is the mass of dark colours beneath, possibly representing the darkness of evil and ignorance on earth. Christopher's picture (Fig. 4:6) of God and Jesus in spaceships, uses yellow to represent God and Jesus, while the alien "baddies" are coloured red, the colour of danger. Makayla's picture (Fig. 4:1) represents the alienness of God through the portrayal of "his" mother. She is entirely different in colour, shape, and physical features. Jade (Fig. 4:3) depicts the similarity between God and herself by drawing the representative figures the same colour, shape, and size; the difference between them is evident in the figures' features. Reesha (Fig. 4:4) communicates her perception of God's loving watchfulness by representing "him" with large eyes and a smiling mouth. In contrast is God's body which is underdeveloped in comparison with the head. Several children express the concept that God is non-corporeal and does not require normal human legs in order to move about by drawing pictures of God without legs. Em's picture (Fig. 4:8) represents God as a boy on a cloud. As the cloud is the boy's mode of transport, he does not require legs; these are noticeably absent in the picture. Chelsea's representation of God (Fig. 4:9) also features a legless being. A sense of naturalness and rightness in the world is represented by Jade, Kyle, and Em through elements of nature such as water, flowers,

birds, butterflies, and rainbows. A sense of security is represented by Makayla, Jade, Kyle, and Em through the borders which they drew around their pictures. Furth (1988:34-36) commented that for children, the use of borders frequently denotes a sense of security arising from the existence of appropriate parameters in their lives. The bright, happy colours with which the children chose to draw their borders support Furth's interpretation of the meaning of borders in children's artwork.

There is another type of symbol present in the data. These symbols are cultural constructions which the children have absorbed and applied appropriately in their pictures. The concept of alienness is present in Chelsea's picture and is represented by a little green man with antennae. This reflects the cultural concept of aliens from outer space and in the representation of these aliens as "little green men". Related to the current belief in aliens is the existence of computer games like "Space Invaders". This game is based on the premise that aliens have come to earth to destroy it. Christopher uses his familiarity with this game and with its symbolism of alien invasion to represent his concept of God as one who is a heroic, powerful protector of humanity. Mythology is another source of symbolism with which some of these children are familiar. Chelsea's second picture is of Jesus on the cross. Of his death she says, "the green dragon bit him". Mario asks Jesus to "help his wolves". To these children, Jesus belongs to a world that is different from theirs, yet still real. In their minds the realm of mythology appropriately names the reality and difference they perceive between their world and that of Jesus. The world of religious symbolism provides material for two respondents. Christopher's picture of God, the superpower encased in a spaceship, features an ankh. Christopher said the ankh represented the power within the ship (which he elsewhere associated with God), but he could not explain what it meant or why he thought of it. An ankh, in fact, is an ancient Egyptian religious symbol, representing eternal life. This makes it a perfect symbol for God. Another use of religious symbolism occurs in Mario's responses. During his interview, Mario expressed his belief that Jesus died on the cross, that the cross is God's sign, that God lives in the cross, and that when we make the sign of the cross God is there. The significance of the sign of the cross reflects the strong Italian Catholic background of Mario's family. However, the meaning ascribed to the cross is peculiarly Mario's. Mario believes that the cross represents God is such a real way that God becomes present whenever a cross is present or when the sign of the cross is made.

In 1979 Rizzuto claimed that children already possess well defined notions of God before they begin formal schooling, and that these concepts are built up from life experiences. Nelson (1996) came to the conclusion that a primary, or core, image of

God is formed by the age of three and that it reflects the child's experiences with caregivers. The analysis of the preprimary data of this study tends to support these conclusions. It is evident from the data analysis of this study that young children possess fairly well defined concepts of God. The sources of these concepts in the lives of the participants also can be inferred partially from data analysis. That life experience is one source of inspiration for God concepts is apparent in some of the children's responses. Christopher incorporates his knowledge and feelings about the game Space Invaders into a relevant God concept that aptly names his knowledge and feelings about God. Harry's visit to the zoo prompts him to wonder if God likes wolves, horses, spiders, and birds as much as he did. He concludes that God does, and that God likes Harry's favourite football team as well. The influence of caregivers is clear in Em's picture. Her first picture is of mum gardening, prompting my conclusion that God, for her, is a caregiver like her mum. Mario's concept that God is present in the cross is also evidence of the influence of caregivers on the formation of God concepts. Several pictures associate God with nature, especially the respondents' favourite elements of nature. Several boys, in speaking of Jesus and his death, spoke of the "good guys" and the "bad guys", expressions they evidently encountered in their culture. Another cultural addition is found in the depiction of aliens. The sources of the preprimary group's God concepts, therefore, include life experiences, relationships with caregivers, contact with nature, and the influence of the dominant culture, among others. The language these children employ when speaking of God is also a reflection of their life experiences, and of their culture; very little specifically religious language is apparent. To these children, God is a part of everyday life, not a being separate from ordinary life. They have not yet discovered this concept and the related need to employ a separate language when talking about God.

EXPERIENCES

Goldman (1964) believed that experiences of the presence of God almost never occur in young children. However, Goldman was influenced by the educational and theological philosophies of his time. Educational philosophy dictated that a child was a tabula rasa, requiring adult knowledge and instruction to develop mature abilities. Theological philosophy indicated that only those who had developed a mature relationship with God experienced the presence of God in their lives. Together these philosophies maintained that young children possessed neither the knowledge nor the spiritual maturity that would enable them to experience the presence of God in their lives. Ault (2001:34) made an interesting point about such assumptions. She said, "If children are conceived as immature, uncritical, incompetent versions of adults, then, to

a certain extent, research findings could reflect this attitude". This seems to be the case with Goldman's research. Along with many contemporary researchers, my educational and theological assumptions differ from Goldman's. They enable me to assume the possibility that very young children are capable of experiencing the presence of God, and therefore to search for, and recognise within children's responses, evidence of such experiences.

Determining the experiences of these children was a difficult task, mainly because the children were not able either to examine or to articulate their experiences. However, by piecing together the clues within the data, I distinguished four types of responses. I called these 'none', 'subliminal', 'occasional', and 'everyday'.

Table 4:3 – Types of Experiences of the Preprimary Group

Types of Experiences	Girls	Boys	Total
None	1	0	1
Subliminal	5	5	10
Occasional	3	2	5
Everyday	1	0	1

These experiences are categorised according to their intensity and frequency, which also gives an indication of the degree of impact, with more frequent, intense experiences creating a greater impact on the child's life. The most frequently occurring type of experience for this group is 'subliminal' experience. This means that Makayla, Harry, Daniel, Ross, Christopher, Kyle, Reesha, Emily, Annabel, and Chelsea seem to have a sense of the presence of a spiritual reality in their lives, but they are unable to name or explain these experiences. Six children, Mario, Domenic, Jade, Renae, Em, and Jessica, had experiences that were significant enough to impact on their memories and consequently on their concepts of God and relationships with God. The most significant of these was Jessica's everyday experiences of God that led to the development of her sense of interdependence and reciprocity with God.

Within the data are hints as to what conditions foster these experiences. For these children, play is the most commonly expressed occasion. Makayla, Mario, Domenic, Jessica, and Em explicitly cite play as the time when they feel God close to them. At such times the children's minds are unfocussed and they are happy, two circumstances which create the appropriate mental environment for experience of God to occur. Times of solitude, especially when the mind is unfocussed, are the triggering occasions for Jade and Renae. Jade says that she feels God near to her when she is alone, in her room, being quiet. Domenic finds that he experiences the nearness of God in church during religious ceremonies. Only one of the eight experiences just mentioned cites a specifically religious event as an agent that fosters an experience of God.

RELATIONSHIPS

The experiences of God and concepts of God of these children lead to the establishment of relationships with God. It is evident from an analysis of the preprimary data that children of the age of four and five have already formed a relationship with God. The relationship of each child is unique: however, it is possible to perceive certain similarities that suggest patterns of relating. Different people will distinguish different patterns. I detected six different patterns (or types) of relationship with God. These can be represented on a continuum, roughly ranging from the most distant (and non-involving) to the closest (and involving) degree of relationship.

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__|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|___
 Null     Background    Needs      Separate    Parent/    Reciprocal
 (1)         (1)      Based (1)    Lives (6)   Child (7)      (1)
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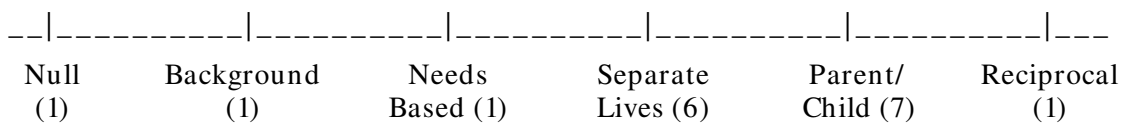
Fig. 4:10 - Continuum of Relationship Categories (Preprimary)

Nikki seems to have a 'null' relationship with God. As the name implies, there is no sense of connection at all in this relational type. Ross has a 'background' relationship with God. This means that Ross recognises God's existence, but for him God is in the background of his life, like a piece of furniture in a room, there when needed, disregarded when not required. Kyle has a 'needs-based' relationship with God where the defining factor of the relationship is that God supplies his needs. Makayla, Mario, Harry, Daniel, Domenic, and Chelsea have friendly relationships with God accompanied by the sense that their lives and God's intersected for short periods of time, then detached into 'separate lives'. Emily, Jade, Reesha, Renae, Christopher, Annabel, and Em have 'parent/child' relationships with God. They depend upon God to protect, guard and guide them, and to take care of the things they love. There is a sense of dependency, admiration, and love in the responses of these children. Jessica's relationship with God is noted for its sense of reciprocity, and interdependence. She recognises that her life and God's intertwine, and that, just as God has taken on responsibilities towards her, she also has responsibilities towards God that impact on the way she thinks and acts.

There are a number of factors that influence these children's relationships with God. One of these influences is the nature of the children's relationships with their parents and other significant adults who act as models of normal relational patterns. The children's relationships with God also are influenced by the children's perceptions of the nature of reality and the world around them, including their perception of their security within this world. A third influence seems to be the children's perceptions of

their needs. In one sense, the relationships they develop with God act as a harmonising influence in their lives, meeting their most greatly felt needs, alleviating their greatest fears, and providing them with a sense of connectedness and meaning.

The influence of parents on the children's perceived relationships with God is often subtle, but can be seen clearly in the responses of several children. Em's mum obviously provides a warm, loving, supportive environment for Em because mum is the inspiration for Em's concept of a loving God (Fig. 4:8). Domenic's mum takes him to church and helps to imbue these experiences with a sense of sacredness. Harry's mum tells him about God; for Harry, God speaks through his mum. Christopher's concept of God as a powerful 'hero' draws upon Chris' relationship with his older brother, whom he patently admires. I would not be surprised to discover that Nikki's parents consider God to be irrelevant. Nikki's concept of God (Fig. 4:2) contains elements of the unconnectedness of God with her life. It is evident from the above examples that the maternal influence on children's relationship with God is of greater significance at this age than paternal influences. Experientially, these children perceive and relate to God more as mum than as dad.

Children's life experiences plainly impact their God concepts, experiences, and relationships. Makayla's picture (Fig. 4:1) indicating that God, her friend, did not want to play with her, reflects a similar occurrence in her life. Makayla's perception of God's mum as a rejecting, alien figure also seems to be drawn from life experiences. Makayla has made the connection between what she felt in those situations to how she feels about God, or at least what she has been told about God. Makayla, Ross, Harry, Daniel, Chelsea, and Mario undoubtedly relate to God in the same way that they relate to their friends, that is, as people who meet, share experiences, and then go their own way to live their own separate lives. These children's experiences of friendship act as the basis for their notions of God and of God's place in their lives.

A third obvious influence on the children's relationship with God is their perception of their needs. For these children, God is the one who provides for their needs. In my typology, I included only Kyle in the category of 'needs-based' because for Kyle, meeting his needs seems to be the only important function God has in his life, whereas the other children related to God mainly in other ways. However, to a certain extent, most of the children have a needs-based relationship with God. Several children, for example Reesha, Emily, and Jade, relate to God as a caring adult who looks after them. This parental concept reflects these girls' perception that they need an adult to look after them, to provide for their physical and emotional needs, and to protect them.

Christopher relates to a 'hero' God who defends him against the unknown alien invaders, in other words, the unseen negative circumstances and influences in his life. Ross', Harry's, Mario's, Renae's, and Em's responses contain a sense of happiness, contentment, and security. For these children, the notion of God is accompanied by a sense of security that flows from having their basic needs met. An opposing picture is created by Nikki (Fig. 4:2), who perceives no connection between herself and God. In consequence, it seems to Nikki that she lives in the dark, swirling chaos of life.

The influence of parents and other significant adults in the formation of God concepts and relationships with God have been mentioned above. There is another adult influence only alluded to so far, the corrective influence that parents and teachers have on the ideas of young children. This influence is seen in the responses of Domenic and Mario. Both these boys relate to God as a friend. God is a person who is friendly, responsive, interested in them, and partly involved in their lives. However, mum and sister respectively, in informing these boys about God, unconsciously provide concepts that are opposite in nature to the concepts the boys hold and which they use to make sense of their world. (For example, Domenic relates to God as a friend, reflected in his drawing of God and himself eating ice-cream together. However, he says that God is in heaven because his mum said so.) These adults assume that young children know nothing about God and need to be educated. In fact, what they are doing is implicitly rejecting the concepts (and the coexisting relationships) of these children and introducing confusion and uncertainty into their spiritual lives. Teachers and parents, in particular, need to beware of this danger. It is my belief that this type of 'correction' goes on all the time, often unconsciously, in the name of religious education.

Table 4:4 – Types of Relationship of the Preprimary Group

Types of Relationship	Girls	Boys	Total
Null	1	0	1
Background	0	1	1
Needs-Based	0	1	1
Separate Lives	2	4	6
Parent/Child	6	1	7
Reciprocal	1	0	1

Looking at the table of experiences of God (Table 4:3), it is plain that girls and boys experience God in much the same way. The categories of responses are fairly evenly matched in terms of gender. However, when examining the distribution of responses about relationship, which involve the individual's interpretation of the meaning of the experiences, it is clear that boys and girls differ significantly. Generally speaking, the boys tend to have objective relationships with God. This means that they see

themselves as separate from God, they focus on their own autonomy, and they are more aware than the girls of the material benefits accruing to them from their relationship with God. (For example, to Kyle, God is the one who gives him "things, so we can have lots of toys and things". Christopher speaks of a God who provides him with protection from physical danger.) This explains the overrepresentation of boys in the categories of 'background', 'needs-based' and 'separate lives'. Girls, on the other hand, tend to have involving relationships. This means that the girls see themselves in relationship to God, they focus on God's expectations of their behaviour, and they are more aware than boys of the emotional aspects of their relationships with God. (For example, Jessica says, "I love you" to God and asks God to "come for a stay over". Emily's God is smiling because "he" loves Emily, clearly something that is very important to her.) This accounts for the overrepresentation of girls in the categories of parent and reciprocity.

There is another obvious difference between the responses of girls and boys. Most of the children imagine God as male. For the boys, this similarity of themselves and God is a source of satisfaction and identity. For some of the girls, however, the difference between themselves and God is summed up as an alienness that detracts from their relationships with God. This is seen plainly in Makayla's portrayal of God's alien mum (Fig. 4:1) and in Annabel's uncertainty about how acceptable she is to God (Fig. 4:7). Chelsea experiences the alienness of God (Fig. 4:9), but considers that to be "his" problem if he wants to play with her and be a part of her life. However, when God is imagined as female, for example with Em's portrayal of God as mum (Fig. 4:8), there is an obvious sense of belonging akin to the responses of the boys who experience their likeness to God. This finding corroborates that of Eshleman et al. (1999) who found that when children perceive God as male, boys perceive God as closer; when children perceive God as female or in a non-anthropomorphic way, girls perceive God as closer. This finding has significant implications for the religious education of girls, especially in regard to the concepts of God that are portrayed. [143]

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[143] I would like to point out that the categorisation schemes are strongly influenced by my perspective. As a woman, I am more sensitised to, and therefore more aware of, the presence and importance of relationship than are most of my male colleagues. For example, when Babin (1965) discussed the relationship with God of his respondents, he commented that the boys thought of "God-in-himself" whereas the girls thought of "God-in-relationship-to-us", a point with which I generally agree. This finding influenced Babin's conclusion that boys showed "a sense of loyalty to a leader", whereas the girls "are emotive and fickle", and their "notions of God … are strongly coloured by their condition of mind". Boys were also said to have a much better sense of "the objective moral order" than girls. These characterisations reflect Babin's masculist perspective which values objectivity and objective knowledge, while devaluing the feminine way of emotive involvement, attachment and relationship. In contrast, I value the feminine way of knowing and my values automatically imply some degree of devaluation of the ways boys relate to God. This is unintentional but unavoidable, given that valuing one way of knowing implicitly devalues its opposite. I hope, however, that I have avoided the extremes of negative characterisation to which Babin gave voice. In all fairness to Babin, however, it must be noted that in 1965 most researchers operated from assumptions containing a heavily masculist bias, and had no qualms in stating their opinions in highly sexist language. Hopefully, today this assumption that one's biases reflect reality and therefore permit such devaluation of one segment of humanity, is no longer widely held.

CONCLUSION

Hull (1986:60), in commenting on the religious thinking of preschool children, exclaimed, "We should never forget how varied and surprising such thought can be". This comment echoes my reaction to the responses of this fascinating group of children. It was clear to me that these children were actively involved in discovering the meaning of God in their lives and in developing a theology that named this God. Their responses were indeed varied and surprising.

Ascertaining what four and five year olds think and feel about God, and how they experience and relate to God is not an easy undertaking. These children function in a way that differs from adults. Some of these differences create difficulties when adults and children communicate. One difference is the ability of these children to be comfortable with paradox. They seem able to hold two or more apparently contradictory ideas simultaneously without feeling the need to decide on one 'correct' idea.

A second difference is perceptual in nature. These children have not yet learned the categorisation conventions that adults apply to life in order to make sense of it. Their perceptions tend to be undifferentiated, that is, everything they experience, whether physical, mental, or emotional, is regarded as being equally real and valid. In addition, these children do not distinguish their experiences of God from their everyday life (which essentially is an adult exercise in categorisation). This made it difficult for them to decide whether they had ever felt God near them. Those children who had experience of God's presence took for granted the idea that this was an everyday part of life and did not view it independently from their other experiences. Those children who did not experience God's presence simply did not understand my question. The children also did not distinguish between what adults would categorise as fact and fantasy, so that when they were unable to answer my questions 'factually', they would sometimes resort to 'fantasy'.

A third difficulty is developmental in nature. Young children have not yet developed analytic abilities that would enable them to step outside their experiences and observe them objectively. Thus, they are not able to say whether one experience is more intense or meaningful than another. Neither are they able to express what something means to them. For example, they have difficulty explaining why they used a particular colour or drew a figure with enlarged hands or a disproportionately large head. They are capable of using symbol, but not of explaining what the symbol means.

A fourth difficulty has been raised by previous researchers. It is a lack of linguistic ability. These children lack a sufficient linguistic command to be able to adequately verbally express their experiences and concepts. However, even adults have difficulty describing or explaining their experiences of God because language is intended to communicate ideas about our material world and not about spiritual matters, so it is not at all surprising that young children should experience great difficulty in this area. Some researchers have assumed that this lack of linguistic ability indicates a corresponding lack of knowledge. I do not believe this is so. My preprimary respondents had definite ideas about God and God's role in their lives, but often lacked the words to express these ideas.

A fifth difficulty with these children is their wish to please significant adults. This leads them to seek responses that will please adults, rather than ones that reflect their own thoughts. For example, during interviews when I made a positive comment about one child's responses, the other child or children present at the interview tended to copy that response in an effort to please me. To understand what they really meant, I found it necessary not to take their statements at face value, but to place them in the context of the discussion in which the statements were uttered, and also in the context of the children's other statements and drawings.

Another difficulty was my inexperience with children of this age group. I was not in tune with them as much as I would wish. This meant that the questions I asked sometimes reflected my perceptions and perspectives, not those of the children. I suspect that this led to less meaningful communication between us than I would have wished.

From the pragmatic point of view, these are difficulties because they constitute differences between the ways children and adults process information and therefore between the ways adults and children communicate and understand one another. However, from the experiential point of view, these 'difficulties' become assets. My preprimary respondents did *not* differentiate their life experiences into categories of factual versus imagined, literal versus symbolic, cognitive versus affective, or ordinary versus extraordinary; neither did they analyse their experiences and evaluate them against an objective measure. To them, everything they experience *is*. Something they see through the faculty of their imagination is as real as something they see through the faculty of their eyesight; something they 'hear in their hearts' is as real as something they hear with their ears. That is why these children can so confidently talk of God speaking to them "in my heart" or "in fairy dreams" with the same sense of reality and

sincerity as when they say, "God lives in the clouds, coz my mum said". This undifferentiated reality enables young children to see and hear God in the things of the world, in their hearts as well as their minds, in their imaginations and their dreams. This is an ability that most people leave behind with their childhood. Is it appropriate, then, for adults to judge that adult perception of reality is more accurate than that of children? Can we say that, because children use imagination and fantasy to enable them to perceive God in their lives and to relate to God, these experiences are not real? Nye and Hay (1996:149) do not interpret children's use of imagination in this way. They noted,

> To experience mystery requires the imagination to conceive what is beyond the known and what is 'obvious'. Studies of children's ability to enter into fantasy show they have a powerful capacity for (and enjoyment of) letting go of material reality, or using it in a new way to discover meanings and values in response to their experience, especially experience for which their language is inadequate.

Burke (1999:9, 10) claimed that imagination is the universal "ability to form an image of something one has not yet seen". He then asked "How could we form an image of God *except* through the faculty of the imagination?" Perhaps this is what Jesus was referring to when he said, "Unless you become like these little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven".

CHAPTER FIVE - YEAR THREE CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

The group of year three participants consisted of 24 seven and eight-year-old-children. Collecting data from these children posed no difficulties. They were lovely children who were interested in working with me. The main difficulty occurred during the data analysis phase. There was often a sharp distinction between the God concepts expressed unconsciously through artwork and the concepts consciously expressed in the writing and interviewing activities. These latter concepts seem to be the attempts of the children to give the 'correct' answer, and they reflect the concepts learned during religious education lessons. As this study is about uncovering the *lived* experience of God of these children, it was necessary for me to distinguish between these two types of information. I did this by relying more on the artwork than on the verbal data as sources of information; by being aware of the children's use of learned religious language as opposed to spontaneous language; by observing the tone of voice, degree of hesitancy, body language, and any other cues that indicated whether the child was performing for me or conversing with me; and by monitoring the children's reactions when I asked for clarification of statements they made (if they were merely repeating the 'correct' answer, they usually were at a loss to explain the meaning of their answer). In this way I was able to differentiate learned responses from spontaneous responses to a degree of accuracy that I believe to be acceptable. It is the spontaneous responses that form the basis of my comments and categorisation patterns.

The conceptual responses are grouped into six categories, four of which contain sub-categories. They are: 'creator' (subcategory 'the God of nature'); 'parent' (subcategory 'heavenly father'); 'supreme being' (subcategories 'supreme magical being', 'supreme ruler', 'superman'); 'Jesus' (subcategory 'my brother, Jesus'); 'manager'; and 'spirit friend'. There were six relational categories, these being 'null', 'duty-based', 'supplier/consumer', 'separate lives', 'parent/child', and 'reciprocal'.

FINDINGS

CREATOR

Skye (Fig. 5:1)

> *Skye drew the planet Earth; all the people of the Earth standing on it; the sun and rain, natural elements which sustain human life; and God's two special creations, Mary and Jesus, with the symbol of Jesus' act of self-sacrifice. God is the 'creator', "a special man" who "lives everywhere" and who is "up the top of the world looking down on everyone" to see if "everything's all right with his people".*

The ancillary concepts are 'watcher' and 'carer'. God is portrayed with only a head, to represent the knowing and watching qualities of God, but with no body, as God neither has nor needs one. Skye seems to have 'subliminal' experiences of God in her life, judging by her tone of voice when speaking about God and the degree of confidence she seems to feel in her ideas. Skye is aware of God's expectations of her; God expects her to "don't do sins" and "be good to people". She says she does these things because "it's making God happy" and she wants to make God happy "because he helps me in all stuff and I'm thanking him by being good". Skye's understanding of God's expectations is clearly learned. Nevertheless, the reason she gives for conforming to these expectations shows an awareness of living in a 'reciprocal' relationship with God.

Emma *drew a happy scene with a robed and sandalled God in a cloud and below "him" two colourfully dressed girls with baskets standing next to an enormous tree containing a monkey, a koala, birds, and apples. Of this picture, Emma says, "God is on a cloud. He has made the special tree. He is making the new life"* (that is, the objects that issue from the tree). [It seems to be the tree of life.] *For Emma, "God is good at creating lots of things. God loves us lots and lots." God also "watches us and makes sure that people on earth feel happy and not scared". God is "everywhere … in heaven and in our hearts". God "is a part of us … so he can protect us".* Emma has a clear image of the wholeness and oneness of creation. To her, everything is a creation of God, and God exists in all "his" creations. Emma's ancillary concepts are 'carer' and

'watcher'. The creative, protective image of God portrayed by Emma is reminiscent of a child's loving trust in her father. Emma says that she talks to God and tells "him" that she has "faith in him", that is, she believes in God. Emma also comments that God answers back. She says that, when she is falling asleep, she hears God speaking to her; "Sometimes when you think that you can hear a voice, it's actually God". Emma has 'occasional' experiences of God, specifically when she is experiencing the transition period between waking and sleeping. She has a 'parent/child' relationship with God.

Henry *drew himself in the jungle, surrounded by a tiger, a crocodile, a raven, and various insects. God is in heaven, watching what Henry is doing. Heaven "is like a house, but it's like space how it goes on and on and on and never ends".* Henry is attempting to reconcile his knowledge of science, especially space, and his religious understanding that God lives in heaven. *Henry says God "looks down on us and makes sure we're safe, but we can't see him".* This implies that Henry can see the effects of God's work, but cannot respond to God because one cannot relate to someone who cannot be seen. All he can do is enjoy what God has provided. Henry has a 'supplier/consumer' relationship with God. His ancillary concepts are 'watcher' and 'carer'. Henry speaks of a time when he was lost in a shop and felt God near him, looking after him so that he was not afraid. He has 'occasional' experiences of God, usually when he is in need or scared.

Aaron drew a scene from nature with a mountain, a lake, a tree, and many animals, including a zebra, a giraffe, an elephant, a turtle, a snake, a bat, a koala, a meercat, a bushmouse, a parrot, an eagle, and a "roadrunner". For Aaron, God is the one who created the animals. God "is with the animals, taking care of them". God is also "one of a kind" and "when we need care, he cares for us". Aaron's ancillary concept is 'carer'. Aaron regards himself as one of God's creations, and one of God's children. Aaron says he hears God speaking to him in his mind, telling him "to look after my pets and things like that". Clearly, God is also a guide, telling Aaron what to do. Aaron comments, "God expects us to be kind and caring" because it helps people get along. He does this because God expects it of him. Aaron's has 'everyday' experiences of God and a 'parent/child' relationship with God.

Timothy *"thought about God creating animals". Timothy likes the beach, so it was natural for him to draw a beach scene, complete with crabs, fish, and seals. For Timothy, "God lives far away in heaven". God also "created friends, family, the world for me". Timothy derives comfort from the notion that "devils can't beat God in a fight". God is powerful, unconquerable.* Timothy's ancillary concepts are those of

'provider' and 'powerful ally'. Timothy has a 'subliminal' sense of the presence of God in nature. It is associated with the happiness he feels near the ocean. Timothy also has 'everyday' experiences of God, conversing with him about everyday matters. When Timothy talks to God, "I tell him I don't want anything bad to happen". God responds to Timothy. "Sometimes you can hear him in your mind", and "If you want something to happen, he might do it". Timothy is aware that this is not a one way relationship. He believes that God "expects us to help people who are hurt and if your mum needs help with the work". The relationship between Timothy and God reminds me of a father/son relationship (including the instruction from dad to go and help mum).

The God of Nature

Katalin (Fig. 5:2)

> *In her meditation, Katalin went to the forest, where she sees a bird's nest. "I'm happy in the forest and that makes me think about God". For her, God is in our hearts. God is associated with nature, in essence God is 'the one who is found in and through nature'.*

Katalin experiences God in nature, an example of 'occasional' experience. Katalin prays to God, but "he doesn't talk back". Katalin has some experience of God and takes the initiative in responding to God, but does not feel that God plays an important part in her life. Katalin and God live 'separate lives'.

Patra *drew a picture of herself in a meadow beside a flower. While she was admiring the flower, she "thought about God making stuff". Patra believes that "all people are special" and that "God is in our souls".* For Patra, God is the creator who is found in nature, including humans. Patra's ancillary concept is 'carer' of nature. She also comments that when we talk to God through prayer, "he" talks back to us by "helping us". Patra feels the presence of God at night when she goes to bed. She also senses God in nature. I have called these 'occasional' experiences because they are related to specific times or occasions. Patra has a 'parent/child' relationship with God.

PARENT

Jasmine (Fig. 5:3)

Of her picture, Jasmine says, "I walked into the lounge room and I saw the table with lots of great food. God appeared and said, 'I did all this for you because you have been grateful'. Then we both had dinner." Jasmine thinks of God as being "in our hearts and everywhere". Jasmine speaks of a time when she had an 'occasional' experience of God.

"When Daddy gave me a big smack and I was in my room, I talked to God and it was like he was cuddling me. …I felt happy." God is like mum rewarding her when she is good, and comforting her when she is in trouble with her father. In her poem Jasmine writes, "God doesn't think we're babies", indicating that her experiences of God lead her to feel that God thinks of her as a good girl, not a useless baby. (Perhaps Jasmine feels this is what her father thinks of her and she is contrasting God's concept of her with that of her father.) Jasmine has a 'supplier/consumer' relationship with God.

Emily *drew a picture of herself and her mum going horseriding on a fine, windy day.* For Emily, God is like mum, loving her and sharing in her favourite activity. There is a sense of warmth, safety, companionship, love and belonging in Emily's response. This picture is not only about Emily's relationship with her mother; it is also about her relationship with God. Emily wrote, "God is special", "God is lovely", phrases that describe her feelings when she is in contact with mum-God. Emily also tries to be "good" because God wants her "not to hit people or be naughty". She has a 'subliminal' awareness of the presence of God in her life, and a 'parent/child' relationship with God.

Sam *drew a large man with a smile on his face and arms stretched wide in a welcoming, gesture.* He gave all the 'correct' answers (like "God is a shepherd", and "God is good for people"), but I found no evidence of a meaningful personal concept, of any type of experience of God, or of any sense of relationship with God. Sam thinks of God as a loving father, but this is a learned notion, an abstract concept that does not touch his life. Sam's experiences are 'none' and his relationship with God is 'null'.

Heavenly Father

Romey (Fig. 5:4)

Romey drew herself standing beside God who reaches out to her "because he likes me". He is standing in a shaft of light because "he just come down from heaven" when he saw that Romey was thinking about "him". God is a faraway person who is busy with "his" own activities (in this case "making birds") yet stops what "he" is doing to be with her. God is a heavenly version of Romey's own father. Romey has a 'subliminal' sense of God, but there is no sense of God playing a part in her everyday life. They live 'separate lives'.

Braydon *drew a picture of a man standing in a shaft of light. This is God who "came down from heaven on a beam of light. God is praying for the world, for people to have a good life." Braydon also comments that "God made the beach" (Braydon's favourite place).* God is a distant, powerful, creative, father figure. Braydon does not appear in the picture; there is no connection between himself and God. His experiences of God are 'none' and his relationship with God is 'background'.

SUPREME BEING

Alana *drew a picture of a man standing beside a fairytale castle in the clouds and another of the same man standing beside a castle on earth.* For Alana, God is the 'supreme being' (symbolised by "his" size in comparison to the castles) who is associated with story, is larger than life, and belongs to a world that differs from our world. Alana prays to God sometimes and asks for the weather to be fine, but God "doesn't talk back". God is a special, powerful man who can grant her wishes and to whom she occasionally speaks. Her experiences are 'none' and her relationship is that of 'separate lives'.

Laurie (Fig. 5:5)

Laurie drew two pictures. The first is of the God of heaven, surrounded by an angel, a devil, and the landscape of paradise. The second picture is of the God of earth: an invisible God (symbolised by the large sunglasses) watches over Laurie and his sister (playing with water pistols), his dad (fishing), and the things he loves (nature, sunny days, tractors, mining, hot dogs, and having fun).

For Laurie, God is a spirit (the image in the first picture in not coloured in); God lives in heaven but "his" presence is also on the earth; God is associated with Jesus (the image in picture one has solid feet with holes in them). God loves all that "he" has created (symbolised by the two hearts "he" is holding); God sees all things (represented by the sunglasses in picture two). The ancillary concepts are 'watcher', 'creator', 'carer' and 'spirit'. Laurie is appreciative of God's efforts. He prays to God "saying thanks for everything", but God "doesn't talk back. He just takes it in". Laurie has a 'subliminal' sense of the presence of God. He and God live 'separate lives'.

Supreme Magical Being

Sarah (Fig. 5:6)

For Sarah, not only is God supreme, God is a fairy queen. She has wings and flies in the air, surrounded by magical creatures like fairies, flying horses, demons, and spirits. Below her, in a meadow, a teacher with a blackboard is teaching a group of children. God is a 'supreme being' associated with magic and, therefore, power. God is not of this mundane world, but of a world that transcends and permeates this one. Sarah says that God "lives in this forest. It has fairies and lots of animals that talk." Sarah's portrait reflects her belief that, like fairies, God is real but cannot be seen except through the imagination. Despite associating God with fairies, during the interview Sarah said that "God's our father", and "God died for us". These words reflect the public God about whom Sarah is taught (as opposed to the private God expressed in her picture). Sarah has 'subliminal' experiences of God, and relates to God as one who lives a 'separate life'.

Supreme Ruler

Soni (Fig. 5:7)

Soni drew a series of two (before and after) pictures. Previously, he had drawn a picture about what happened between the events of the other two pictures. The series of three pictures tells a story, so all are presented here.

Soni's first picture is of Jesus in heaven with tears streaming down his face because his father, God (the king sitting on the throne) is forcing him to leave his home in heaven. Jesus does not want to go; even the donkey at the bottom of the page cries in sympathy with him. However, his cries have no effect. God, surrounded by his guards, evicts Jesus (symbolised by their outstretched sceptre and shields respectively). The purpose of his eviction is evident in the second picture where we see Jesus on the cross, watched by his mother, Mary, and the donkey. Jesus is coloured black, the colour of death and despair. The final picture reveals the ending of the story. Jesus, having completed his mission, is welcomed back into heaven. The king and the guards are smiling, as is Jesus himself. Even the donkey is happy to have Jesus back where he belongs.

Soni expresses the opinions that God "made us" and "nature", "God is in heaven", "God does a lot of special things", "God is important", God "died for us", God "is our father", "God protects us from evil", and "God knows who we are" and "loves us". The image that Soni presents is disturbing. Essentially, Soni envisages God as a supremely powerful ruler whom none can gainsay. God "made us", so he can do as he likes with us, as evidenced by his actions concerning his own son. God "is our father" and he "is important", so we cannot escape from him or from our creaturely duty of obedience. Clearly, Soni derives this image from the Easter story, though this data was collected in late November. Note that the pictures say that God ordered the expulsion and death of his son, but the words say that "God died for us". Soni does not see the discrepancy; he is merely trying to make sense of what he has been told about God. As he has no experiences of God of his own, he can only base his concepts on what he has learned. The problem here is that Soni, a seven year old boy, has literalistically interpreted an adult, metaphorical truth that is too sophisticated for him. Soni's concept of God is of a 'supreme ruler', a tyrannical despot who is capable of murdering his own son. 'Tyrant' is the ancillary concept. Soni has a 'null' relationship with God. His body language and tone of voice confirmed that his attitude toward God was something like, 'I've been taught about God, so I'll give you the answers you're looking for. I don't know if there is a God. If there is, God has nothing to do with me.'

Superman

Kendrick (Fig. 5:8)

Kendrick drew a picture of God on the battlements of a castle. The castle and God are beset by dragons, the epitome of power. However God, a well-muscled 'superman' is unaffected by the flames. In fact, he is smilingly unconcerned. Beyond saying that the man in the picture is God, that "he is pretending to be superman" and that the dragons are breathing fire on him in an attempt to kill him, Kendrick could not explain the meaning of this picture, or why he drew it. It seems to me that Kendrick has a fascination with dragons, a mythic symbol of great power, and for Kendrick the epitome of power. The fact that even dragons cannot destroy God is Kendrick's way of expressing the inconceivable power of God. Elsewhere, Kendrick volunteers the information that "God is special", "God created heaven and earth", and "God loves us and forgives our sins". These seem to be learned concepts. Kendrick has no experiences of God, and a 'background' relationship.

JESUS

Jeremy (Fig. 5:9)

Jeremy's picture is of a young man, Jesus, identifiable by the cross on his robe. Jesus "flies down from heaven" to go camping. He pitches his tent beside the river. The hot sun and native vegetation mark this as an Australian setting. Jeremy associates God with Jesus, one of us, who is so much a part of our world that he has to fly down from heaven every now and then to enjoy nature.

The ancillary concept is 'creator'. Jeremy says it is Jesus in the picture, and the figure wears a large cross on his chest identifying him as Jesus, but I think the figure also represents Jeremy. In his notes and interview, Jeremy repeatedly refers to God as creator. He also says that "God is our father". What I think Jeremy is saying is this: Jeremy likes the bush and he likes going camping with his dad. Meditating on God in preparation for the picture drawing activity, the image of the bush and of camping came to his mind. The picture he drew, therefore, has a double significance – it represents himself and his dad, and it also represents God and God's son, Jesus. The two images are closely intertwined. Jeremy states that he felt God close to him attending "reconciliation during the holidays", that is during a special ceremony in which he experienced the sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time. This is an example of 'occasional' experience which for Jeremy occurs during religious ceremonies. Jeremy also has a 'subliminal' sense of the presence of God in nature. Jeremy has a 'parent/child' relationship with God.

Justine *drew a picture of a large cross. Beside the cross is a small window through which the smiling face of a young man is peering. Justine said, "I saw God looking out of a window. He's smiling because he's happy".* Jesus is the human face of God. He watches over everyone and is happy with what he sees. Justine's concept of a distant, uninvolved God is portrayed in her drawing by the face of Jesus peering through a window in heaven. Justine says that God expects us "to be good". Justine imagines a distant, disconnected God. Her experiences are 'none' and her relationship is 'background'.

Fraser *drew a picture of Jesus on the cross, with a crucified man on either side of him. He said that God is on the cross, and there is a "good guy" on one side and a "bad guy" on the other. God is talking to the "good guy".* The images that Fraser uses obviously come from his religious education. There is no evidence of a meaningful personal God concept; instead Fraser is substituting an image he has learned which has no relevance for him. Fraser provisionally accepts the existence of God, but his concept is of a transcendent God too involved with more important things. (Fraser also commented that God lives "up in the clouds" where he "looks down so he can see that people are all right down on the earth".) Fraser's experiences of God are 'none' and his relationship is 'background'.

My Brother, Jesus

Katie (Fig. 5:10)

Katie drew herself and God, playing hide-and-seek. They have pitched a tent on the grass near the beach. The hearts represent Katie's feelings of love for God. Katie comments, "I think God's like a brother to me, a big brother". Katie thinks, "God is inside you and he's having fun everywhere and he's having fun with everyone at the same time."
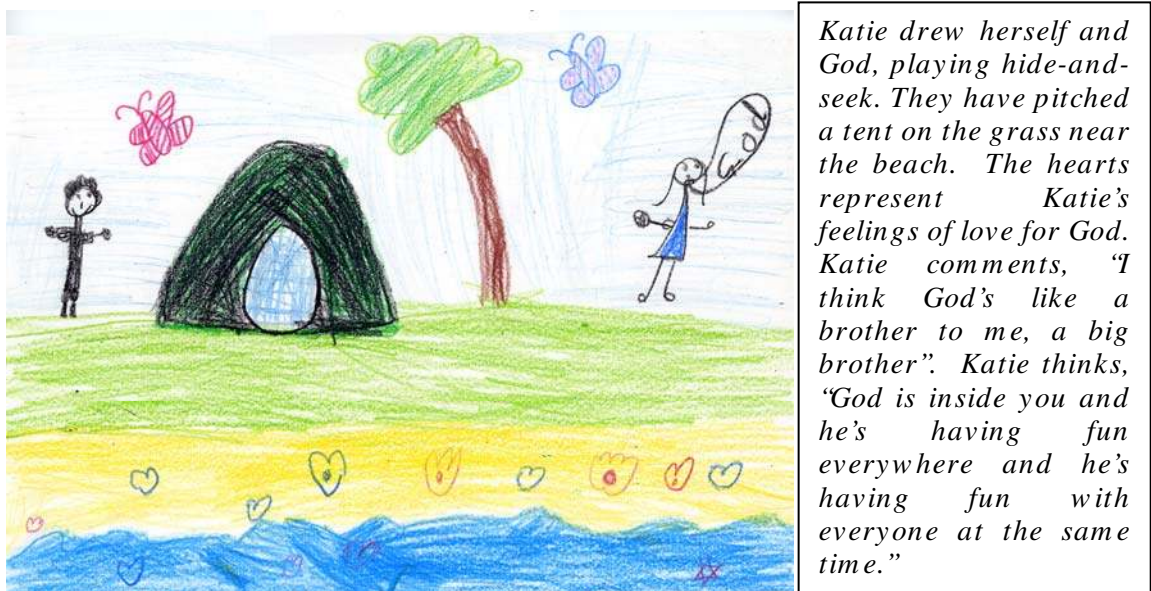
Katie believes, "God shares himself in a hundred dimensions maybe". The joy of this picture captures the essence of God for Katie. "He" is a fun God who loves everyone and wants them to enjoy themselves. God is the same size as Katie, indicating equality. The shape of the figure of God indicates that Katie's big brother is Jesus. Katie talks to God "in my mind … mostly at home when I'm in my bedroom or when I'm drawing". She hears God answering her "in my mind". They talk about "my day and what I had for tea". When God talks to her she hears both in words and through feelings. "And sometimes when my sister's being really mean to me he just gives me a hug". Katie is aware of her responsibilities to God. She says that God wants her "to be nice", a general term covering both behaviour and attitudes. Katie tries to do what God expects of her. Katie's has 'everyday' experiences of God, and a 'reciprocal' relationship.

MANAGER

Alex (Fig. 5:11)

Alex is "in his friendly place, playing with his friends". (Alex is the boy whose soccer playing is so good that he is 'on fire' – note his clothing – and his friend on the far right is clapping.) In the upper middle section is "a tunnel leading from under ground up into the sky". God is in the tunnel, "pushing buttons to work the air tube …to make the air clean". (The air tube is the small tunnel on the right.) There is "a friendly house to put bad people in to make them good". It "is connected to God's tunnel and he is taking away their bad thoughts" and replacing them with "good thoughts and feelings". (There are wires running between God's tunnel and the friendly house for this purpose.) Alex has a great imagination which he uses to help him understand about God and God's relationship with humanity. His responses were quick and sure, indicating that Alex finds surety and satisfaction in his God concept. Alex writes that some days God gets mad at us. Alex experiences God when he is experiencing a crisis. He speaks of feeling God near him when he was injured in a fall and needed 10 stitches. "God helped me to be really brave and not feel the pain." Also, "When my rabbit died, I went to bed and I felt God was near me on my bed". Alex also speaks of 'everyday' experiences of God. When Alex talks to God, God answers; "like when you've done something bad, God comes down to earth …and he talks to us in our hearts". He tells us that what we are doing is wrong, "and he teaches us why". Also, "sometimes when you are doing something really, really, really, really good, God says 'thank you' for being really, really good". Alex is aware that God has expectations of him; God "expects us to be nice to each other and be really friendly". Alex said that he tries to do these things. Alex has a 'reciprocal' relationship with God.

Carlton *drew a picture of a skyscraper on fire, and a fireman trying to put it out. Carlton could not explain his picture.* Carlton probably wants to be a fireman when he grows up. God probably means nothing to him. It is also possible that subliminally he thinks of God as being like a fireman managing a fire. Carlton says that God expects him to do "good things every single day and every single time". When I asked him whether he tried to do this, he curtly responded "no". Perhaps Carlton feels that God's expectations are impossible to fulfil. In essence, Carlton distances himself from what he perceives to be an impossibly demanding God of whom he has no experience. Carlton's experiences of God are 'none' and his relationship is 'background'.

SPIRIT FRIEND

Rosie (Fig. 5:12)

Rosie drew a picture of herself praying. Beside her is an invisible God, in a mirroring pose, receiving her prayers and "seeing if what she is praying for is nice". Rosie says that God is special, cares for us, loves us, can look after us, made nature and life. God is a spirit, and of indeterminate gender. God is intimately involved in Rosie's life, like a friend to whom she speaks and who responds to her. Rosie says, "If I want him to do something, he'll do it, but only if it's nice".

Rosie believes that God "loves everybody and if you're sick he makes you feel better". She tells of a time "when I was outside and I was playing, I fell off [the swing] and I felt that God was near me and stopped me crying. …[When] I fell on the concrete he [God] helped me and my dad came out and I felt that God was near me. …He came in and he just said goodbye when I was inside". Rosie has 'everyday' experiences of God in her life. Rosie is aware of God's expectations of her; "He wants us to be nice to people … like, say, if someone's lonely you could invite them to play with you". Rosie does what God expects because she understands why God asks these things of her. There is a sense of love, companionship, and trust in Rosie's image. There is also a sense of partnership and of 'reciprocity' in both her drawing and her statements. Rosie feels that her friendship with God is a two-way relationship with its concomitant obligations.

DISCUSSION

CONCEPTS

Tamminen (1988:64) found that "young children's concepts of God are entities with many levels and dimensions". This is certainly true of this group of respondents. The 24 seven and eight-year-old children in this group conveyed concepts that range from the literalistic to the metaphorical and from the acquired to the idiosyncratic. It is this range of concepts, and the varied types of thinking, imagination, and meaning making that underlie these, that amaze and impress me most about the responses of these children. From this small sample of twenty four children come six core concepts, six core concept subcategories, and ten ancillary concepts. These concepts represent the central idea of God for these children. They seem to be the temporary results of the children's struggle to integrate the diverse fragments of life experiences, teachings, and personal meaning making attempts.

Table 5:1 – Core God Concepts of the Year Three Group

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Creator	2	3	5
God of Nature	2	0	2
Parent	2	1	3
Heavenly Father	1	1	2
Supreme Being	1	1	2
Supreme Magical Being	1	0	1
Supreme Ruler	0	1	1
Superman	0	1	1
Jesus	1	2	3
Brother, Jesus	1	0	1
Manager	0	2	2
Spirit Friend	1	0	1

God as 'creator' is the core concept of seven of this group. These children seem to be incorporating their increasing awareness of the world around them and the ecological concerns that arise in their scientific learning into their concepts of God. God is perceived to be the creator of the whole world, and is portrayed in various natural settings. A sense of awe accompanies this concept which primarily views God as a transcendent, powerful being who lives outside and above "his" creation. However two girls in this group, while holding the concept of God as creator, see God primarily as the 'God of nature'. For them, God is to be found in nature because nature is imbued with God's presence. God for them is both transcendent and immanent, with the transcendent 'creator' God being above creation and the immanent 'God of nature' found within creation. This concept is a panentheistic one.

God as 'parent' is a concept held by five of this group. These children do not name God as mum or dad, but their portraits are of a person who responds to them in ways reminiscent of a parent. One boy and one girl envisaged God as a 'heavenly father', a father-like figure who comes down from heaven to be with his children and to care for them. One boy visualised God as a loving father, but this seems to be a learned concept. Two girls imagined God as a mother-like figure, someone who shares their activities, rewards them when they are good, and comforts them when they get into trouble with dad. This implicit image is accompanied by a sense of intimacy which is not present with the father image. Despite this, both girls refer to God as "he", gendered language they have been taught to adopt, even though it does not name for them their lived experiences of God. The sense of happiness and security present in four of the five responses speaks of these children's experiences of their own parents.

A sense of awe characterises the concept of 'supreme being' which is held by five of this group. For Laurie (Fig. 5:5) God is a spirit, the creator of heaven and earth, caretaker of all that exists, the 'supreme being', the ultimate, benign power in the universe. Alana pictured God as a friendly giant who lives in a castle, an image that denotes a benevolent, larger-than-life ruler who cares for all creation. Sarah (Fig. 5:6) resorted to the world of magic to express her notion that God is an otherworldly ruler, a loving queen who has dominion over all she surveys, and who has at her command all power, including the power of magic and miracles. These three images of a benevolent 'supreme being' carry with them a sense of order, harmony, and safety. Kendrick's image of a 'superman' God (Fig. 5:8) portrays the supreme power of God in a neutral way: God is neither benevolent nor malevolent, though he does exhibit human hubris. In contrast, Soni's pictorial story (Fig. 5:7) presents the image of a powerful tyrant who banishes his son from home until the son completes a mission that culminates in his own horrific death. The power and injustice of a cruel, despotic God permeates Soni's image. One can only imagine the psychological effect on Soni of holding such an image.

Four children conceive of God as Jesus. Jeremy (Fig. 5:9) presents a heavenly Jesus who flies down to earth to go camping. This concept emphasises Jesus' affinity with nature and with the earth which was once his home. Justine thinks of a heavenly Jesus who is monitors events on earth from his vantage point in heaven. Fraser pictured Jesus on the cross, between the 'good' and 'bad' thief. This image is very traditional and clearly reflects Fraser's religious education. Katie's image is of her brother, Jesus, who plays with her and is a close companion. These images seem to imply that Jesus is a part of God and is associated with God, rather that that Jesus alone *is* God.

Two boys envisage God primarily as a 'manager', one who manages the problems of the world. Alex's image (Fig. 5:11) of an invisible God in a tunnel, manipulating controls to purify the air, and sending out positive impulses to alter the negative thoughts and feelings of "bad" people portrays God as a behind-the-scenes 'manager' who takes care of creation. Carlton's image is of a fireman managing an enormous fire. Neither of these images represents God as dominating humanity or flouting humanity's free will. Rather, they present a God who is concerned, involved, and willing to help humanity.

Rosie (Fig. 5:12) envisions God as an intimate friend who is a spirit, therefore invisible. This image provides a sense of support, love, acceptance, and harmony in Rosie's life. It is an example of a meaningful image that functions to help her develop a positive view of herself and her place in life.

Table 5:2 – Ancillary God Concepts of the Year Three Group

Ancillary Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Watcher	4	5	9
Carer	5	3	8
Caretaker	0	4	4
Creator	1	1	2
Friend	2	0	2
Powerful Ally	0	1	1
Provider	1	1	2
Comforter	1	0	1
Spirit	0	1	1
Tyrant	0	1	1

There are eleven ancillary concepts held by this group. 'Watcher' is the most frequently occurring ancillary concept with nine of the twenty four children portraying this image. (The term 'watcher' is derived from the children's own comments. Several of them stated, "God watches over us".) This term refers to the belief or sense that God is alertly observant and actively involved in watching over "his" children and "his" creation in "his" self-imposed mission to protect, guard, and guide. This term occurs frequently in conjunction with the core concepts of 'creator', 'supreme being', and 'manager' and with other concepts that also implicitly contain the God/us dichotomy; it does not occur in core concepts that are primarily relational, like 'friend', because the mental stance is one of God and me together.

The term 'carer' similarly is derived from the children's statements that "God cares for us". This concept contains the sense of God's loving involvement in the child's emotional and physical wellbeing. It occurs in relational concepts or complements distant images like 'creator' or 'supreme being'. It differs from the concept 'caretaker'

which names an active occupation and has a more emotionally distant connotation. 'Carer' is a concept more frequently found in girls' responses (six girls and two boys used this as their ancillary concept), whereas 'caretaker' tends to be employed more by boys (four boys and no girls employed this image). The relative emotional distances connoted by the terms seems to be the reason for this gender difference.

'Creator' was the ancillary concept of two children. Laurie's image of God is of a 'supreme being', one of whose functions is to create. Romey's heavenly father figure interrupts his occupation of creation to come and visit her.

'Friend' is the ancillary concept implicit in the responses of two girls. Emily drew a picture of herself and her mum horseriding. The friendship between the two is obvious. Katie drew a picture of God (Fig. 5:10) as brother 'Jesus' who is clearly a close friend. For these two girls the intimacy and love that is implied in their pictures, and encapsulated here in the term 'friend', seem to provide a solid foundation for a healthy sense of self. Both the core and ancillary concepts of these girls are plainly relational in nature. 'Powerful ally' is Timothy's ancillary. He imagined God as a 'creator' who is so powerful that "devils can't beat God in a fight". He seems to derive satisfaction and a sense of security that such a 'powerful ally' is on his side. This concept is active in that it names God as one who takes action to defend "his" friends. It seems to be Timothy's equivalent of the above, more passive concept of 'friend'.

Two children held the implicit concept of God as a 'provider'. Timothy said that God "created friends, family, the world for me". In Jasmine's picture (Fig. 5:3) God provides a feast for her. God as the 'provider' of good things is evident in these notions. One difference occurs in the children's comments: for Jasmine, God's providence is a result of her efforts, that is, she must earn the reward; for Timothy, God's providence is a gift that is unearned. Jasmine also presented the image of God as a 'comforter' in times of distress.

'Spirit' is an ancillary concept found in Laurie's depiction of God (Fig. 5:5). The actual figure of God is cleverly drawn. God has a head, to represent the knowledge and will of God. God's body is outlined faintly and is uncoloured to represent that God is a spirit, a statement about God's actual nature. God's legs and feet are black and coloured in, and the feet have holes in them. This is to indicate that God became human in the form of Jesus, and that this incarnation grounded God in humanity, even though God is essentially spirit. Several layers of symbolic representation are present in the metaphoric representation of God by this eight year old boy.

'Tyrant' is the ancillary concept that accompanies Soni's image of God as a despotic king. Soni has taken a concept intended to be understood metaphorically and interpreted it in a concrete, factual way. He then extrapolated the nature of God from this information. This results in a very negative concept of God. It does not correspond to the actual meaning of the idea being taught, and it (and others like it) can be psychologically damaging to children whose sense of self-worth and of the nature of humanity is related to their concept of God. Reyes (1994:1) believed that "how one perceives God determines how one develops a philosophy of the nature of human beings".

Soni's image of God is an example of literalistic interpretation.[144] Another example of this approach is seen in Romey's and Braydon's concept of 'heavenly father' which features a male figure coming down from heaven in a shaft of light. In direct contrast to this mode of interpretation is the symbolic, idiosyncratic images created by students such as Alex (Fig. 5:11) and Carlton. Alex's concept of God as 'manager', working to control and manage the earth's air supply (to meet humanity's physical requirements) and to ameliorate the "bad" thoughts and feelings of some people (to meet humanity's psychological requirements), is unique. This concept displays a sophisticated understanding of the nature and role of God, and a well-developed symbolic sense.

Soni's, Romey's, and Braydon's concepts are constructed from received truths and their own logical extrapolation from these. Alex's and Carlton's concepts are constructed from their own imaginative reinterpretation of fragments of information about God they have acquired, combined with their sense of the meaning of God in their lives. These two types of conceptualisation represent the two ends of the spectrum of interpretive approach present in the work of these children. The remaining children exhibit an interpretive technique that falls somewhere between these two and attempts to reconcile their own intuitive sense of the existence and meaning of God with the concepts of God they are taught. This technique results in concepts that range from a personal appropriation of received truths (for example, Jeremy's image of Jesus camping and Laurie's depiction of the 'supreme being' of heaven and earth), to an imaginative and personal reworking of major concepts (for example, Sarah's notion of the dominion of God expressed in her depiction of God as a fairy queen, and Jasmine's portrait of God as a loving mother who prepares a feast to reward her and who comforts her in her sorrow).

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[144] 'Literalistic' interpretation is not to be confused with 'literal' interpretation. The latter term refers to the application of the appropriate literary genre to arrive at an interpretation that is in accordance with the intention of the text, that is, it is literal. The former term refers to the interpretation of abstract concepts as if they were concrete realities.

Embedded within these concepts are many different symbols. Some of these are conventional and acquired. Soni represented the kingship of God through the symbols of the throne, the crown, and the sceptre (Fig. 5:7). Katie and Laurie used the symbol of hearts to represent the love of God (Fig. 5:10 and 5:5 respectively). Jesus, or the significance of Jesus for humanity, is represented by the symbol of a cross in the responses of Skye (Fig. 5:1), Jeremy (Fig. 5:9), and Justine. Note also the stance of the friend in Katie's portrait (Fig. 5:10). His arms are spread wide so that his body forms the shape of a cross. This seems to be a subtle use of the symbolism of the cross to identify Jesus. The transcendent, heavenly nature of God is represented by the symbolism of a shaft of light in the pictures of Braydon and Romey (Fig. 5:4).

Some symbols employed by the children are natural or logical symbols; as they are elements of that which is being symbolised, they become logical representatives of the concept. God's creative power is symbolised by various elements of nature like trees, grass, sun, clouds, animals, and humans. The invisible, spiritual nature of God is symbolised by figures that are very faintly drawn (for example, the torso and thighs of the figure representing God in Laurie's picture, Fig. 5:5) or faintly coloured (for example, the figure of God in Rosie's picture, Fig. 5:12). That God watches over creation is symbolised by the use of sunglasses in both of Laurie's pictures (Fig. 5:5) and by a face looking through a window in Justine's picture.

Mythic symbols also appear in the pictures of these children. Power is represented by Kendrick through the symbol of the dragon; the power of God is represented by Sarah in the form of a fairy queen. Fire is utilised as a symbol of destruction (in Carlton's picture) and the sustaining, life-giving quality of nature is symbolised by the tree of life (in Emma's picture). These mythic symbols are the contents of what Jung called "the collective unconscious". The children are not consciously aware of their use of these symbols, a fact deduced from their inability to explain why these symbols were employed. Conscious and unconscious symbolic representations occur frequently in the pictures of these children, belying the supposition that children of this age are incapable of appropriate symbolic usage.

In the introduction to this chapter I mentioned that "there was often a sharp distinction between the concepts of God expressed unconsciously through artwork and the concepts consciously expressed in writing and interviewing". This distinction seems to arise because of two reasons. Firstly, language about God and images of God are sexist. This becomes apparent when one considers the fact that all twenty four children refer to God as "he", even though three girls (Jasmine, Emily, and Sarah) specifically hold a

female image of God and four girls (Emma, Katalin, Patra, and Rosie) hold a gender-neutral image as their personal God concepts. Holding non-masculine concepts of God supports the development of close relationships with God for these girls, a finding which corroborates the conclusion of Eshleman et al. (1999) on this point. However, as there is no place in traditional Christian teaching for feminine language about God or for concepts of God as mother or queen, when asked to write or speak about God, these girls consciously use the 'correct' language and images they have been taught. This gives rise to several problems. Girls like the seven mentioned above (more than half the female population of this cohort) experience dissonance between their private concepts of God built up from their experiences of God, and the exclusively male language and imagery that traditionally is applied to God. Eventually the girls are forced either to abandon their private concepts or to hold these in secret. Either way, the girls' private notions are rejected, giving rise to a sense of their own incorrectness and the unacceptability of their ideas. This is one of the reasons Sally McFague (1987), in her book 'Models of God', advocates adopting the models 'mother' and 'friend' to conceptualise God. To do so is not to introduce new concepts of God, but to give voice to concepts that are already held by many people, both children and adults.

The second apparent reason for the distinction between the children's drawings (their private concepts) and their verbal responses (their public concepts) is the disregard with which children's ideas are treated. Most teachers would agree with Liddy's (2002:14) statement that "The crucial point educationally is the reality of the child's world, of beginning with the child's experiences of life and relationships. All education must begin and end with children's own inwardness". Despite this educational maxim, the teacher of these children was unaware of the myriad creative, symbolic, functional concepts her children possessed. She therefore was unable to build upon these concepts in developing the children's religious and spiritual understandings. Even if she had been aware, there is little she could do without contravening the religious education curriculum, which neither permits feminine concepts to be taught, nor recognises that children already hold valid concepts of God. All that is left for her to do officially is to teach the curriculum. The result of this 'correct' religious education is a dichotomy between the perceived truths the children hold and the received truths they are given. Several examples will serve to illustrate what I mean. Five children wrote that God is a "shepherd". However, none of these children has a pastoral background that might enable them to derive any real meaning from this concept. The image of God as shepherd did not occur even once in the children's private, meaningful concepts of God. Three children wrote of God as "father". However, none of these three children

held the concept of father privately.[145] Eight children wrote of God as "creator". However, not one of these children held 'creator' as their private God concept. This is also true of the four children who wrote or spoke of God as Jesus. These children are already learning to keep their own ideas private and only to say what they are taught to say. This notion is reflected in the children's language. When the children told me about their pictures, they used everyday language with which to communicate their explanations and ideas. For example, Sarah states that God "lives in this forest", Emily thinks "God is lovely", Skye says that God is "a special man", Aaron describes God as "one of a kind", and Jasmine speaks of God cuddling her. However, the children's language usage changed abruptly when they were asked questions which they interpreted as a catechism drill. When I said "Can you tell me something about God?" the children frequently employed terms like "God is in heaven", "God is a loving father", "God is our shepherd", "God died for us", "God is kind", "God forgives sins", "God heals us", "God guides us", "God protects us from evil", and "God loves us". (This last phrase comes from Soni, whose concept of a tyrannical king pointedly contradicts Soni's public acceptance of the 'party line'.) These children have learned that there is a special language which one must use when making official statements about God. This language, however, appears to be meaningless to them.

The idea that children have their own well-developed concepts of God that differ markedly from the concepts of the official religion is not a new one. Rizzuto (1979) came to the conclusion that the God of official religion may be very different from the God of experienced subjective reality. Later (1991:51) she added, "For the believer it is that subjective God that counts, because it is that God who is the specific object of a religious experience." She also noted that "The conceptual God of official religion and of many religious studies is but an aspect of the experientially richer God of private life" (p. 52). Essentially, Rizzuto is claiming that the personal God concepts children hold are more important than the official concepts taught to them because their personal concepts are built up from their life experiences and serve to help them make sense of, and relate to, themselves and their world. Despite Rizzuto's widely publicised views, however, few religious education curriculum writers take into account children's religious experiences, and the theologising and concept development in which even young children engage. The result is that children's concepts, if recognised, are dismissed. There are several problems with this. The first is the disrespect and disregard implicit in what Erricker and Erricker (1994:178) refer to as treating the child

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[145] Jeremy's concept (Fig. 5:9) is of Jesus camping; no mention of 'father' God is made or implied. Soni's written use of the term 'father' is in sharp contrast to his understanding of God as a tyrant king. (Soni does not have an abusive relationship with his own father, so this is not the source of his private God concept.) Sarah's usage of the term 'father' directly contradicts her private image of God as a fairy queen (Fig. 5:6).

as a "receptive object" rather than a "constructive subject". This implies that children have nothing worthwhile to contribute to theological knowledge. Jesus himself warned against such an arrogant assumption, but his words continue to go unheeded. A second, and potentially more destructive, problem arises from the psychological and spiritual impact on children of such an approach. Farmer (1992:265, 266) reported on her study into adult memories of childhood religious experiences. She noted that nine out of the ten participants reported a gap between their early "perceived truths" and "taught truths", a discrepancy that was "severely exacerbated as they entered the institutions of learning". For these nine respondents, reconciling these two different truths "became one of the major ongoing tasks of adulthood". This reconciliation, in each case, was accompanied by "a sense of loneliness, difference, or strangeness resulting from the incongruity in their early perceptions of the world". Farmer notes that "they essentially describe being inwardly at war between the demands of integrity and conformity". Is this what we want for our children?

EXPERIENCES

Discovering the children's experiences of God and relationships with God was not an easy task. The difficulty I experienced sprang mostly from the children's belief that they were being asked to supply the 'correct' answers to my questions, like a catechism drill. I was able to catch a glimpse of their true ideas and feelings when they attempted to explain their pictures to me and when I surprised them by asking for elucidation on a point they had raised. It was then that I was able to distinguish which children were expressing their personal ideas: the children who were conversing with me were able to give some kind of explanation of their statements; the children who were performing for me found requests for elucidation difficult to answer, so responded with "I forgot" or "I don't know". I also found that by paying attention to verbal and visual cues like the swiftness of a reply, the timbre and intensity of an answer, and the bodily and facial alertness that accompanied an explanation, I was able to perceive to some extent the degree of confidence children felt in their responses, the pauses that denoted continued thought and those that came from lack of comprehension or interest, and the degree of involvement the children experienced in what they were saying.

In examining experiences of God, I distinguished four types of responses. I called these 'none', 'subliminal', 'occasional', and 'everyday'. Although there are only four types of experiences of God, the intensity and personal meaning connected with them vary, creating a broader range than appears at first sight.

Table 5:3 – Types of Experiences of the Year Three Group

Types of Experiences	Girls	Boys	Total
None	2	6	8
Subliminal	4	1	5
Occasional	4	2	6
Everyday	2	3	5

The experiences of God that I have classified as 'None' occur both when respondents *say* they have not felt God near them, and when their other responses confirm this. This type of experience was apparent in the responses of seven children, Soni, Sam, Carlton, Fraser, Justine, Braydon, and Alana.

The second category is 'subliminal' experience. Although the children were not aware of having experienced the presence of God in their lives, their responses indicated a subliminal awareness that God is with them. Sarah and Laurie found satisfaction in their concepts and 'subliminal' experiences of God as 'the supreme being'; Romey and Emily unconsciously experience God as father and mother respectively, with the associated sense of security and happiness; Skye sensed the presence of God in nature.

Six children said they had experienced occasions when they felt God near to them. Two children, Henry and Jasmine, feel the nearness of God in times of crisis. These children told of times when they were lost, hurt, punished, or experiencing the death of a loved one and feeling afraid, sad, and confused. Each of them experienced the presence of God with them, helping them to cope with their crisis. Three children, Patra, Katalin, and Jeremy, experience the 'occasional' presence of God in nature. Two girls, Patra and Emma, feel God close to them in bed at night. These are times when the girls are approaching the liminal phase between waking and sleeping. One boy, Jeremy, also spoke of experiencing the closeness of God during a special religious ceremony in church. The most common occasions which precipitate 'occasional' experiences of God are times of crisis, experiences of nature, and liminal experiences. Each of these is essentially a private experience that occurs in times of solitude. This finding concurs with a point noted by Hay (1979) that a majority of religious experiences occur during periods of solitude.

Five children, Aaron, Timothy, Alex, Rosie, and Katie, spoke of occurrences I call 'everyday' experiences because they are spoken of as occurring frequently, and because the children's responses were accompanied by a sense of ordinariness or everydayness. All five children mentioned God speaking to them in their minds (or heart, in Alex's case) like a mental conversation. These conversations are about everyday matters

("what I had for tea" - Katie), praise (God saying "Thank you for being very, very good" - Alex), giving directions (God telling Aaron "to look after my pets and things like that"), and guidance (God tells us that what we are doing is wrong, "and he teaches us why" - Alex). Timothy and Rosie mentioned that sometimes God grants their requests; Rosie said "If I want him to do something, he'll do it, but only if it's nice". The responses of these five children were accompanied by tones of conviction and authority, and by a sense of security and harmony.

RELATIONSHIPS

Within the data of the year three group I observed six different types of relationship with God which I call 'Null', 'Duty-Based', 'Separate Lives', 'Supplier/Consumer', 'Parent/Child', and 'Reciprocal'. The groups of responses can be represented on a continuum, roughly ranging from the least degree of relationship to the greatest.

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__|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|___
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| Null | Background | Supplier/ | Separate | Parent/ | Reciprocal |
| (2) | (5) | Consumer (2) | Lives (5) | Child (6) | (4) |
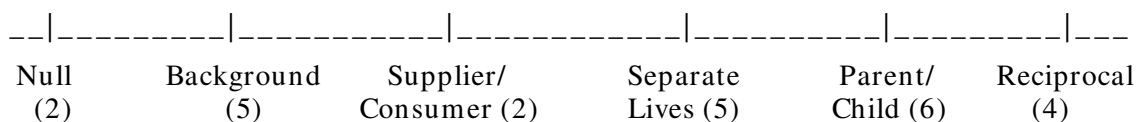
Fig. 5:13 - Continuum of Relationship Categories (Year Three)

The most non-involving degree of relationship occurs in the category 'null'. Soni and Sam have 'null' relationships with God. Braydon, Kendrick, Justine, Fraser, and Carlton, implied that they had little relationship with God. Essentially, God was in the 'background' of their lives. 'Supplier/Consumer' refers to responses that focus on God's provision of goods and services, and on the children's role as beneficiaries. The responses of Henry and Jasmine are included in this category. The category of 'Separate Lives' is applied to responses that indicate there is an interplay between God and the respondents, but this interplay occurs at specific times and is gone, leaving the respondents to continue with their lives as they wish. The responses of Katalin, Romey, Sarah, Alana, and Laurie fall within this category. The fifth category, 'Parent/Child', refers to responses that struck me as being characteristic of parent-child relationships; there is some sense that God acts like a parent in the life of the child, and the child feels a sense of gratitude and obligation to God. The responses of Emma, Aaron, Timothy, Patra, Emily, and Jeremy appear in this category. 'Reciprocal' relationships with God are ones where respondents are aware of God's presence and role in their lives, are appreciative of all God has given them, and reciprocate in love by doing all they can to fulfil God's expectations of them. Skye, Katie, Alex, and Rosie appear to have 'reciprocal' relationships with God.

The responses of the year three children contain a degree of correlation between experiences of God and relationship with God. All the children in the 'null' and 'background' relationship categories belong to the 'none' experience category. The closely linked relationship categories of 'supplier/consumer', 'separate lives', and 'parent/child', mostly contain the responses of children in the 'subliminal' and 'occasional' experience categories. Of the five children who reported 'everyday' experiences of God, three belonged to the 'reciprocal' relationship category and two belonged to the 'parent/child' relationship category. As would be expected, children who do not experience the presence of God (or of the sacred) in their lives tend not to develop a close relationship with God. Conversely, those children who have frequent and close experiences of God's presence tend to develop a close relationship with God. (There was an exception to this trend: Skye had only 'subliminal' experiences of God, but seemed to have a 'reciprocal' relationship with God.) The research of Hamer (2004) suggests that those children who experience the presence of God in their lives have a particular gene that facilitates this recognition.

Below is an overview of the relationships with God of the year three group.

Table 5:4 – Types of Relationship of the Year Three Group

Types of Relationship	Girls	Boys	Total
Null	0	2	2
Background	1	4	5
Supplier/Consumer	1	1	2
Separate Lives	4	1	5
Parent/Child	3	3	6
Reciprocal	3	1	4

The table reveals the over-representation of boys in the 'null' and 'background' categories, and their under-representation in the 'reciprocal' category. However, most studies that report gender differences in ways of relating to God reveal that women and girls perceive God as being closer to themselves than do men and boys.[146] The above findings are consistent with this trend. The relationships with God of these year three children seem to be influenced by a number of factors, including the impact of relationships with significant other people, perception of the world around them, their own life experiences, their imaginations, and learning.

The role of significant others, especially parents, is subtle, but pervasive. Some children sense the presence of God in their lives and the image of their parents plays an important role in shaping the way they perceive their experiences and the way they relate to God. Jasmine relates to God as to a mother who lavishly prepares Jasmine's

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[146] Among these are Heller (1986), Blombery (1991), and Tamminen (1996).

favourite foods in appreciation and hugs her when she needs comforting. Emily based her perception of God and her relationship with God on the model of her mother, in particular the way her mother participates in her life and shares her favourite activities, in this case horseriding. Romey imagined God putting aside "his" work to spend time with her, just like her own father. Katie's concept of God as 'brother Jesus' and her reciprocal relationship with her friend, God, reflect her experiences of her brother and her close friends. Many psychological studies have concluded that children's concepts of God are based on their parental concepts.[147] Nelson (1996:34, 35) explained that the child's interactions with her or his parents "is creating the sentiments (emotionally charged attitudes or dispositions) from which a god representation will emerge", and that "the instructions caregivers have given the child" also contribute to the development of a God concept in young children. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the responses of these children a concept of God and a relationship with God that bear the hallmarks of their relationships with their parents. This can be seen plainly in the notions these children have of God's expectations of them. Timothy believes that God "expects us to help people who are hurt and if your mum needs help with the work". Emily thinks God wants her "not to hit people or be naughty". Katie says that God wants her "to be nice". Carlton says that God expects him to do "good things every single day and every single time". These ideas clearly reflect the children's understandings of their parents' expectations of them.

Perceptions of the world around them, especially of nature, influence these children's experiences and relationships with God. Katalin (Fig. 5:2) associates God with nature, experiencing God's nearness there. Timothy also portrayed the God of creation, experiencing enjoyment and appreciation of the natural world when he is at the beach. Jeremy likes camping. He feels the presence of God in the Australian bush, and this, together with his close relationship with his father, informs his relationship with God.

Several children found inspiration in their own life experiences. Laurie drew a picture of a happy, busy scene (Fig. 5:5) that encapsulated all the things in his life that gave him enjoyment. Aaron loves animals, so he modelled God on his own predilections. For Aaron, God is the one who created all the animals, and when God speaks to him, God tells him to look after his pets.

The freedom and creativity of the imagination are important factors in the concepts and relationships of several children. Alex's imagination led to his representation of God as 'manager' (Fig. 5:11) who cares for the physical and psychological well-being of

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[147] These include Buri and Mueller (1987, 1990, 1993), Lawrence (1991), and De Roos et al. (2001).

humanity. This concept is closely intertwined with Alex's 'reciprocal' relationship with God. It is Alex's ability to imagine God in such a novel, personally relevant way that fosters his close relationship with God. Sarah also uses imagination to envisage God as a fairy queen (Fig. 5:6). This image facilitates her relationship with God. Kendrick (Fig. 5:8) imagined God as a superman, resisting the attempts of his powerful adversaries to defeat him. This powerful image provides satisfaction to Kendrick. Many researchers and teachers have written about the importance of the imagination in forming God concepts and in relating to God.[148] Smith (1987) declared, "Our imagination is the crucial faculty in the engagement with reality which we call knowing". These children provide potent examples of the use of the imagination in developing healthy God concepts and meaningful relationships with God.

An important influence that emerges at this age is the impact of learning. All the children in this study attend Catholic schools, so they are receiving five religious education lessons a week. For children who experience the presence of God in their lives and who possess well-developed, functional concepts of God, this learning will either contribute further to their understanding of the nature and role of God, or be treated as a divergent view that does not impact greatly on their spirituality. With children who have no experience of God in their lives and who have not yet developed functional God concepts, the learning they receive forms the matrix from which a concept will emerge. The concept that is developed, however, rarely is one the teacher intends. For example, the belief that God sent his son, Jesus, to earth so that he would die on a cross is one commonly held and taught by Christians. However, by taking this belief literalistically and deducing details from the core concept, children like Soni (Fig. 5:7) develop the concept of a cruel, tyrannical king banishing his son from his home to a place of pain and death. Soni appears to have no relationship with God: In Soni's mind there is no connection between God and himself. Unless something ameliorates his negative concept of God, Soni may soon develop a negative relationship with God. Soni may learn 'correct' phrases like 'God is a loving father', but these words will not impact his negative conceptualisation of a highly objectionable God. Soni's teacher is a dedicated, caring professional who would be horrified to discover the results of her teaching. However, while young children are taught adult concepts without heed for the effects produced, examples like Soni's misunderstanding will continue to occur.

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[148] Among these are English (1987), Harris (1987a, 1987b), Treston (1990), Trainor (1991), Erricker (1992), Watson (1993), Nichols (1996), and Burke (1999).

CONCLUSION

The twenty four children in this group are all seven or eight years of age, they attend the same school, and they receive the same religious education. Despite this, their responses reveal an enormous range in ways of experiencing God, relating to God, and conceptualising God. Clearly, there are important factors that affect these phenomena other than age and education. One powerful, influencing factor that appears in the responses of these year three children is their perceptual abilities coupled with their openness to non-physical reality. It is evident from their responses that some of these children are more capable than others of perceiving the sacred dimension of life. If such children also remain open to their experiences, they may continue to grow and evolve spiritually. However, there are many obstacles in their way. One of the most surprising of these is the religious education these children are receiving. Instead of fostering spiritual growth, religious education seems to be creating a dichotomy between personal spiritual experiences and public, taught creeds. Undoubtedly, this outcome is unintentional. It arises because few teachers or curriculum writers are aware that most children come to school with their own well-developed concepts of God which reflect their lived experiences of God. The spiritual education of children who already possess concepts and relationships with God follows different lines from the spiritual education of children who are tabula rasa. Unfortunately, the metaphor of children being empty slates waiting to be written upon seems to be the chief metaphor guiding religious education, as least as far as these children experience it. This need not be the case. Rizzuto (1979), in her well-publicised book *Birth of the Living God,* stated that children come to school with their own private God tucked under their arms. Cavalletti's (1983) research into the religious potential of the child indicated that children have deep, noetic, mystical experiences. A study by Olivera Petrovich in 1989 concluded that children have quite sophisticated concepts of God, more sophisticated than those of many adults (in Watson, 1993:59). Coles (1990) maintained that children regardless of culture and religious upbringing have their own experiences of and strong convictions about God. Nelson (1996) concluded that a primary image of God is formed by the age of three. Hay with Nye (1998:89) discovered that each child had a very individual spiritual approach, "a spiritual signature".

As long ago as 1988, Bridger claimed that religious educators should "build on images ... which have made up a child's experiences" (p. 36). More recently Ramsey (1999:117) declared, "Teachers are aware of the importance of beginning with the children's own experiences of life and relationships". Unfortunately, these insights, and the insights of others, have gone unheeded.

CHAPTER SIX - YEAR SIX CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

The year six group of participants consisted of 20 ten and eleven-year-old children. Unlike the other groups, however, the year six respondents come from two separate schools. The main reason for this was the low number of year six students present at school on the days I collected data from my participating primary school (school A); there were only twelve students present. Although I had been hoping to have approximately twenty students from each year group, I accepted that a certain degree of fluctuation in this number would occur (there were seventeen preprimary students, twenty four year three students, twenty year nine students, and nineteen year twelve students). Even so, twelve seemed a low number of respondents given that I wanted to obtain a roughly representative range of responses from the group, and given that I wanted to have generally comparable group numbers. I therefore decided to supplement the year six responses by asking year six students at another primary school (school B) to participate.

Another reason for my decision to seek additional data was my disappointment with the conduct of data collection with this class. Unexpectedly, the class teacher gave me extremely limited access to her class, telling me that all data had to be collected within two days, and that I could only work with the students for two hours on each of those days. On my first day with the group, after briefly telling her class that I would be doing some work with them, the teacher left me to teach the whole class for the two hour period. Her lack of support for my work, her lack of encouragement to the children to cooperate with me, and the lack of her physical presence during the activities clearly communicated to the students that their teacher considered my activities to have very low priority. Consequently, they put little effort into the drawing or writing activities. In hindsight, I should have refused to accept the teacher's conditions. However, I am now pleased that I continued with this group, for one important reason: although their pictorial and written activities were slapdash, the interviews (conducted in pairs) resulted in some well-considered, thoughtful replies.

The responses I obtained from school B differed in most respects from those of school A. The teacher was cooperative and encouraging, with the result that I obtained pictorial and written data of a high standard. The pictures are very expressive of the children's ideas; the written notes reveal reflection and thought; the interviews display deliberation and openness. In fact, the responses obtained from school A and school B

represent the two ends of the spectrum of response standards. The overall effect is complementary, providing a more or less average range of responses.

All except the last of the pictures used to illustrate the concept categories come from school B because they communicate the concepts much more clearly than school A's pictures. (School B's pictures differ from most of the other pictures in this study because these students used the class crayons instead of coloured pencils. With crayons, the result is more vibrant, but less detailed.)

One problem I encountered with this year group was a gap between personally meaningful concepts and learned responses. I had encountered this with the year three group, but it appeared in a more entrenched form with these students. I found it necessary to employ all my intuitive sense, to read between the lines (a process I outlined in chapter five), and to verify my conclusions with others to be reasonably confident of my findings.

Within the data of this group I identified nine different conceptual categories; 'Jesus', 'creator', 'spirit', 'ruler', 'heavenly being', 'a helping hand', 'light of the world', 'life force', and 'agnosticism'. The relationship data formed six categories, namely 'negative', 'duty-based', 'supplier/consumer', 'separate lives', 'dependent', and 'reciprocal'.

FINDINGS

JESUS

Lukas (Fig. 6:1)

Lukas states, "My picture is of Jesus showing himself to the people". This picture is both of the transfiguration of Jesus on earth, and a representation of the resurrected Jesus in heaven: Jesus is the interface between humanity and divinity. Lukas prays to God to protect him and his family and friends. In return, Lukas does what God expects of him in following the Commandments. When Lukas thinks of Jesus or prays to him, there is a subliminal awareness of their connectedness. Mostly, however, Lukas lives a 'separate life'. Lukas' ancillary concept is 'Heavenly Being'.

Hannah *drew a picture of Jesus on a cloud with a thunderbolt beside him and the word "God" beneath him. Jesus is powerful and welcoming. However, Hannah says, "I half think God's there. I know he's there to pray to and for luck, but I don't believe that he could feed all those people with just a few fish and a loaf of bread and how he created the whole earth". She also writes, "God is a bit fake because how could he of [sic] invented the world".* The stories she is told about God and Jesus cause Hannah to doubt God's existence because they demand blind faith from her and they do not make sense. However, in her everyday life Hannah unconsciously accepts God and turns to "him". Hannah has 'occasional' experiences of God: she finds that whenever she needs God and talks to God, she "sort of hears … a deep voice … that guides me … to do the right thing". God also acts as an emotional punching bag: Hannah wrote, "When I get angry, I blame God. I call him STUPID and everything, but then I say sorry, because I didn't mean it". Hannah has a 'supplier/consumer' relationship with God.

Megan *drew symbols associated with Jesus, including people and events in his life. Beneath these were the words "God is powerful". Megan believes that God is "all around us". However, she also writes, "I still wonder whether God created all the stuff around us? Or was it Evolution?"* Megan's doubts are not about the existence of God, which she plainly accepts, but about the actions ascribed to God. The 'power' of God is Megan's ancillary concept. Megan has 'occasional' experiences of the nearness of God, usually when she needs guidance. She says, "Sometimes I ask him what's the right thing to do and how do you do this and how do you respond. Sometimes I don't get an answer back and I have to find out for myself and sometimes I just have this feeling that I know what to do". Megan and God live 'separate lives'.

David *drew the sun, (Jesus "shows you the way and the light"); "the body and blood of Christ"; "Jesus helping sick people"; the star of Bethlehem ("when he was born"), and the cross ("when he died"). David thinks that Jesus "will always be there when you're sick or unhappy".* He writes, "I want to be just like you … with the loving and caring you do". David says he feels God near him helping him when he is being bullied at school. David has a devotion to Jesus which seems to be fuelled by his sense of dependency on the one who shows the way and helps him in times of trouble. David's experience is 'occasional' (in times of crisis). He has a 'dependent' relationship.

Rebecca *drew the cross and symbols for peace, kindness, and friendship. Rebecca thinks that Jesus is her best 'friend',* her ancillary concept. She says, "Whenever I'm down and sad I always think of God and he brings happiness to me and so I say a little prayer in my head. …I feel he's really close to me. When I'm a little bit upset because say your friend's ignored you or something and you feel like you just need someone … God is close to me". Sometimes God talks to Rebecca "when I'm daydreaming", that is, when her mind is unfocussed. God tells her when she has done something wrong; God is her guide. Rebecca's response to God's involvement in her life is "to be the best person that you possibly can … and think of him, not just thinking of you, what you want, you have to think what he wants as well". Rebecca has 'everyday' experiences and a 'reciprocal' relationship.

CREATOR

Michelle (Fig. 6:2)

Michelle drew this picture "because it reminded me of God". God is the creator of nature and God's spirit is found in nature. God is loving, and takes care of creation. Michelle finds a sense of peace, harmony, and rightness in nature that speak to her of the nature of God. Michelle's ancillary concept is 'spirit' because she thinks of God as a spirit. Michelle has 'occasional' experiences of God's presence in her life. When she is in a natural setting, like the one her picture depicts, Michelle feels a bond with God. Apart from these times, however, God is not a significant element in Michelle's life. They live 'separate lives'.

Zeke *drew a picture of a wizard creating the earth, the sea, and animals. Zeke says, "I drew him like a wizard because wizards can create a lot of things and God can too". At the same time Zeke writes, "There are some things that I don't believe ... like making Jesus rise from the dead and stuff like that".* Zeke's ancillary concepts are 'wizard', 'watcher', and 'power'. The image of the wizard comes from the movie Fantasia. Zeke believes that God "watches down on the people ... and helps them get through life everyday". Zeke also indicates another function of God, that of emotional punching bag: "When something bad happens I call God names but I only do it because I'm mad". Zeke also recognises that God has needs. Zeke said that God "wants a bit of recognition, like to pray to him and thank him". Zeke gives God what God wants, in return for God giving him what he wants. Zeke has 'subliminal' experiences and a 'supplier/consumer' relationship.

Russell *drew Michelangelo's "The Creation of Man" (Fig. 6:9). This picture, and his basic concept, is inspired by the film "Bruce Almighty". For Russell, people are an extension of God, of the same nature as God, and co-creators with God. Essentially, humanity complements God.* This concept implies a sense of partnership with God. The ancillary concept is 'partner'. Russell has independently developed his own version of the theological proposition of synergism. His notion that the ideal relationship between God and humanity is one of mutuality, however, is a new concept which does not reflect his own relationship with God. Russell's experience of God is 'occasional'. He said that sometimes he feels God with him answering his prayers. His relationship is based on the idea that God expects him to do the right things (that is, pray and follow the rules). He tries to do this because it is the right thing to do. In return, he expects God to take care of him and his family. God has duties too. Russell's relationship is 'duty-based'.

Joe *drew symbols including the sun (representing God's power and God watching over us), a thunderbolt (also representing the power of God), two hearts (symbolising "the love God has for us"), a cross (which represents Jesus), the word 'heven' [sic], and a cloud containing the words 'God loves me'. For Joe, "God is the person who created us" who is "in heaven, all around us, with us 24/7". Joe seems to hold God responsible for all that happens in the world, and he has no qualms about taking God to task. He writes, "Dear God, I want to know why there is all bad things in our world like bombs. Please stop it."* Joe thinks of God as a powerful creator who is responsible for creation. Joe is disappointed in what he perceives as God's lack of responsibility. Joe's ancillary concepts are 'power', 'watcher', and 'guardian'. Joe prays occasionally "for everything to be good in my life, my family all to be happy and the world to all be fine and no bombs or anything to go off. I just want the world to be a good place". When Joe prays for these things, God talks back, like a little voice in his mind, saying "I'll do my best to help you". Joe makes his expectations clear, and God does "his" best to comply. Joe has 'occasional' experiences of God and a 'supplier/consumer' relationship.

SPIRIT

Simon (Fig. 6:3)

Simon writes, "My picture is of God filtering his light and love through me. He is white because he has no sin and is excellently pure. I am black because I am sinful and God is filtering his love and light through me because he wants to forgive all of my sins. ... The tree represents nature which is unpoisoned by greed and sinfulness. The grey storm clouds that are coming in the background are sin to come and take me over again."

Simon imagines God as a powerful spirit who is deeply concerned by Simon's plight (the existential sinfulness inherent in humanity), and who does all "he" can to ameliorate this condition. Simon is vividly aware of original sin and contrasts this with the purity and goodness of God. He thinks in terms of absolutes, (literally, black and white) with the result that he portrays himself as being at the mercy of sin. His apparent ontological helplessness invites a passive stance regarding life which could lead to a sense of victimisation and rejection of personal power and responsibility. Simon is occasionally aware of the presence of God in his life. He is sensitive to the fact that he is ontologically and radically 'dependent' on the goodness of God.

Lavenita *drew four small pictures: a depiction of the wind with the word 'spirit' denotes the nature of God; a heart with 'love' and a dialogue with the word 'caring' indicate characteristics of God; and a church indicates where God may be encountered. Lavenita says, "God to me is like another father. ... Wherever I am he will always be there. ... God is one who will listen even when your [sic] not talking. ... God is like a spirit. He is everywhere you go".* For Lavenita, God permeates all of creation. Lavenita feels God close to her. "When I'm by myself ... I just feel that God's always around me and brings happiness". Lavenita believes that God expects us "to look after everything he's made because everyone's your brother and sister. ... I expect myself to ... do whatever I have to love and help everyone and to be a better person". For her, this is an appropriate response "because he has done a lot for us". Lavenita's ancillary concepts are 'father' and 'loving carer'. Her experiences are 'everyday' and her relationship is 'reciprocal'.

Thomas' *picture is of a robed, bearded, haloed man (God); fire and a lightning bolt (representing God's power); a peace symbol and a heart (representing the love and peace God created); and the words "Spirit of God" (signifying that God is a spirit). Thomas writes, "God is a loving and peaceful man. He is very powerful and shows a lot of hard determination. He created the world and is the greatest person who has lived". God is "all around us ... since he's a spirit he's got to be all around us because he's looking over everyone and seeing what they're doing and all that".* Thomas imagines a powerful spirit, living everywhere so that "he" can watch over people and keep track of what they are doing. There is almost an intrusive feeling to this notion, as if God were a busybody looking over people's shoulders and spying on them. Thomas is giving his interpretation of what he has learned about God: there is no sense of experiential knowledge. For Thomas, God is a 'belief' and a 'duty'. God expects us to do "the work he's told you to do", that is, what Thomas has been taught is right. Thomas does this. In return, he expects God to fulfil "his" duties and "stop the wars". Thomas seems not to experience the presence of God. Thomas' ancillary concept is 'power'. Thomas' experience is 'none' and his relationship is 'duty-based'.

RULER

Jade (Fig. 6:4)

Jade drew nature ("God, Jesus, and Mary rule over the world, sea, and land"); a bright ray of light ("God shines light upon us"); "the cross his son died on"; "the gate with the lock is the kingdom of heaven"; "the rainbow reminding us that he will never destroy us again". God is "in heaven", the sovereign of all that exists and co-ruler of earth.

God is powerful and is also wise and kind. Power and sovereignty are characteristics of this portrayal. Jade's experience of God is 'subliminal'. Her relationship with God is 'duty-based', being based on her concept that it is her duty to follow God's rules.

Tom *drew a road at the top of which is a cloud with a man's head peering over it (symbolising the road to God). On one side are the words, "The road to God. Be nice. Live in peace. Share. Be happy." On the other side are a sun and a lightning bolt*

(symbolising God's power). Tom writes, "I think God is the almighty ruler of everything ... the most powerful person or thing in the world". 'Power' is Tom's ancillary concept. Tom is aware of God's expectations: "be nice to everybody and treat everyone as you would treat yourself". Tom feels that in return for his compliance, God should help him stay safe and also should "get the world into a better place". Tom feels God near him when he prays, in time of need. Tom's experiences are 'occasional' and his relationship is 'duty-based'.

HEAVENLY BEING

Kayla (Fig. 6:5)

> Of her picture Kayla said, "I chose to draw this picture because ... I could visualise God's face and his healing power and I could feel his love". Kayla has "a sense of him being up in heaven and looking down upon us". Kayla envisages God as a 'loving carer' and 'watcher' (her ancillary concepts).

She feels the presence of God whenever she prays. Kayla has strong devotion for God. She experiences an emotional and spiritual dependence on God. Her experiences are 'occasional' and her relationship is 'dependent'.

Michael *drew a picture of a man peering over the top of a cloud. In the blue sky are symbols: a small heart (representing God's love - its small size seems to denote its limited nature); a sun and a lightning bolt (representing God's power); and a large cross (representing Jesus' death, which is a matter of concern for Michael, hence its size). God is "a spirit sort of thing. ... He was never a human; he was just a thing that just came". Michael writes, "Dear God, I want to know **why** you sacrificed your only son".* Michael has no experience of God, and the notions of God he has gleaned from others are of a distant, non-human "thing", which "sacrificed his only son". Michael is troubled by God's apparent cruelty. If Michael believes that God is his father, he will wonder what cruelty God has in store for <u>him</u>. Michael follows God's rules and he prays, but God does not respond. Michael's relationship with God is 'duty-based'.

A HELPING HAND

Kristin (Fig. 6:6)

Kristin calls her picture "A Helping Hand". She says, "My picture is of a place I imagine when I feel lonely. It is in the clouds and it symbolises Jesus' feet which I follow. The hand shows that God loves and helps everyone". God is a helping hand in difficult times and Jesus is her guide, the one who has gone before and who shows her the way. Although Kristin says that her picture "is in the clouds", these are coloured green and brown, the colours of trees, showing an association with the earth. However, the "gates of heaven" and the figure of Jesus on the road ahead denote heaven. The road is coloured gold, reminiscent of the yellow brick road in the Wizard of Oz. The border indicates that Kristin feels a sense of security with her God.

The tone of Kristin's responses is thankful and appreciative. God is someone to whom she can turn in times of need. Her ancillary concepts are 'loving carer' and 'sustainer'. Kristin has 'occasional' experiences of God's presence. God is there for her, helping her to cope and to keep going. Her relationship with God is 'reciprocal'.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Rose (Fig. 6:7)

Rose writes, "God is shining his light down onto the Earth and all the people. The clouds are heaven, the sun is God. The sun rays are light shining down and helping us. God is good and he makes me happy. God is Perfect!!" For Rose, God is in heaven and on earth, in all of us, like life-giving light.

The large sun appears from behind the clouds (heaven), and its rays eclipse the impenetrable clouds. This portrays the unstoppable power of God. Note that the oceans are coloured green and the continents are coloured blue, opposite to normal conventions. [Unfortunately, I did not ask Rose about this, and I cannot infer the meaning of this colour choice.] Rose appears to feel an ontological dependence on God; her present and continued existence depend on "him". There is a sense of harmony, balance, and rightness in Rose's responses. It seems that Rose has a need to believe in a higher power that brings order and meaning into the world and into her life. Rose's ancillary concepts are 'light' and 'sustainer'. Rose has 'occasional' experiences of God and a 'dependent' relationship.

LIFE FORCE

Eric (Fig. 6:8)
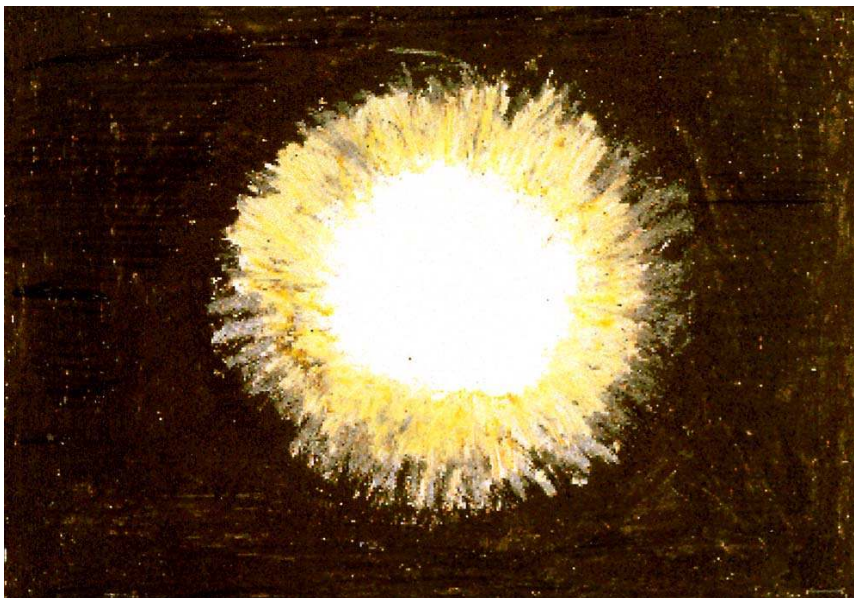
Eric writes, "The picture I drew is quite strange. I have no idea why I drew it. But that's what I saw. All of the black is space, dark, desolate, cold. Nothing lives in space. But in the vastness of space is a bright light pulling in all the darkness

and making it liveable, turning bad to good, cold to warmth, hate to love. Whatever stays near the light lives. What does not stay near the light dies off and waits for the light to pass through it and it is given another chance." Eric's picture conjures up images of the 'big bang', an explosive, cosmic force that creates and sustains life. The power and brightness of this image portray a God who is both powerful and good, a creative force that gives of itself so that the universe may have life and be sustained. In this image exists the opposites of light and dark, good and evil. Eric is awed by the vision of God he experienced during his brief meditation which has only now emerged from his unconscious mind. His ancillary concepts are 'light' and 'power'. He has a 'subliminal' awareness of the presence of God and a sense of his own intrinsic dependence on God.

AGNOSTICISM

Brendan (Fig 6:9) initially drew a conventional picture of a powerful being in heaven. During the course of our interview, however, it became clear that the picture was drawn in response to what he thought I wanted from him. When I told him that I wanted to know what he truly thought and felt, he destroyed the first picture and, upon returning to his classroom, drew the picture below.
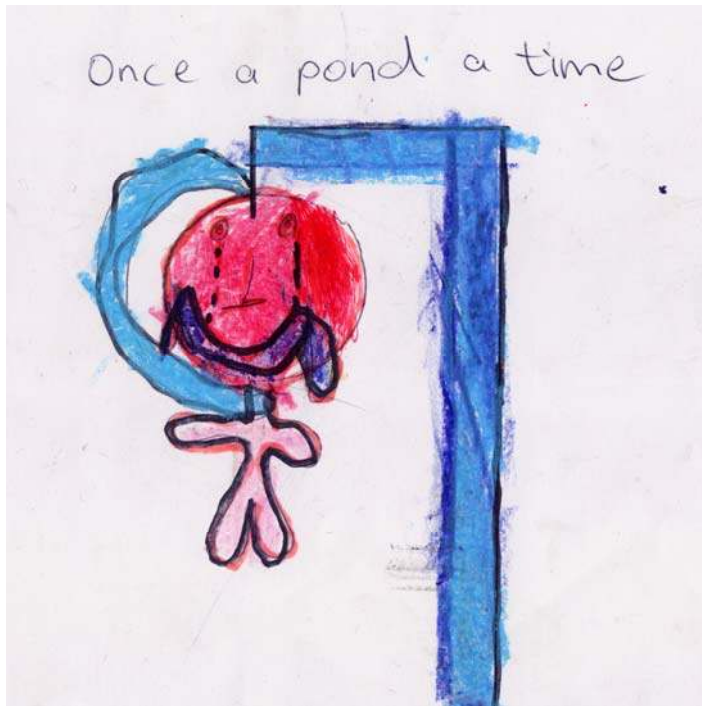
Brendan's picture shows that God is dead. The words 'once a pond a time' indicate that God is a fairy story and nothing more. Brendan writes, "I think that God's not true. It's only a story, so I do not believe in God". Brendan had read "heaps and heaps" of information on the internet that said "God isn't true". God is "a fairy tale", and one of the stories told about God is that God "is the creator of everything. … It's too much to be believed".

Brendan struggles with the realisation that some things he has been taught are not true. Brendan feels frustrated because he does not know what is true and what is not true, so he defiantly states that he does not believe any of it. This interpretation is supported by the only anomalous item in Brendan's response. He says, "It's a bunch of stories because **sometimes** the Bible isn't true". [Emphasis added.] Religious education's emphasis on the miraculous activity of Jesus has led to Brendan's disbelief. Also, Brendan's older brothers say and write (in graffiti) that they hate God, giving Brendan negative role modelling. The result is that Brendan has developed an antipathetic stance regarding God. He does not hate God; he is not atheistic; he does not know whether God exists; all he knows is that he has great difficulty believing in some aspects of religion, and that no one takes his questions seriously, simply dismissing him as a 'stirrer'. (Brendan's teacher told me that Brendan has ADHD and other problems, so not to take him seriously. His classmates also tended to act in a dismissive way towards him.) Brendan's ancillary concept is 'fairy tale'. He has no experience of God and a negative relationship with God.

DISCUSSION

CONCEPTS

The 20 ten and eleven-year-old children in this group expressed a variety of concepts that range from the traditional to the novel, and from the literal to the metaphoric. Some responses reveal little or no personal thought or engagement with the subject. Other responses reveal deep reflection, resulting in personally meaningful concepts. From these twenty children come nine different core concepts, accompanied by twelve different ancillary concepts. These concepts seem to be the current results of many of the children's struggle to incorporate their expanding awareness of the world with its multiple perspectives into the narrower framework of their Christian heritage.

Table 6:1 – Core God Concepts of the Year Six Group

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Jesus	3	2	5
Creator	1	3	4
Spirit	1	2	3
Ruler	1	1	2
Heavenly Being	1	1	2
Helping Hand	1	0	1
Light of the World	1	0	1
Life Force	0	1	1
Agnosticism	0	1	1

God as 'Jesus' is the core concept of five of this group. Lukas, Hannah, and Megan all spoke of the 'power' of the risen Jesus. Jesus is a 'best friend' for Rebecca. David and Rebecca seem to have traditional, devotional images of Jesus, using the concepts of God and Jesus interchangeably. They seem to find it easier to deal with the concept of God through God's human incarnation, Jesus. Hannah and Megan find belief in stories about Jesus to be a challenge to their everyday, scientific knowledge of the physics of human life. They have not yet decided how to resolve the conflict. Unfortunately, teachers are ill-equipped to handle such doubts and questions, and these are not considered to be appropriate topics in most religious education class.

The concept of 'creator' is the core concept of four of this group. The meaning of the concept, however, is different for each of them. Michelle thought of God as a creative 'spirit' that imbues all of nature with its presence; Zeke likened God to a powerful 'wizard', a being who can create from nothing; Russell drew on a popular film for his concept of God as the co-creator and senior 'partner' of humanity; and Joe imagines God as the creator and 'guardian' of creation, who is not doing "his" job properly.

'Spirit' is the core concept held by three children. Simon's distinctive picture of the spirit of God permeating his sinful self is a striking image of sin and redemption. Lavenita's image speaks of a warm, intimate relationship with the unseen spirit of God which is a 'father' and 'loving carer' to her. Thomas speaks of God as a "man", but then asserts that God is a spirit. It seems that Thomas is in the process of moving away from his anthropomorphic image of God as a man, toward the less restricted image of spirit.

Two children conceptualised God as a ruler. Jade depicted the "kingdom of heaven", ruled over by God, Jesus, and Mary. Tom pictured the "almighty ruler of everything" who can be trusted with the fate of humanity. The image of God as 'ruler' is a transcendent, distant image of a God who is not intimately involved with "his" creation, but who is to be feared, respected, and obeyed. However, "his" power and sovereignty are causes for relief in the knowledge that all is proceeding according to "his" orderly plan.

God is portrayed as a 'heavenly being' by two respondents. Kayla's image is of a 'loving carer' who watches over us. Her image is anthropomorphic. Michael's depiction is also anthropomorphic, but here the likeness of God to himself does not bring comfort and a sense of being loved. On the contrary, Michael feels great unease at the concept of God sacrificing his son, an idea he plainly considers to be barbarous.

Four respondents held images so unique that each is in its own category. Kristin pictured God as a 'helping hand', silently and strongly present when she is in need, inconspicuous in the background when not required. There is a strong feeling of support and loving encouragement in Kristin's image. Rose pictured God as the 'light of the world', a constant, powerful, life-giving energy that sustains all life on earth. A sense of absolute dependency accompanies this image. Brendan's dilemma in sorting out which of the stories about God are true led to 'agnosticism', attended by frustration and uncertainty. Eric saw a vivid image while he was meditating prior to the drawing activity. It was a depiction of the primeval, cosmic, life-giving force of God.[149] A sense of awe and ontological dependency accompany this image.

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[149] The process Eric underwent was discussed by Gunther-Heimbrock (1999:51), who believed in "the possibility of taking pictures to be not only a reproduction of inner concepts but also as phenomena indicating a formation process." This process "is based on the human capacity of creative seeing". Gunther-Heimbrock criticised studies about children's pictures of God because they assumed that a picture is a "mere … reproduction of what is first developed by children in their minds" (p. 54). Instead, he proposed that a picture can be seen as "a subjective formation process of the individual" (p. 55). This is certainly true in Eric's case.

Table 6:2 – Ancillary God Concepts of the Year Six Group

Ancillary Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Power	1	6	7
Watcher	1	3	4
Loving Carer	4	0	4
Sustainer	3	1	4
Heavenly Being	1	2	3
Light	0	1	1
Friend	1	0	1
Father	1	0	1
Guardian	0	1	1
Partner	0	1	1
Wizard	0	1	1
Fairy Tale	0	1	1

There are twelve ancillary concepts held by this group. The concept of 'power' is very important, with half of the students mentioning it as a significant aspect of God. Of these, seven students rated 'power' so highly that it is their ancillary concept. Predictably, this concept is much more important to boys, with six boys (Lukas, Joe, Zeke, Thomas, Tom, and Eric) and only one girl (Megan) holding this concept. [Hutsebaut (1972) also found that the image of 'power' was important for boys.] Megan, Zeke, Thomas, and Joe think of power as being an integral aspect of the nature of God and a prerequisite for the role of creator. For them, the powerful nature of God underscores God's otherness and transcendence. Joe also considers God's power to imply responsibility, which "he" is negligent in fulfilling. Lukas and Tom perceive Jesus' and God's power as a personal adjunct that is to be admired and that may be available to the boys if they remain on God's team. The sameness of God (being on the same team) is implicit in their use of this concept. For Eric, the vast power of God is an unstoppable, life-giving force.

The concept of 'watcher' is held by four children. For Kayla, Joe, and Zeke, it is one of protective 'watching over' and caring for creation. For Michael, the concept is one of a passive 'watching', inspecting, and judging. This notion is consistent with Michael's concept of an unloving God who sacrificed his son.

The ancillary concept of 'loving carer' is held by four girls. Michelle, Lavenita, Kayla, and Kristin implied that God has a warm, loving, caring nature that is an essential characteristic of "his" relationship with them and which is constant, providing them with a sense of security, companionship, and love. That only girls hold this image is consistent with the findings of many other studies.

Four students presented images of God that carried with it the sense that God is a 'sustainer'. Jade's concept of a 'ruler' God is accompanied by the sense that God sustains and protects "his" subjects. Rose's image of God as the 'light of the world' displays a sense of God's sustaining power. Kristin's image of the 'helping hand' of God exudes a sense of God sustaining her in her journey. Simon's image of the pure spirit of God permeating him and cleansing him conveys a strong sense of Simon's radical dependence on God and of God sustaining Simon's spirit.

Three students imagined God as being essentially a 'heavenly being'. Jade and Tom thought of God as a powerful ruler who watches over creation from heaven. This image is a distant, transcendent one that implies little sense of relationship between ruler and subjects. Lukas imagined the powerful, resurrected Jesus in heaven. This Jesus seems to be a hero, an approachable person even though he is in heaven.

Seven ancillary concepts are each held by only one person. Powerful, life-giving 'light' is an essential element of Eric's explosive image (Fig. 6:8). Rebecca thought of Jesus as her 'best friend', and Lavenita commented that God was another 'father' for her. These two are relational images. Joe took God to task because, as the 'guardian' of the world, "he" should not allow bombs. Russell found the concept of God as a 'partner' of humanity to be a concept that named for him an essential element of God. Zeke borrowed the concept of a powerful, magical, creative 'wizard' from the film <u>Fantasia</u> and, I suspect, from the Harry Potter books. 'Fairy story' is Brendan's agnostic description of God.

The concepts of the year six respondents range from traditional, learned images to unique, unconsciously-held images. I detect five different types of concepts on the continuum from traditional to unique. Six of the respondents hold concepts that are traditional and contain devotional sentiments. David and Rebecca think of God as Jesus. They use traditional, learned symbols, like the Eucharist, the star of Bethlehem, and the cross. They speak of Jesus/God as "powerful", "holy", and "wonderful". Lavenita spoke of God as "spirit", "creator", "father", and "carer". Even though "God is spirit" and "is everywhere we go", Lavenita drew a church as "the place where God can be found". She does not seem to notice the contradiction in these two beliefs. Thomas also thought of God as a powerful spirit who watches over us. His images include a robed, bearded, haloed figure; a fire; the peace symbol; a heart; and a star. Tom imagined God as a man in heaven, alert and watchful. He thinks of God as the "almighty ruler of everything". *Almighty* is a word that is not used by eleven-year-olds outside religious discourse, indicating that when Tom hears the word *God*, traditional,

learned words, images, and responses prevail. Kayla's human, Jesus-like figure in the clouds depicts her concept of a 'heavenly being', watching over and loving us all. The concepts, images, symbols, and language of these six children are conventional, traditional, devotional, and learned. For some of them, these responses are given because the students have no experience of God, so are happy to believe what they are taught. For others, holding these concepts brings them a sense of harmony, satisfaction, happiness, relief, or belonging to a faith community. Equal numbers of girls and boys belong to this group of traditional believers.

Six respondents hold essentially traditional images, but there is one unusual, non-traditional element to each of their responses. Lukas presented Jesus as a modern hero with his arms wide (Fig. 6:1). Jade's image of God as a 'ruler' (Fig. 6:4) contains the notion that Jesus and Mary are God's co-rulers. Joe rebuked God for permitting bombs to exist. Michael's devotion is disturbed by his troubled question, **"I want to know why you sacrificed your only son"**. Hannah and Megan, who conceptualised God as Jesus, found belief in miracles and in creationism to be a challenge to their faith. Their everyday knowledge of how the world works and their growing scientific knowledge make them question some traditional teachings. These six respondents, like the previous group, make use of symbolism, much of which consists of traditional, received symbols. Three girls and three boys form this group.

The third group of respondents consists of two children. Michelle and Zeke hold relatively traditional concepts but are less conventional in their usage of these. Michelle perceived God as the one who both created nature and is to be found in nature. Nature mysticism is accepted, but is not considered mainstream Catholic teaching. Michelle's concept arises from her own experiences, not from religious teachings. Zeke depicted God as a wizard. This reveals cultural influences that Zeke has absorbed and adapted to his own use. I was struck by one particular aspect of Zeke's concept. When using metaphors, we usually employ the more commonly accepted or obvious image to describe the lesser known concept. If we were to say 'wizards are like God', we are explaining something about the unknown, the wizard, in terms of that which is known, God. Zeke's implicit 'God is a wizard' assumes that the knowledge that a wizard is powerful is more commonplace than the idea that God is powerful. Amongst his peers, this assumption may be correct. Recent books, such as the Harry Potter series, and films, like <u>Fantasia</u>, make wizards more of a household word than God. Symbolic usage here contains elements of the conventional; it also displays personal appropriation of some traditional symbols and some cultural symbols applied in an unconventional way.

The next group consists of three participants who reveal a personal understanding and appropriation of traditional abstract concepts. Their creative use of symbolism reflects their own experiences that are interpreted in the light of traditional teachings, resulting in a unique and personally meaningful concept. Rose imagined God as the 'light of the world' (Fig. 6:7), portraying God as the sun. The sun symbolises both light and power, and is necessary for life on earth. These are the characteristics of God that have most impressed themselves on Rose, making her metaphor and symbol apt. Kristin presented the image of God as a 'helping hand' (Fig. 6:6). This metaphor is expressed through the symbols of the road to heaven, the gates of heaven, and following in the footsteps of Jesus, which are traditional. However, expressing the notion of help through the idiom 'helping hand' overlays the traditional symbols with a personal touch. Russell (Fig. 6:10) used a famous painting to portray God as 'creator'.
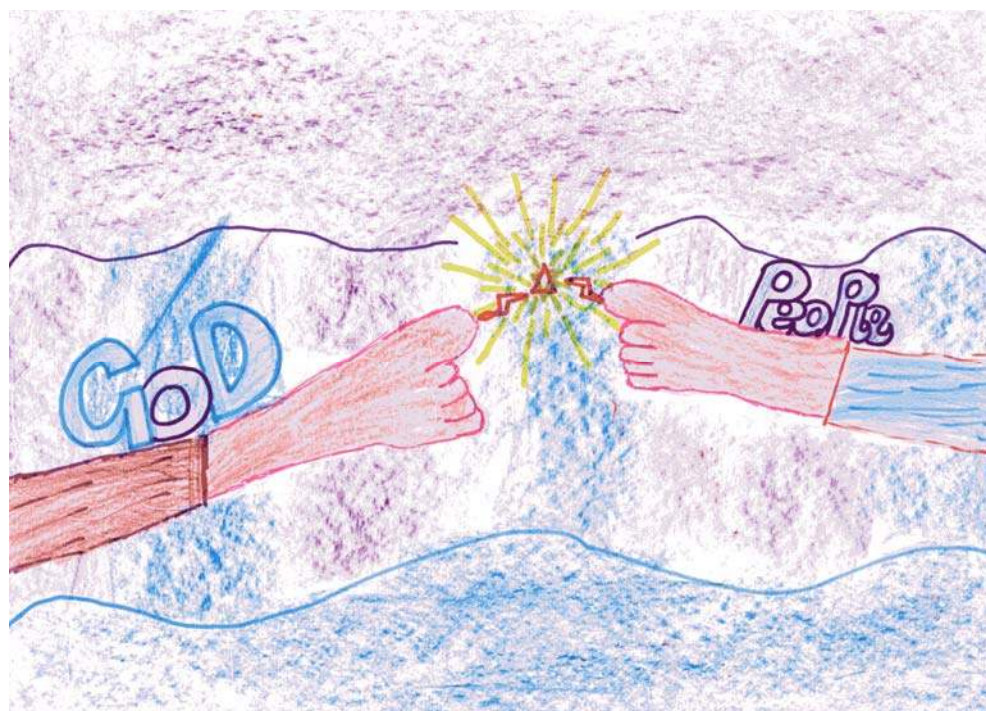
Adults would identify this picture as "The Creation of Man" by Michelangelo, but for Russell it is an image he saw in the movie <u>Bruce Almighty</u>. In this film, an ordinary man acquires divine powers for a week and learns to use his powers for the betterment of humanity. The notion of humans being co-creators and partners with God took hold of Russell's mind and became his concept of God. This concept names for Russell his, and God's, roles in life. This is an example of popular culture providing symbols which are personally appropriated and interpreted, then employed in a meaningful way. It is also an example of what Gunther-Heimbrock (1999:52) calls "people's personal capacity to develop their own theology". This capacity is present in the responses of many of the participants of this study.

The final group consists of two boys who, during the brief meditation that preceded the drawing activity, uncovered unconscious images that represented their deep-seated impressions of God. Eric saw an immense, cosmic life force (Fig. 6:8) which travelled through the universe bringing warmth and life in its wake. Eric had no idea what he was drawing; it was only during the drawing process that the image communicated to him and explained its meaning. The symbol of light is a familiar one in religious imagery, but the way Eric has employed it melds traditional symbolism with science. To many traditionalists, picturing God as a 'big bang' is iconoclasm, bordering on heresy. Simon (Fig. 6:3) pictured himself as existentially tainted, requiring the divine purity of God to cleanse him. He has no illusions about the future; he knows that his contaminated human nature will cause him to succumb to sin again. This image of fallen human nature, sometimes called *original sin*, is a traditional one, but in Simon's work it represents an ontological awareness that is theologically and spiritually advanced for an eleven-year-old. If this were Simon's only image, I would be concerned because the notion of overwhelming sin, and the bleak passivity of humanity in the face of evil, could easily lead to a fatalistic, disempowered response to life. However, my impression is that this is only one of Simon's concepts, the one that chose to rise to consciousness during the meditation activity.

The drawings of this group are composed mostly of symbols. There is a vast range in the types of symbols used. I have distinguished seven different types of symbology, ranging from the traditional concrete to the uniquely abstract, present in the data of these respondents. Three of these involve the unedited use of conventional symbols, two involve the alteration and personalisation of conventional symbols, and two involve the creation of unique symbolic forms.

Some respondents employ concrete, religious symbols, like the cross, the Eucharistic elements, the Bible, and the church. These symbols are concrete realities which stand for other, greater, non-concrete realities. The advantage of using concrete symbolism lies in the palpability of the symbolic elements, providing a tangible link with the unknown. Some respondents draw upon more abstract, religious symbols, like the halo, the heart, and the gates of heaven. These are received symbols which are in common usage within the religious tradition, and which are employed in a traditional way by the participants. Some respondents use symbols that are conventional and natural, but not especially religious, like the sun, lightning bolts, rainbows, forests, clouds, and paths. Here we see the divine represented through nature, rather than through theology.

Some students have personalised the traditional symbols they use. One way of doing this is to juxtapose religious or natural symbols with anomalous cultural symbols. Zeke's drawing is an example of this. The natural elements of earth, sea, sky, and the animals that occupy each of these habitats, belong to the category of conventional, non-religious symbols. However, Zeke also includes a wizard, a cultural symbol of power that provides a dissonant element to the picture. It is the novelty of this inclusion that creates the impact of Zeke's symbology. Another way to personalise symbols is to convert cultural idioms into symbols. Kristin's drawing (Fig. 6:6) takes the idioms *a helping hand*, *to follow in the footsteps of*, and *the yellow brick road* and converts them into images, creating a unique conceptual representation.

Several respondents created their own symbols. Simon (Fig. 6:3) appropriated the theological, abstract concepts of 'sin' and 'purity', and visualised them by providing suitable forms in which they could appear. Eric (Fig. 6:8) created the image of a huge ball of intense light and energy, which became his symbol for God. This symbol seems to be a synthesis of scientific imagery and theological concepts.

The utilisation of symbolic forms by this group is far more prolific, sophisticated, and diverse than I had anticipated. Conventional knowledge, derived from Piaget, implies that at approximately the age of twelve, children move from concrete thinking to abstract reasoning, and thus become capable of symbolic use. However, the data from the preprimary and year three groups indicate to me that children are capable of appropriate understanding and use of symbolic communication well before this age, and that by the age of twelve advanced symbolic usage is possible. Cognitive stage development theory also implies that most children of the same age will be approximately at the same stage of thinking and, therefore, of ability to apply symbolic imagery. The data of the year six group does not conform to this notion. Although many of the respondents do employ conventional, received symbols without any degree of personalisation, a few respondents personalised conventional symbols to render them more appropriate, and several respondents created their own sophisticated, unique symbols (a skill of which few <u>adults</u> are capable). The symbolic capabilities of these children are diverse, ranging from the very concrete to the highly abstract. Teachers who assume a large degree of homogeneity within a class group are mistaken.[150]

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[150] Teachers generally do not make this assumption about their students. However, in the area of religious education, my experience is that teachers do expect a degree of homogeneity in their classes.

EXPERIENCES

Most of these children were fairly open and forthcoming in their discussions with me. I asked them questions like, "What is God like?", "Has there ever been a time when you felt God close to you?", "Do you talk to God?", "Does God talk to you?", and "Does God expect anything from us?" These questions opened up discussions involving the children's experiences of God (God's nearness and communication), and their relationship with God (what God is like, when and how they talk to God, whether God has expectations of them, and the nature of their expectations of themselves resulting from their concepts and relationship with God). The students' answers, both verbal and non-verbal, gave me insight into the meanings God has in their lives. As with the previous groups, I classified the experiences of God into four categories, 'none', 'subliminal', 'occasional', and 'everyday'.

Table 6:3 – Types of Experiences of the Year Six Group

Types of Experiences	Girls	Boys	Total
None	0	3	3
Subliminal	1	3	4
Occasional	6	5	11
Everyday	2	0	2

Within this group, three boys said they had no experience of God. This was confirmed by their other verbal and pictorial responses. This response is noted in the work of Brendan, Thomas, and Michael. 'Subliminal' experiences of God are alluded to in the responses of four children. Lukas seems to feel a connection with Jesus in prayer; Jade finds the positives in her life leading her to detect the presence of God; and Eric and Zeke feel the magnificence of the universe turning their minds towards God. 'Occasional' experiences are reported by eleven children. David feels God near him, supporting him, in times of physical crisis, and Kristin feels God close to her in times of emotional need; Hannah and Megan experience the presence of God helping them when they are in need of guidance; Tom and Kayla experience the nearness of God when they pray, and Joe and Russell feel the presence of God when God answers their prayers; for Michelle nature triggers awareness of the presence of God; for Rose it is the positives in her life; and Simon's sense of the evil and the good in people, including himself, is the occasion that precipitates his sense of God in his life. Two girls experienced frequent, 'everyday' contact with God. Lavenita reported feeling God especially near to her when she is alone (which seems to happen frequently), and Rebecca has a heightened sense of the presence of God when she is feeling lonely or sad, and when she is daydreaming (that is, when her mind is unfocussed).

Within the above responses, one of the most frequently cited occasions that precipitates an awareness of the presence of God is a sense of need or crisis. Four girls noted a need for guidance and times of emotional need, and one boy spoke of physical crisis, as their key experiential triggers. Five children also cited prayer (either times of prayer or answered prayer) as their experiential trigger. Life experiences, either positive or negative, featured in the responses of three children. The existence of nature and the universe inspired two respondents, and one girl noted times of solitude as her key experience. Of the sixteen responses noted above, all occurred in times of solitude or within the privacy of the mind. No experience is precipitated by the presence of others.

Elkind and Elkind (1962:105) found that "more girls than boys report recurrent experiences" of God. Tamminen (1994:79) also reported that "girls in almost all grades experienced God's nearness and guidance more often than the boys did". The responses of this group, and indeed most of the groups in this study, confirm this conclusion. However, it does not seem to me that girls experience the nearness of God more frequently or more intensely than do the boys. Rather, it seems that girls value these experiences more than boys and therefore speak of them more highly, whereas boys tend to speak more dismissively of such experiences. This gender difference reflects the observation that girls focus on relationship whereas boys focus on independence.[151] Robinson (1977) also recognised the distinction between the experience of God and its expression and interpretation. However he found that these are largely influenced by culture, not gender.

RELATIONSHIPS

This group's responses include most of the relationship categories encountered in the preceding groups and also three new elements that emerged in the responses. There are two new relational orientations that I call 'Dependent' and 'Negative', and which are discussed later. Also, for the first time, there appears a doubting or questioning of certain concepts. This doubting, which appears in the responses of five students, is not directed at the individual's belief in the existence of God, but at certain miraculous events that some students find beyond belief or at certain teachings about the nature of God perceived in the light of the actualities of life on earth.

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[151] Brown and Gilligan (1992) noted that male development focuses on identity first, then intimacy, whereas for women, intimacy develops first, followed by identity and independence.

Within the responses of the year six children I observed six different types of relationship. These are called 'Negative', 'Duty-Based', 'Supplier/Consumer', 'Separate Lives', 'Dependent', and 'Reciprocal'.

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___|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|___
Negative    Duty       Supplier/    Separate   Dependent   Reciprocal
   (1)     Based (5)  Consumer (3)   Lives (3)     (5)         (3)
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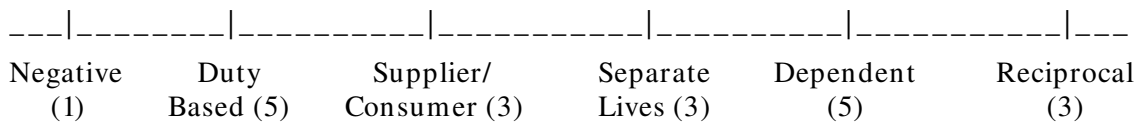
Fig. 6:10 - Continuum of Relationship Categories (Year Six)

Brendan's relationship with God is characterised by its negativity. Brendan is reacting against the notion of God, especially the God about which he has been taught. The relationships with God of Russell, Thomas, Tom, Michael, and Jade are 'Duty-Based', that is, the essence of the relationship is the children's acknowledgement of their duties to God, and of God's duties towards them. Hannah, Zeke, and Joe have a 'Supplier/Consumer' relationship with God, which means that essentially God is a supplier of their needs and they are consumers of God's providence. There is little concept of gratitude, though the concept of barter does occur. This concept is higher on the relational scale because these respondents have a more immediate sense of God's role in their lives. Lukas, Megan, and Michelle find that their lives and God's touch upon occasion, but for the most part they and God live 'Separate Lives'. The category labelled 'Dependent' is similar to the 'Parent/Child' category in the previous two chapters. The main difference is that 'Parent/Child' refers to a dependent relationship with a loving parental person, whereas 'Dependent' refers to an awareness of an ontological dependency on a higher power. The responses of David, Simon, Eric, Kayla, and Rose are in this category. Rebecca, Lavenita, and Kristin seem to have reciprocal relationships with God. This means that they are aware of the positive presence of God in their lives, and they reciprocate God's love. This leads them to try to become the best that they can be, in an effort to thank God and to do what they can for God.

The experiences of the respondents affect their relationships with God, but not always in predictable ways. It might be inferred that the more intense and frequent a respondent's experiences of God, the closer will be the degree of relationship. Although this is the case with many respondents, some do not conform to this expectation.

It seems logical to me that children who do not experience the existence of God will be more likely to relate to God in a non-involved or distanced way. This can be seen in the responses of three boys who had no experiences of God and who belonged in the 'negative' or 'duty-based' relational categories, the two most emotionally distant categories. Of the children who experienced 'subliminal' awareness of the presence of

God, one had a 'duty-based' relationship, one had a 'supplier/consumer' relationship, one belonged to the 'separate lives' category, and one had developed a 'dependent' relationship with God. With the exception of the last mentioned relationship, these are minimal experiences which are matched with moderate relational distances.

Of the eleven students who had occasional experiences of God, two had 'duty-based' relationships, two had a 'supplier/consumer' relationship, two had 'separate lives' relationships, four had 'dependent' relationships, and one had a 'reciprocal' relationship. The two girls who reported 'everyday' experiences of God also had developed 'reciprocal' relationships with God. As expected, the more intense experiences of God are accompanied by more intense relationships with God. However, the three students who reported occasional experiences and who have 'duty-based' or 'supplier/consumer' relationships do not fit the pattern. I expected that occasional experiences of the presence of God and the assistance of God in one's life would lead to the development of a closer relationship. This does not seem to be the case with Tom, Joe, and Hannah. These three children seem inclined to accept God's assistance without any sense of obligation on their part. They take God for granted.

Below is an overview of the relationships with God of the year six group.

Table 6:4 – Types of Relationship of the Year Six Group

Types of Relationship	Girls	Boys	Total
Negative	0	1	1
Duty-Based	1	4	5
Supplier/Consumer	1	2	3
Separate Lives	2	1	3
Dependent	2	3	5
Reciprocal	3	0	3

Previous research indicates that girls tend to develop closer relationships with God. The responses of the year six group concur with this finding. However, it seems to me that gender is not the only major factor: the nature of one's experiences of God is also a crucial contributing factor in the development of close relational ties with God.

Relationships with significant others, an important influence on the relationships with God of the preprimary and year three groups, seems to be of less significance to the year six group. Learning, although important, is also a less influential factor with this group. What are of significance are the children's own life experiences, coupled with their reasoning abilities, including their observational and deductive abilities.

Perceptions of the world around them, especially of nature, influence these children's experiences and relationships with God. Michelle feels God near her in nature; Eric's perception of the vastness and beauty of the universe informs his concept and relationship; Simon's perception of good and evil in the world, along with his sense of his own sinfulness, are major influences on his concept and relationship with God.

Several children are influenced primarily by personal life experiences. Jade and Rose experience a sense of harmony and happiness in their lives that is intimately linked with their experiences of the presence of God in their lives and in turn influence how they feel about God and how they relate to God.

Of importance to this group is their growing confidence in their own reasoning and deductive abilities. Several children experience difficulties in reconciling the stories they have learned about the miracles of God and Jesus with their observations of the mechanics of the world around them or of reconciling stories about God's actions with their observations of human relationships and responsibilities. For them, there needs to be consistency between their world view and what they believe about God. Thus Brendan, Zeke, Megan, Michelle, and Hannah experience differing degrees of questioning and rejection of some religious stories. The influence of culture and significant others also contribute to this questioning of received ideas.

It seems that the most important factors influencing the relationships with God of this year group are the intensity and frequency of their experiences of God, their observations of the world, their reasoning about God and the world, their life experiences, and their experiences of nature.

CONCLUSION

Kraft (1983:16) claimed that children's "spiritual experiences are pre-authentic". I strongly disagree with this statement. The responses of my participants indicate that many children have authentic experiences of God that impact on their lives. In addition, these experiences often lead the children to develop a theology that integrates their experiences into a meaningful worldview. I also found that the children's responses were individual and showed that they were capable of complex theological reasoning and questioning.

The children's experiences of God, or lack of these, greatly influence their concepts of God and their relationships with God. Also of growing importance are the influences of culture and science. Popular films and books present novel ways for the children to imagine God and to orient themselves towards God. The theory of evolution, the concepts of the big bang, and everyday physics that indicate people cannot walk on water or turn water into wine, challenge the literalistic interpretation of religious stories the children have learned. This can create dilemmas for some children.

Adato (1998:2) concluded that "all children, regardless of religion, or whether they were raised in a faith at all, depict the god they need". This echoes the findings of Hutsebaut (1972), and of Nelson (1996:33) who found that a child's image of God "is formed to satisfy psychological needs". The responses of many children in this study support Nelson's findings.[152] Although the responses of these participants support Nelson's findings, I question whether his conclusion that such images are "formed to satisfy psychological needs" is the only, or even the best, explanation of the process at work. My interpretation of my experiences of God is that God relates differently to each person, depending on their needs. It could be that the participants of this study depict the God they need because this is the God they experience.

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[152] Within this group, for example, Hannah finds that God is one who guides her "to do the right thing" and is there "for luck". David experiences God's nearness helping him when he is being bullied at school. He also believes that Jesus "will always be there when you're sick or unhappy", and he looks to God as a role model, saying "I want to be just like you". Rebecca says, "Whenever I'm down and sad I always think of God and he brings happiness to me". Russell has an image of a God who will take care of him and his family. Lavenita conceives of a close, personal God who is always with her, supporting her "like another father". Tom depicts a powerful God who is capable of "get[ting] the world into a better place". For Kristin, God is a helping hand in difficult times. Rose and Eric depict a God who is essential for life, and upon whom they are radically and ontologically dependent.

CHAPTER SEVEN - YEAR NINE CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

The year nine participants of this study consisted of 20 thirteen and fourteen-year-old students. There are a number of characteristics of this group that need to be mentioned. Firstly, they had fun in choosing their pseudonyms, leading to the creation of unusual names, which were sometimes symbolic. Secondly, as this group had not been asked their ideas about God before this, many of them went through the process of trying to verbalise their notions by thinking aloud. It was a process of discovery as much as a method of communication. Thirdly, several students recognised that God cannot be encapsulated in one image, so employed several images to express different aspects of God. This created some difficulties for me in determining the core concepts of these students. Fourthly, these students were actively creating their own concepts of God largely based on their own experiences of God and of life. This led to a conflict with what they perceived as being the one concept "pushed" by the school.[153] An unspoken assumption expressed by several students, and implied by Corey's last statement below, is that if one does not accept what the school teaches, one does not believe in God.

The conceptual responses of these participants are grouped into six categories, one of which contains a sub-category. They are: 'supreme being' (subcategory 'higher being'); 'the unknown'; 'creator/caretaker'; 'presence'; 'light'; and 'atheism'. There are six relational categories, these being 'null', 'background', 'supplier/consumer', 'separate lives', 'dependent', and 'reciprocal'.

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[153] The following is an extract from a conversation between Mickey, Corey, and me: (Mickey) "I don't really like the way the teachers at school are". (Anne) "It's what's been taught to you that you have difficulty with?" (Corey) "They put too much emphasis on it. ... Trying to make all of us believe in one thing". (Anne) "So they're trying to get you to accept one idea instead of letting you form your own ideas?" (Corey) "Yes. And if you believe in God then you believe in God and if you believe in a higher being then that's your decision."

FINDINGS

SUPREME BEING

Wednesday (Fig. 7:1)

Wednesday depicts God as the lion king, the king of the jungle, "the almighty ... ruler of everything. He controls everything; when we live, when we die, what happens to us. This life is a test God puts us through." The mice are humans ("we're all insignificant things in the universe"). The different colours of the mice are the different races of humanity. "He treats us all as equals, he always forgives us and he looks after us". Wednesday experiences conflict in her beliefs. She says, "Sometimes I doubt whether there is a God". The terrorism and poverty, in the world conflict with Wednesday's image of a loving God.

King of the Jungle

However, she also comments, "When I'm having a tough time … I reflect or pray and he's just there to help me get through things. … He's something that's there all the time." She feels God's presence helping her to stay calm "when I'm really upset about something" and "when I'm angry". Her 'occasional' experiences of God and the good and beautiful things in life lead Wednesday to believe in God. Wednesday also finds that "praying helps me get a stronger bond with him". Another influence is the strong belief of her family. Wednesday has a 'dependent' relationship with God. Her ancillary concept is 'presence'.

Babi *drew the sun setting over a sea fringed with sand and palm trees. The beach makes her "feel good" and that is how God makes her feel. She thinks of "us being like the planets and God being like the sun" which is light, life, the greatest thing in our solar system. Like the planets, we depend on God for life. Babi talks to God in her mind. ("I just visualise him there and … [he is] sitting there and I'm telling him my problems.") God responds. ("Sometimes I visualise him just nodding his head and smiling".) Babi feels God near her most when she is "at Mass", and "when I'm feeling down. … God is like a friend that'll always be there for you".* Babi confirmed that her experiences of God lead her to believe. Her ancillary concept is 'friend', her experiences are 'everyday' and her relationship is 'dependent'.

David *drew the blackness of the universe. Within it is a group of symbols: a face (God); a cross and chalice (Jesus); an egg and a skull (life and death). Surrounding it is creation. David's statement is a series of words: "God, life, death, universe, almighty power, nature, animals, intelligence, heaven, solar system, planets". David says, "God's an almighty being that has control over everything". God decides "who lives and who dies and what else happens around the world". God does not usually become involved with people "like us", only those who "really believe and really need help". David experienced God's presence once when he was five or six-years-old and his mum was ill in hospital. God helped him to "take everything as it happens".* David's experience is 'occasional' and his relationship is 'background'.

Bob *drew a hotel in the sky. It is called the Hotel California and it represents heaven. Bob is inside the hotel playing pool with one of the other guests. Bob writes, "God is a good person" who "is always around us" and "tries to help everyone".* God is essentially the 'Big Boss' who owns everything. If a person can get on God's good side and manage to be invited into the prestigious life hereafter, he will experience great pleasure. Bob has no experience of God and a 'supplier/consumer' relationship.

Higher/Greater Being

Spoonfish *drew a yellow cloud containing a cross (God in heaven). A shaft of light descends from the cloud, cutting the sky in two. One side is coloured blue and the other is red (representing the good and bad in life: "God created all things, good and bad"). A bird (the Holy Spirit) is in the blue patch of sky. Spoonfish wrote that God is "a greater being, though what form he takes I don't know". God has emotions, but is more loving and caring than we are. God "loves all the things he creates even if they are evil". … God is "out there to help us and is very forgiving". God expects us to "push ourselves a little bit more to help other people where he can't sometimes". Spoonfish also says that God is "hard to believe in but I do believe in him". This is because he experiences God near him in times of crisis; when his father was sick with a stomach ulcer, Spoonfish felt God's presence, making him feel "secure that someone else was there guiding me through it". Spoonfish adds, "It's really hard to believe there's not a greater being out there that created this wonderful world that we live in".* Spoonfish has 'occasional' experiences of God and a 'dependent' relationship with God. His ancillary concept is 'power'.

Mickey (Fig. 7:2)
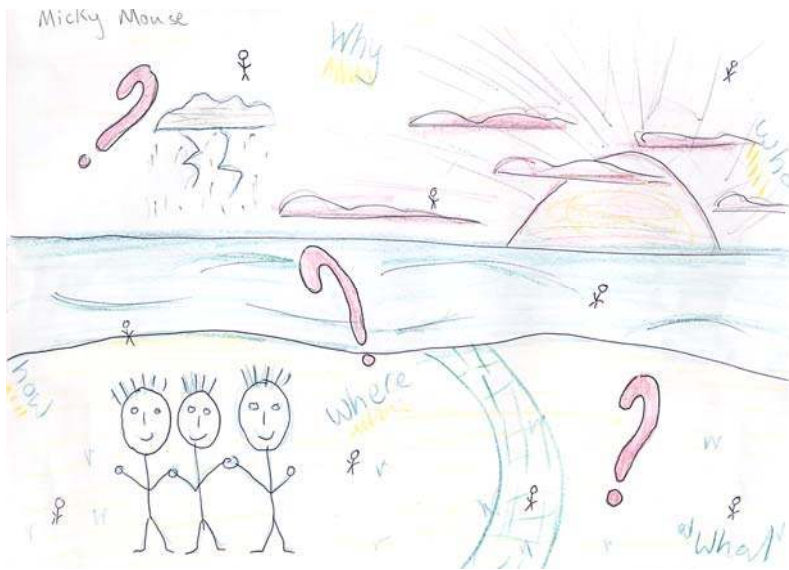
Mickey *drew a nature scene in which he and two friends are standing. Around them are little people (who are "lost" as to what they should do with their lives). Large question marks express Mickey's doubt in God's existence.*

The words "why", "where", "who", "what", and "how" express Mickey's confusion. Mickey says, "I'm very confused. I don't really believe in all that spiritual stuff. … I don't believe in God and how he does all the miracles … mumbo jumbo. The bible; crap basically." However, he says, "I believe in a higher being. … He's an energy. I don't believe in a being or anything. It's just an energy." This energy is everywhere, in everything that exists. It is "in our minds … a conscience sort of thing". Mickey believes in a 'higher being' that reminds me of Teilhard de Chardin's concept of *the ground of our being*, or the concept of *the Force* in <u>Star Wars</u>. Unfortunately, Mickey's religious education seems not to leave room for this understanding of God, so he concludes that his beliefs are atheistic (thus his initial response "I don't believe in God"). This causes Mickey confusion and doubt. Mickey's ideas are orthodox, though unconventional. If his teachers understood Mickey's core concept of God, they could affirm him in this. However, no one before me has ever asked Mickey what *his* ideas are. Mickey's ancillary concept is 'energy'. His experiences are 'subliminal'. (He says that he feels "close to the world that's been created … and to people around you".) His relationship is 'background'.

Ben *drew a large cross (Jesus/God) standing in a shaft of bright light. Surrounding it are the words "light", "faith", "hope", and "warmth" (representing "what God is"). God is a supernatural being who is not like us. God is in everything "he" creates. Despite this, God does not become involved with us, but lets us the make decisions. God is "really, really powerful".* Ben had not experienced a time when he felt God close to him, but says, "I think he's always close to everyone". Ben has 'subliminal' experiences of God and a 'separate lives' relationship. His ancillary concept is 'power'.

THE UNKNOWN

Corey (Fig. 7:3)
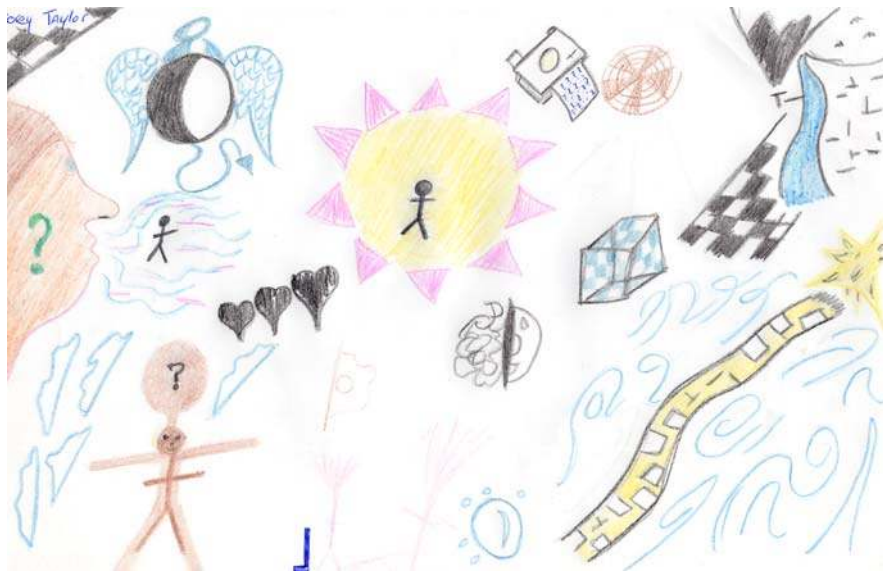
Corey drew symbols to convey his ideas about God. The profile of a face on the left is God breathing life into people. The question mark on God's face indicates "Nobody really knows who or what God looks like". This notion is repeated: the camera in the upper centre prints out question marks because "you can't capture what God looks like"; the brown figure in the lower left is a person who is growing up in the image of God, whose face contains a question mark; the yellow and blue roads lead to an unknown "better place"; the circular figure in the centre of the page represents the notion some people have that God is "like a person", while others think God is "more spiritual". The figure in the yellow circle represents all people, lost in the middle of nowhere, not knowing who they are. The angel/devil figure in the top right reflects the differing emotions people have towards God ("sometimes you may not like God because something bad has happened to you"). The hearts mean, "As you get older, you form a better relationship with God". Corey writes, "God is everything. He is all around us like air. It is important to take the time and try to 'see' God." Corey says, "I don't know much about God. ... Not many people do". Despite calling God "he", Corey notes that God is not "he", but "it". Corey's ancillary concept is 'presence'. He has 'subliminal' experience of God and has a 'separate lives' relationship with God.

Homer drew a number of symbols: a man with hair completely covering his face because "God's face will only be revealed in heaven"; a jigsaw puzzle because God is "like a jigsaw puzzle; hard to put together". (God is "very mysterious and helping".) The remaining symbols (a cross, a crown of thorns, a star, and the word 'God') are not important: "They just came into my mind when I thought about God". Homer

believes that "God lives on Earth in many forms through reincarnation". God communicates with some people "through their minds" and "through dreams". Answered prayer is also a form of communication from God. Homer feels God near him communicating with him. Sometimes when he is riding his bike, he sees an old man and he feels the impulse to help the man. Homer identifies this impulse with God telling him what to do. He also feels God near him, comforting him in times of crisis, like a death in the family, or when he is afraid. Homer has a strong Italian Catholic background and this influences his beliefs. Homer's ancillary concepts are 'helper' and 'guide', he has 'occasional' experiences of God, and a 'dependent' relationship with God.

Phil *drew, in the upper half of his picture, the gates of heaven set amongst the clouds in the sky. The gates are closed. The lower half of the picture features a door upon which is written the words "Door of unknowing, caution, mystery". Beside the door is the phrase "vague corridor". Phil writes, "When I thought of God one of the things that came to mind was mystery. I think that the belief of God is very vague and mysterious and much of what is written in the Bible is trivial information. ... I believe that God is hiding behind closed doors. To open this door we need to let go of much of the trivial bible information and just try to understand life."* For Phil, heaven is God's domain. We are on earth trying to work out our purpose and what is expected of us. It is like a puzzle we need to solve in order to unlock the door of mystery and gain access to the gates of heaven. Life is like God, vague, the unknown. We must find the key to life and, therefore, to heaven. Phil's ancillary concept is 'power'. (He writes that he also thinks of God as an all-powerful being, constantly watching us.) Phil has no experience of God and has a 'null' relationship with God.

Hue *drew the gates of heaven among the clouds. The gates are adorned with two crosses, denoting the presence of Jesus. Hue writes, "When I was reflecting about God I felt mystery because no one knows what he really is like. I believe that God is like our soul. He will guide us towards him in heaven. In the picture I drew, God is waiting for us on the other side for when our lives are over." When he thinks about God, Hue thinks of "us going in to his house ... and meeting him". Hue also believes that God planned and created the world and now sits back and watches it all. There have been several difficult times in Hue's life when he felt God's presence helping him. "He's just there; you can feel it; it's different", like an invisible presence.* Hue's ancillary concept is 'watcher'. He has 'occasional' experiences of God's presence in his life, helping him in times of need. Despite this, Hue speaks of God as someone who is in the 'background' of his life, an insignificant, often forgotten, presence.

Dream Girl *drew a pencil drawing of herself looking up into the sky at two angels (God's messengers to her). God is portrayed as an indeterminate figure on a cloud, with God's head extending beyond the top of the page, denoting that God is unknown. Dream Girl expresses a number of conflicting thoughts and feelings. She says that God "feels so unreal and far away. ... I know God is here and I've heard about him and I want to know him", but "he seems unreal" and the real world "is pushing him further from me". She writes, "I feel very tiny under the eye of God". Jesus' suffering causes Dream Girl to doubt the goodness of God. "It's all confusing" to her. Dream Girl experiences the nearness of God when "I take a quiet break" or "I go to the park and see all the nature ... it gives me the quietness I need". She sometimes feels the presence of God in her friends.* Dream Girl is confused about what she really thinks and feels about God. She is searching for an answer, and finds that her experiences of God give her an insight. At the same time, she feels the realities of her life and culture displacing God in her life. Dream Girl's ancillary concepts are 'watcher' and 'helper'. She has 'occasional' experiences of God's presence, usually in quiet, private times. Her relationship with God is that of 'separate lives'.

CREATOR/CARETAKER

Lauren *drew a beach scene with an enormous sun in one corner of the sky, indicating that God is 'creator'. In the sky and sea are crosses, signifying God watching over "his" creation. Lauren thinks, "God is a man ... [who] always watches over us". She also wrote, "I think God is there to guide us through life. ... God is someone that we can rely on if we need guidance. ... God is our friend."* Lauren imagines herself at the beach, relaxing, while God remains on guard, watching over her, protecting her. There is no sense of obligation on her part towards God, only of God's duties towards her. Lauren's relationship with God is that of 'supplier/consumer'. She has no experience of God. Her ancillary concept is 'watcher'.

Dubbo *drew a field dotted with trees. A stick figure (Dubbo) stands in the field in a broad shaft of light emanating from an orange sun. The sun represents God and the sunlight signifies God's care and concern for the world. Dubbo thinks of God as the 'creator' who "created everything" and who takes care of "his" creation. God is "peaceful" and is "the hope of the world". God gives help to those who ask and are in need.* Dubbo is giving me the 'correct' answers to my questions. There is no evidence in any of his other responses to indicate that these phrases have any meaning for him. Dubbo has no experience of God and his relationship is 'background' because most of the time God is a vague idea in the background of his mind.

Daddy's Little Girl (Fig. 7:4)

Daddy's Little Girl associates God with "natural beauty. He created the beautiful places that I love)". God is also associated with "that big hand on The Simpsons that comes out of the clouds". This symbol signifies "a kind of guidance because it's like a helping hand". The mustard seeds and the ant indicate, "God is in everything whether it's big or small or how powerful or insignificant it might be". The people around the heart show, "we should all be together in love, that's what God intended". The peace sign is "because of all the war today that really shouldn't be there." The birds are there because "they're so free". Daddy's Little Girl believes, "God is like a really big elephant because he's really big and he can see everything and remember everything." God provides "protection like rubber - 99%". God is like a hippie; God is cool and would say, "Peace, man".

In the picture, the cross with a heart is "actually for my cousin because he died just recently, a couple of weeks ago". Daddy's Little Girl wonders "was that always God's plan to take him away so early or did something change?" Although she could not answer that question, she writes, "Troy is with God now, R.I.P". She believes that there is something behind the events of her life, which she experiences as God's protection. She reached the conclusion, "GOD KNOWS! When you feel depressed/bummed out, you have to remember that God only dealt you this hand because he believes you can HANDLE IT!" Daddy's Little Girl uses a number of symbols, analogies, and metaphors to present different ideas about God, most of which are based on her experiences of God. Her ancillary concept is 'protector'. She has 'everyday' experiences of God guiding and protecting her. God plays "a big part in my life …like another parent". She believes that God communicates with her through signs and infused ideas. Her relationship with God is 'reciprocal' - God protects and guides her and she does what she can to live up to God's expectation that people should "spread the love because people don't show each other enough love. …They disrespect each other. …It's not what God intended for us to be like."

PRESENCE

Ashlee (Fig. 7:5)

Ashlee's picture symbolises her life with God. The clouds, raindrops, and lightning represent negativity ("anger" and "danger"). The rainbow signifies joy. God is the star and the star's rays are God's energy permeating life and showing the way. The sea symbolises Ashlee herself; turbulent on the surface but calm beneath the surface.

God's rays penetrate below the surface, enhancing the serenity within. To Ashlee, God "is a spirit above us looking down on us watching what we do and basically trying to help us in every way he can. … When we need help, he's always there to help us out." Although Ashlee says that God is a spirit, the remainder of her responses indicate that, for her, God is primarily a constant, supportive presence working with her in her life situations. She says she has not had a specific experience of God, but it is clear to me that she has strong, 'subliminal' experiences of God's presence. Her relationship with God is 'dependent' and her ancillary concepts are 'helper', 'watcher', and 'energy'. What Ashlee learns about God is confirmed by her experiences of God, so are acceptable.

Innocence *drew an enormous sun setting behind a sea containing the words "no thoughts", "I feel free", "I feel relaxed", "I hear birds". Innocence experiences the presence of God in creation: "I'm close to him while I'm there". She writes, "When I think about God, I feel secure because I know there is someone who will help me through my life. I feel free, no one telling me what to do (parents), no one judging me. When I think about God, I think about peace and equality and how in some parts of the world, lack of these." When her grandfather died, Innocence felt God near her, supporting her. Her experiences of God lead her to believe that God is dependable, supportive, comforting. She says, "I think he plays a big part in my life, like sort of another parent".* For Innocence, God is a 'presence' around her, helping her and supporting her like a 'parent' (her ancillary concept). She senses the presence of God especially when she is alone with nature, and in times of crisis and need. Her experiences are 'occasional' and her relationship 'dependent'.

Paddle Pop *drew a series of symbols: the back view of a girl (herself) sitting on large rocks, contemplating a waterfall and river; a tree; an angel on a cloud; and two large crosses in the sky. Paddle Pop writes, "My picture is about a place where I feel very comfortable and God is by my side helping me". She believes, "God is all around you. God is part of everything." Paddle Pop experiences the presence of God when she is happy and relaxed, and when she is in crisis. (She mentioned a time when a close member of the family died.)* For Paddle Pop, God is a supportive 'presence' helping her through life. God is also a 'helper' and 'guide' for her. She has 'occasional' experiences of God. Most of the time, however, God lets people make their own decisions and go their own way. Paddle Pop says, "I guess he's there but you don't always see him and you don't always hear him". There is a disparity between some of her statements, indicating that the concept of God to which she currently gives assent is not fully supported by her experiences of God. She feels confusion. Paddle Pop seems to be saying that her relationship with God is that of 'separate lives'.

LIGHT

Travolta (Fig. 7:6)
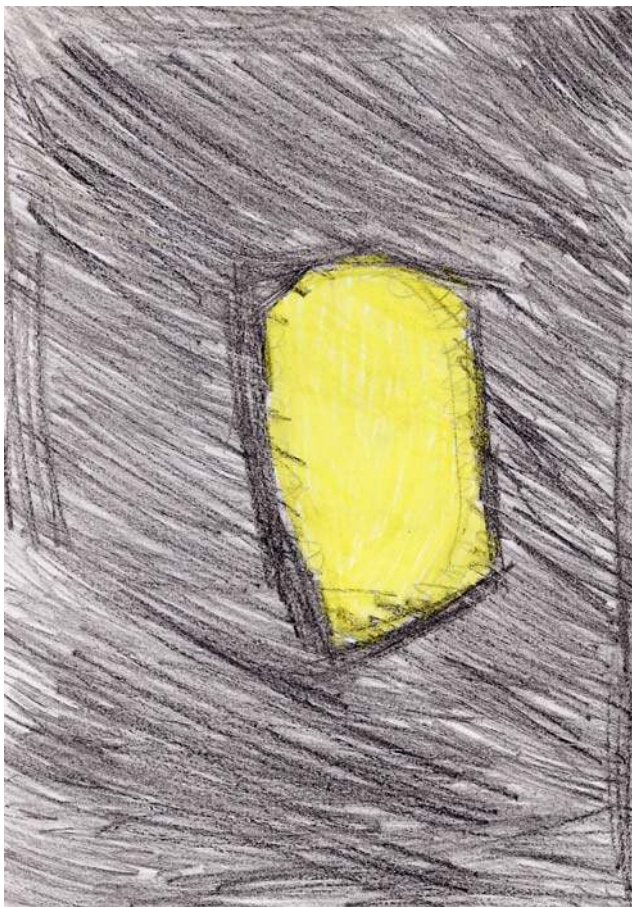
*When he closed his eyes (during the meditation activity) Travolta saw "this black, black surrounding and then **brightness**. That's what I think God is." The brightness is "coming up to help us". Travolta feels this light looking at him and he feels comfortable with this. Travolta believes God wants us to be "a little bit ... like him". Before we do something, we should always ask what God would want us to do. Travolta felt the presence of God once, when he was in trouble, "telling me that I should have done better". He feels God near: "When someone dies or something happens he's always there". Travolta's ancillary concepts are 'helper' and 'watcher'. He has 'occasional' experiences of God and a 'dependent' relationship with God.*

ATHEISM

Fawlen Angewl (Fig. 7:7)
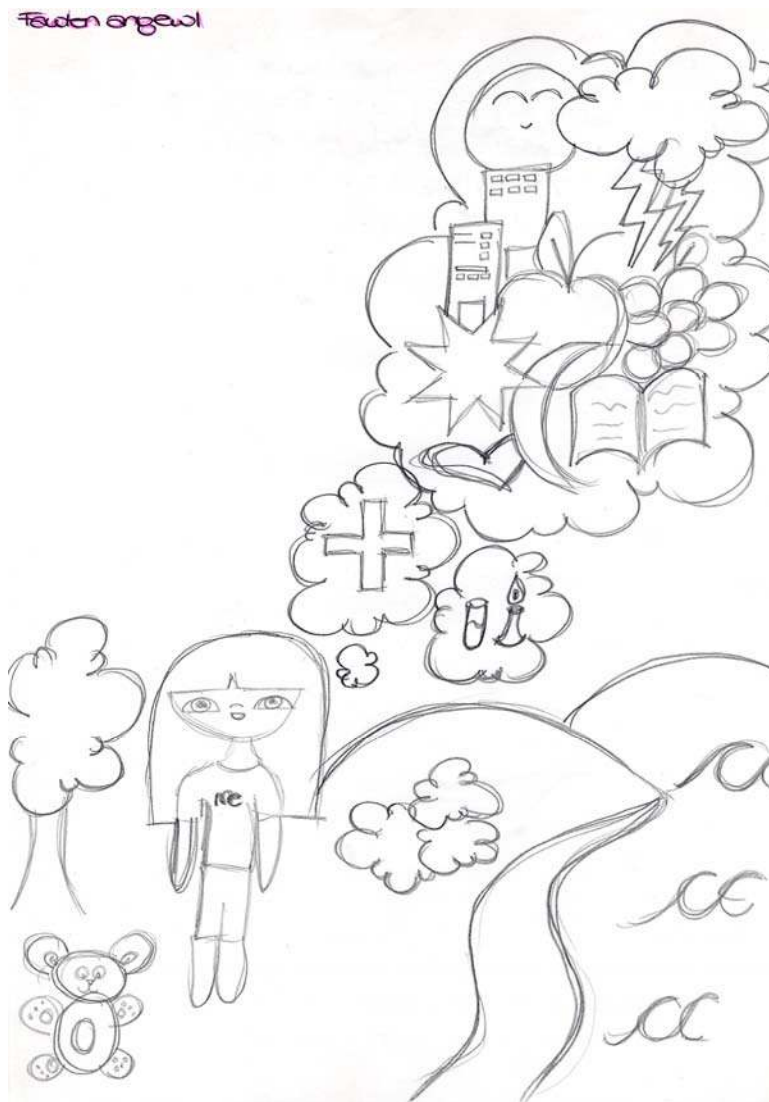
Fawlen angewl

When Fawlen Angewl thinks about God, she thinks about "science coz everything can be explained by science". For her, "God = science". Her picture is of herself (because "we're alone") surrounded by nature. In the large thought bubble are all the things we have: the universe (the moon and star); weather (the clouds and lightning); food (the apple and grapes); learning (the book and calculators); and emotions (the heart and smiling face). In the smaller bubbles are a cross (representing religion) and a Bunsen burner and test tube (representing science). Fawlen Angewl weighs up the merits of each of these in explaining everything.

She decides, "Everything in the world can be explained by science. Not everything in the world can be explained by God." She does not believe in God "because you can't see it [God]. If you see it, it's real". She has not experienced the presence of God and she has no tangible proof of God's existence, so for her, God is not real. Fawlen Angewl believes that "God/Jesus are all in the mind, something people look to for guidance", something for them to believe in. They are social constructs, ideas representing the perfection of humanity, a potential and goal towards which one can work, and "the basics of civilisation". For Fawlen Angewl, there is a clear God/science dichotomy, where if one is accepted as 'true' the other must be considered 'false'. At this point, she has accepted science as her belief system, and therefore rejected the notion of the objective existence of God. At the moment, Fawlen Angewl's core concept is 'atheism'. She has no experience of God and a 'null' relationship.

DISCUSSION

CONCEPTS

The 20 thirteen and fourteen-year-old students in this group expressed a variety of concepts that often convey their understanding of the multi-dimensionality of God, the mysterious, ineffable nature of God, and their current resolution to the conflict between the public God taught in school and the private God of their experience. From this group come six core concepts, one core concept subcategory, and twelve ancillary concepts.

Table 7:1 – Core God Concepts of the Year Nine Group

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Supreme Being	2	2	4
Higher/Greater Being	0	3	3
The Unknown	1	4	5
Creator/Caretaker	2	1	3
Presence	3	0	3
Light	0	1	1
Atheism	1	0	1

The category of 'supreme being' and its subcategory, 'higher/greater being', contain the responses of seven participants. Wednesday, Babi, David, and Bob conceive of God as an almighty being who has control over everything. There is a sense of God's supremacy and of the absolute dependency of humanity on God. Mickey, Spoonfish, and Ben think of God as a transcendent 'higher being' or 'greater being' who is completely different from us.

Five respondents, Corey, Homer, Phil, Hue, and Dream Girl, find God to be the unknown, a mystery, a puzzle. For these students, the incomprehensibility of God is all that can be known of God; all else is speculation. This notion is apophatic. It is an understanding of God that is found in the writings of the mystics. The complete *otherness* of God is highlighted in this concept.

Daddy's Little Girl, Lauren, and Dubbo conceive of God primarily as the one who created all that exists, and who takes care of creation. However, God is not an anthropomorphic super-being, but a mysterious presence. The distance between the creator and "his" creation is apparent in the responses of the last two of these participants and echoes their lack of experience of God.

God as a spiritual 'presence' is the core concept of three girls. For Ashlee, Innocence, and Paddle Pop, as for many of the students in this cohort, God is the unseen, unknown, greater being. These girls, however, experience the presence of God in their lives and so conceive of God as the one who is present to them, with them, involved in their lives, a friend and guide.

Travolta saw God as light, a brightness in the dark of the universe. This light is a benign power that brings light and life to the universe. Travolta feels this light as a supportive presence that watches over him and helps him in times of need. He feels "comfortable" knowing that this light watches him.

For Fawlen Angewl, science is God because science can explain everything. Fawlen Angewl does not experience the presence of God in her life, so she has no compelling personal reason to believe in God. She is, however, very intelligent (an A level student) who finds that the scientific explanations she discovers at school appeal to her intellect and provide her with a compelling intellectual reason to believe in the supremacy of science and of scientific knowledge. Her God is science; she is atheist.

Table 7:2 – Ancillary God Concepts of the Year Nine Group

Ancillary Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Watcher	3	3	6
Helper	4	2	6
Guide	2	1	3
Power	0	3	3
Presence	1	1	2
Creator	0	2	2
Energy	1	1	2
Parent	2	0	2
Friend	1	0	1
Protector	1	0	1
Caretaker	0	1	1

The concept of 'watcher' is found in the responses of six students. For Dream Girl, Ashlee, Travolta, and Lauren, 'watcher' indicates that God watches over, protects and helps them. (The first three of these students also speak of God as 'helper'.) This concept emphasises the involved and active 'watching over' of God. In contrast, Hue and Phil envisage a 'watcher' God who is an impassive and uninvolved observer of humanity and its actions. 'Helper' is a concept that accompanies other concepts like 'watcher' (the first three students mentioned above) or 'guide' (in the responses of Daddy's Little Girl, Paddle Pop and Homer). The term denotes the felt experience of God's presence in the lives of the students. This is also true for the concept 'guide' which

differs from 'helper' in that it is a more subtle, gentle prodding, rather than the more dynamic, involved action of 'helper'. Spoonfish and David conceive of God as a 'supreme being' or 'greater being' who created all that exists. They could say little about God's self, but knew something of God from "his" action as 'creator'. Dubbo thinks of God as one who is the 'caretaker' of creation. Daddy's Little Girl finds that God is a 'protector' for her. These six concepts, 'watcher', 'helper', 'guide', 'creator', 'caretaker', and 'protector', name actions of God and present God as a dynamic force.

For Spoonfish, Ben, and Phil, 'power' is an important attribute of God which they respect. For two students, God is a 'presence' that surrounds us (Corey) or is an intimate part of one's life (Wednesday). All that Mickey is prepared to say about the nature of God is that God is 'energy'. For Fawlen Angewl, *God* is the idea of God that people hold; for her, God does not exist outside people's minds. The essential attribute of this image of God is 'representation of perfection', meaning that God exists as an ideal of perfection or potential towards which humanity must strive. These four concepts, 'power', 'presence', 'energy', and 'representation of perfection', name attributes of God that emphasise the differences between God and humanity.

Daddy' Little Girl and Innocence relate to God as another 'parent'. Babi relates to God as a 'friend'. These two concepts are relational notions of God. They highlight the immanence, the emotional involvement, and the responsiveness of God.

Most of the students in this year group are vividly aware of the otherness or ineffability of God. For them, God is fundamentally the unknown, a mystery, a puzzle, a presence, energy, and an idea. There is a distinct reluctance by many of these respondents to make declarative statements about the appearance or nature of God. Instead, God is known indirectly through God's actions, or through the felt experience of God in the respondent's life. Even so, there is tentativeness in the responses. Considerable similarity or overlap exists between most of the concepts: The categories tend to represent different emphases rather than completely different concepts.

The role of experience of God in forming concepts of God is apparent in the responses of this group. One interview in particular highlighted this for me. Babi and Fawlen Angewl attended the same interview. However, their concepts of God are dissimilar. Babi has 'everyday' experiences of God which lead her to consider God as her 'friend' and a significant part of her life. She confirmed for me that it was her experiences of God that led to her understanding of the meaning of God for her. Fawlen Angewl has no experience of God in her life. She believed in God as a child because "when you're a

little kid …you grow up believing" what you are taught. Now that she is older and able to decide for herself in what she will believe, her commonsense and powers of scientific inquiry lead her to regard God as an intellectual proposition that has a role to play but no substance outside the human mind. Fawlen Angewl confirmed that she believes this way because this reflects her experience of life. In essence, she lacks a good reason to believe in God. Despite their different stances regarding God, Babi and Fawlen Angewl are friends who understand and respect the different perspectives of each other.

The existence of competing 'public God' and 'private God' concepts is apparent in the responses of several of the students. Homer, for example, drew a picture of a man with hair completely covering his face, and a jigsaw puzzle, which denote the unknown, puzzling nature of God. This is the concept of God which represents Homer's ideas of God and which interact with his experiences of God and his relationship with God. On the same page he drew other symbols (a cross, a crown of thorns, a star, and the word 'God'). During the interview, when asked about his picture, Homer explained only the man and the puzzle. When asked about the other symbols, he commented that they were not important and that "they just came into my mind when I thought about God". These symbols represent the 'public' God concepts he has been taught and while they are still are held in his memory, they have no meaning for him.

The responses of this group incorporate a range of symbols. Some of these are traditional, learned symbols, examples of which are present in the responses of Ben, David, Phil, Hue, Dubbo, and Homer. Other students have taken traditional religious and non-religious symbols and adapted them in a personal way. For example, Daddy's Little Girl (Fig. 7:4) used a cross to represent her dead cousin, and a heart to indicate the respect people should feel for each other; and Fawlen Angewl (Fig. 7:7) drew a cross to symbolise religion and a test tube and Bunsen burner to represent science. Several students employed symbols in a novel way: Ashlee (Fig. 7:5) used symbols of the weather (raindrops, lightning, and a rainbow) to represent the emotions in her life; Daddy's Little Girl (Fig. 7:4) drew some seeds and an ant to express her notion that God is present in the smallest and most insignificant of objects.

An extension of symbolic thinking present in the responses of this group is the utilisation of metaphors.[154] Some of the metaphors for God are conventional. They are essentially analogies that posit a direct line of comparison between God and the

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[154] McGrath (1999:151) commented on the significance of metaphoric usage: "God is revealed in images and ideas which relate to our world and of everyday existence, yet which do not reduce God to that everyday world. …They allow us to use the vocabulary and images of our own world, to describe something which ultimately lies beyond that world".

symbolic object. Examples of this are, God is light (Ashlee, David, and Travolta), God is energy (Mickey), God is a parent (Innocence and Daddy's Little Girl), and God is a man (Lauren). A more complex form of metaphor posits a similarity between two fundamentally dissimilar objects. Examples of this include: God is a lion (Wednesday); God is a jigsaw puzzle (Homer); God is an elephant, God is a hippie, and God is a condom (Daddy's Little Girl). These metaphors contain a sense of surprise and novelty that have a revelatory aspect to them.

EXPERIENCES

Despite the fact that these year nine students stress the transcendent unknowability of God, their experiences of the presence of God create a bond with the one who is radically dissimilar from themselves. There is a dialectic tension between the intellectual concept of a God who is beyond comprehension, and the intimate experience of a constant presence that watches over, helps, guides, comforts, and protects. From the responses of these students, it is clear that their experiences of God and their emotional reactions to these experiences are of greater importance than their intellectual deductions and reasoning in determining the meaning of God for their lives. As with the previous groups, I have classified the experiences of this group under the headings 'none', 'subliminal', 'occasional', and 'everyday'.

Table 7:3 – Types of Experiences of the Year Nine Group

Types of Experiences	Girls	Boys	Total
None	2	3	5
Subliminal	1	3	4
Occasional	4	5	9
Everyday	2	0	2

The responses of two girls (Fawlen Angewl and Lauren) and three boys (Dubbo, Phil, and Bob) fall into the 'none' category of experience. These students report not having any experience of the presence or nearness of God in their lives and the remainder of their responses confirm their report. This lack of experience directly affects their concepts of God and their relationships with God. All of these students conceive of God as distant and uninvolved. Phil and Fawlen Angewl have a 'null' relationship with God, Dubbo has a 'background' relationship with God, and Lauren and Bob have a 'supplier/consumer' relationship with God. The first two of these dismiss God; the third treats God as an object to be used.

Four students are not conscious of experiencing the nearness of God, but their responses imply a 'subliminal' awareness. Mickey feels close to nature and to his friends; Ben thinks that God is always close to everyone (though this belief is not based on his experiences); Corey believes that God is "all around us like air" (which is a belief without an experiential basis) and that it is important to "take the time and try to 'see' God"; and Ashlee (Fig. 7:5) drew God as a star whose light permeates her life and who acts as a constant 'presence' in her life. The three boys in this group have 'background' or 'separate lives' relationships with God. Ashlee has a 'dependent' relationship that mirrors the strength of her subliminal experiences.

Nine students report 'occasional' experiences of God. There are five types of occasions that precipitate these experiences. Times of crisis, especially the death of loved ones, were occasions when David, Spoonfish, Homer, Travolta, Innocence, and Paddle Pop vividly recall experiencing the comforting and guiding presence of God. "Tough times" of conflict, anger, and sadness precipitated experiences of God in Wednesday, Babi, and Hue. Times of quiet and solitude were significant for Dream Girl, Innocence, and Paddle Pop in helping them connect to the presence of God. Everyday experiences like seeing an old man in the street, or awareness of wrongdoing, accompany Homer's and Travolta's sense of God's presence. The religious ceremony of the Mass was an occasion for Babi to experience the nearness of God. Of the sixteen incidences mentioned above, only one occurred in the presence of others. The remaining fifteen incidences occurred mainly in times of solitude and within the privacy of the mind. They are mostly times of intense emotional upheaval and need. Tamminen (1994) also found "emergencies" to be the time most frequently associated with experiences of God.

Daddy's Little Girl and Babi report experiences of God that I call 'everyday'. For these girls, God is a constant, supportive presence; God is an intimate friend in whom one can confide; God is dependable ("like a rubber – 99%"); God is present in all things, no matter how small or insignificant (like ants or mustard seeds); God is central to life (like the sun, and like the planets, we revolve around "him"); God is a helping hand, a guide, a protector; and God is an intimate and indispensable part of life.

RELATIONSHIPS

Within the responses of the year nine students I observed six different types of relationship. All these relational categories appear in the work of the previous groups. They are 'Null', 'Background', 'Supplier/Consumer', 'Separate Lives', 'Dependent', and 'Reciprocal'.

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__|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|___
 Null    Background    Supplier/    Separate    Dependent   Reciprocal
 (2)        (4)      Consumer (2)   Lives (4)      (7)          (1)
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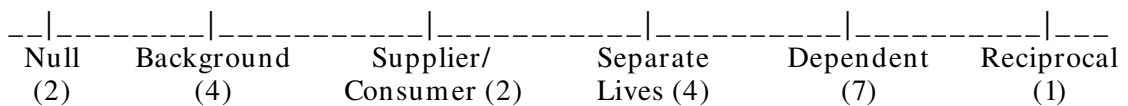
Fig. 7:8 - Continuum of Relationship Categories (Year Nine)

Fawlen Angewl and Phil have 'null' relationships with God. They do not rebel against God; they merely either dismiss the notion of the objective existence of God (Fawlen Angewl) or consider God to be removed from us, and uninvolved and irrelevant to our lives (Phil). These relationships are the correlate of 'null' experiences of God, and lead to the concepts of God as non-existent (Fawlen Angewl) or as the unknown (Phil). Experience, relationship, and concept are all characterised by distance in the responses of these two participants.

Mickey, David, Hue, and Dubbo, conceive of God as powerful, transcendent, uninvolved, non-personal (that is, 'energy' or 'unknown'), distant, and different from themselves. These boys believe in God, but God is so unimportant to their everyday lives that God is a part of the 'background' in their mental landscape. Although David and Hue have experienced the nearness and help of God in times of need, for the most part these four boys rarely think about God or God's connection with themselves.

Bob thinks of God as the ultimate big boss, the owner of everything, and, therefore, the one who can give him anything he wants. If he plays the game of life well, he will be rewarded with everlasting pleasure in the big hotel in the sky which is heaven. Lauren conceives of God as an indulgent friend who watches over her, protects her and provides for her needs. These two students relate to God as consumers to a supplier; God gives them what they want and they do the right thing to keep on the good side of their supplier.

Paddle Pop, Dream Girl, Corey, and Ben have either 'subliminal' or 'occasional' experiences of God's presence in their lives. At these times, they interact with God, feeling gratitude for God's involvement. Most of the time, however, God is not a significant part of their lives. They and God live 'separate lives'.

Seven students seem to have 'dependent' relationships with God. Wednesday, Babi, and Innocence experience the presence of God helping, supporting, or guiding them like "a friend" or "another parent". These girls depend on God for their emotional needs. Travolta, Homer, and Spoonfish conceive of God as an unknown greater power on whom they are radically dependent. They experience ontological dependency. Ashlee's 'subliminal' experiences are of the presence of God permeating all of creation, including herself. Other than Ashlee, these students have 'occasional' or 'everyday' experiences of God. This seems to be a significant factor in fostering their relationships with God.

For Daddy's Little Girl, God plays "a big part in my life … like another parent". She feels dependent on God, but unlike the above mentioned group, she reciprocates by trying to be respectful and considerate of others because this is what God expects of her. This is her way of responding to the God who is there for her in the good and the bad times of her life, like the recent death of her cousin. There is a sense of reciprocity between God and Daddy's Little Girl

Below is an overview of the relationships with God of the year nine group.

Table 7:4 – Types of Relationship of the Year Nine Group

Types of Relationship	Girls	Boys	Total
Null	1	1	2
Background	0	4	4
Supplier/Consumer	1	1	2
Separate Lives	2	2	4
Dependent	4	3	7
Reciprocal	1	0	1

There is a strong link between the respondents' experiences, concepts, and relationships with God, with minimal experiences and distant concepts leading to a minimal degree of relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

My findings with this group of adolescents are similar to those of Nipkow and Schweitzer (1991). Reporting on their study of adolescents' faith, they observed "the diversity of adolescents' views on religion, ranging from unexamined adherence to critical refusal, to highly emotional commitment, to open indifference" (ibid:91). They also noted that "the students' questions about God are not simply intellectual questions … [but] are existential questions that provide the meaning on which the adolescents' fragile identity rests" (ibid:94). Along with these two researchers, I found that adolescents are "fixated on the problem of evil and suffering … which they saw simply in terms of failed reciprocity between God and humans" (ibid:96). Another point raised by Nipkow and Schweitzer which is reflected in my findings with this group is that many students criticised the Church, but found a solution, "namely, differentiating between *the religion of the Church* and *their own religion as individuals"* (ibid:97-98). These findings are not confined to this particular group of students. The year twelve group also exhibited a similar trend in their attempts to create their own theology. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of Crawford and Rossiter (1993, 1996) about the way adolescents deal with religious and spiritual issues.

Erricker (2001:156) noted, "As adults, we are often, if not invariably, unaware of both the issues on which they [children] reflect and the depth of their thinking in relation to experiences which have had significant effects on their lives". This comment holds true for all the groups in this study. None of these students had ever been asked about their experiences or concepts of God before I investigated these phenomena. This is not unusual. Cram (1996:55, 64) asked his son if any of his teachers had ever asked what he thought about God. The boy replied, "No, never. They just tell me what to think".

Kraft (1983:17) wrote that adolescents are "novices at spirituality". My findings indicate that many adolescents have a deep, complex, mature spirituality built up of their experiences of God, their theologising about God, and the everyday lives they live in light of these. Unfortunately, ignorance or indifference on the part of adults leads not only to the writing of smug comments like that of Kraft, but also to teaching adolescents the 'correct' answers. Cram (1996:66) commented, "School is very often also the place where childhood theological reflection is stifled, ignored, or rejected – in lieu of the teacher's perceived need to transfer the truth – the right answers – to the student". This is true of the religious education received by the year nine respondents of this study. For them, religious education is about teachers "trying to get all of us to

believe the same thing" (Corey).   The results of this approach are dubious.   Tacey (2000:195) understood this.

> Our Western crisis in religious faith is partly a crisis of language and representation. It is not that we have lost our capacity for spiritual feeling … but we have lost our ability to locate this feeling in the old theological forms. The old religious worldview no longer resonates with the understandings of the young or of the secular world in which they live.

My observations of the year nine group lead me to agree strongly with Liddy (2002:14): "The crucial point educationally is the reality of the child's world, of beginning with the child's experiences of life and relationships. All education must begin and end with children's own inwardness".

CHAPTER EIGHT - YEAR TWELVE CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

The year twelve participants of this study consisted of 19 sixteen and seventeen-year-old students, in the last year of schooling in Western Australia. For the most part, these students were quite articulate and were able to explain what they believed, why they believed it, and the factors that influenced their beliefs. These students were actively involved in developing their own theology: The few students who accepted the traditional beliefs they had been taught, revealed the other factors in their lives that prompted them to continue in their beliefs. Many of the students held beliefs that reflected their experiences of life, but which deviated from the beliefs taught at school. These students gave priority to the beliefs that flowed from their own spirituality, and consigned the taught beliefs to the category of 'irrelevant beliefs that belong to the religion'. Some students rejected what they had been taught about God, but had not found any other beliefs to replace them. These students were either searching for a belief system more consistent with their perceptions and experiences of life, or found belief in God irrelevant and "a chore", and relegated these issues to the background of their lives.

This group of students was more interested in orthopraxis than orthodoxy, and believed that this reflected God's focus. They also frequently mentioned the significance of feelings of connectedness with themselves, with others, with nature, and with God. This concept of the connectedness of living things is a theme running through many of the responses of this group.

Within the responses of this group have emerged seven core concept categories: 'presence', 'the force', 'mystery/the unknown', 'creator/caretaker', 'higher/divine being', 'nature', and 'agnosticism'. There are six relational categories, namely, 'null', 'background', 'needs-based', 'dependent', 'reciprocal', and 'partnership'. (The last is a new category that appears only in the responses of one student in the year twelve group.)

FINDINGS

PRESENCE

Anthony (Fig. 8:1)

Anthony drew himself in his room. This is where he goes "to chill out". Purple is the base colour in this picture; everything else represents God. The bed and pillow are cloudlike because "not only does God support me, but it's a peaceful support"; the books on the shelf represent "the gift of knowledge" and the bookshelf represents "God supporting my knowledge"; the sun represents God's light and guidance; the birds represent freedom (how Anthony's relationship with God makes him feel). Anthony says, "I don't know what God is. I don't know who God is. But it's a presence that guides me and helps me in my life".

Anthony comments "God is important to me. ... I'm happy having God in my life." Anthony experiences the presence of God whenever he "chills out", that is, whenever he quietens his mind and pushes aside the concerns of the day. He has 'everyday' experiences of God. Anthony's relationship with God is 'reciprocal'. God is a 'guide' to whom Anthony turns in times of need; Anthony reciprocates, "I just try to do the best I can". For him this means "helping other people if they ask me no matter whether I really like them or not; respecting other people even those I don't really like; going to church, spending an hour just giving thanks; loving my mother, my family; trying not to take my anger out on other people when it's not really their fault".

Guido *drew a collection of symbols: a waterfall and river running through a meadow, representing God as creator; a dove, representing the Holy Spirit, the spirit of peace; a trident, the symbol of power for Triton, the king of the sea in* The Little Mermaid*; the sun, representing light and guidance; a metal pole, representing stability; and a question mark, representing the mystery of God. To Guido, God is "a guide in my life", "a lifeline sometimes", and "a friend that you can talk to and always*
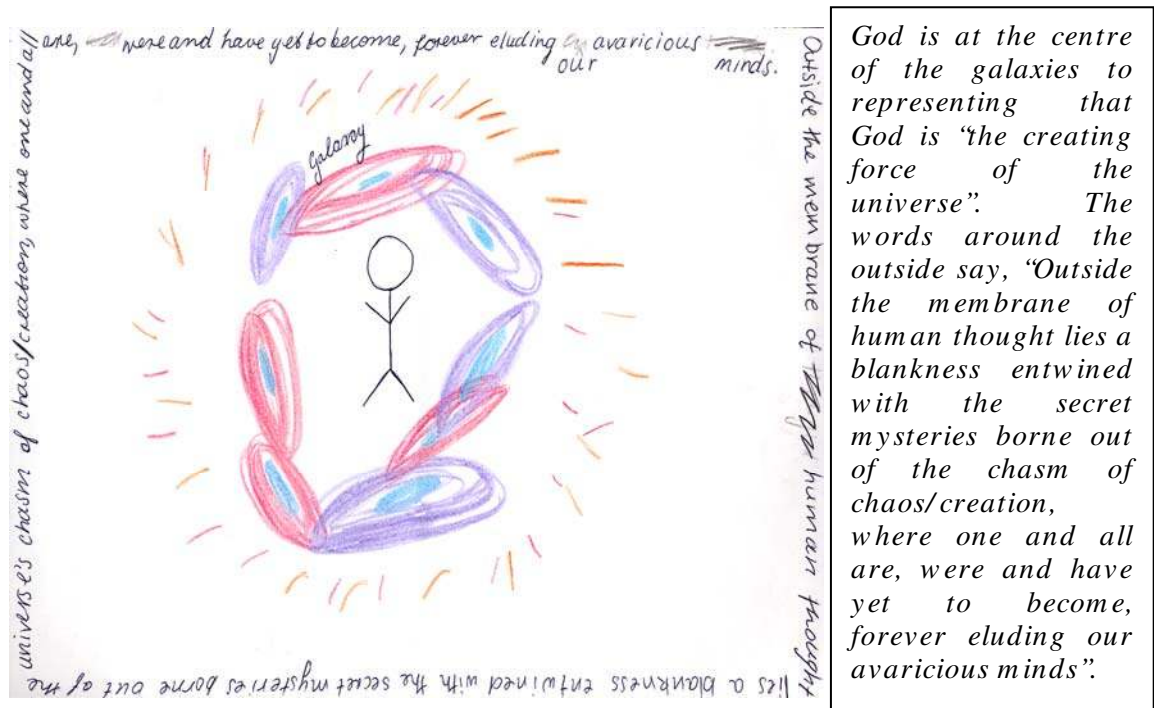
know is there for you". God is "a presence that I think is in all of us"; "s/he inhabits our every thought and action". Guido experiences the presence of God "when I reflect on things and look at the things around me". He experiences a "power" and a sense "that there is a connection between all of us and between everything". Guido believes that not only is God a part of us, but "we are a part of God as well. We reflect God." God, humanity, and creation are all parts of an interconnected existence. This belief influences Guido's actions and philosophy of life. In his relationship with God, "you've got to give and take"; because you are a part of God, you have to reflect God in your life, "to live through him as well". Decisions are "ultimately up to you", but they should reflect the presence of God in your life. Guido experiences the oneness of all living things, existing within the matrix that is God. He has 'everyday' experiences of the presence of God entwined within his own life. This presence permeates his thoughts, decisions, and actions. Guido's relationship with God is intimate. There is an interpenetration of Guido's life and God's life. I call this relationship 'partnership'. There is the sense of a covenantal agreement with responsibility on both sides: God helps Guido as a 'guide' and 'friend', and Guido helps God by being, as much as possible, the best person he can be, so that he becomes a reflection of God on earth, and that God may act through him.

Alex's *picture is dominated by the hand of Jesus bearing the stigmata. This represents the sufferings of Jesus. Surrounding this hand are a blue dove (symbolising peace), a green leaf (symbolising new life and creation), a monstrance (representing the celebration of the Eucharist), and a cloud (representing "obscurity", "getting foggy and misty about ourselves ... and our spirituality"). Despite the traditional symbology, Alex thinks of God as "a type of presence" that gives meaning to his life. God is a mystery, which cannot be explained. Alex calls God "it", to denote that God transcends gender. When he was younger, Alex found God distant, "in the clouds". Now, he says, God is central to his life, "like a good father". Alex experiences God as an intimate 'everyday' part of his life. He also had a dramatic "uplifting" experience of God at a youth convention celebration. Alex addresses the dilemma of evil in the world through the concept of free will. He believes, "We bring it on ourselves"; it is not the case that God is "abdicating responsibility". Alex considers that it is his responsibility to "do what is best for others and what is best for ourselves". This involves balancing free will with responsibility.* Alex's responses imply that God is a constant 'presence' in his life. He confirmed that the concepts of God as the ground of our being, or as the matrix in which we live describe God "quite well". He has a 'reciprocal' relationship with God that flows from his 'everyday' experiences.

Mary Jones *drew a large, brilliant sun surrounded by small, white clouds. The picture represents the all-powerful God, who "looks down on everyone" and "knows all and sees all". Mary is unsure of the nature of God. She thinks of God as a powerful, protective 'presence' overlooking creation. At the same time, "I don't really know what to believe". She has questions and doubts about the existence of a loving God when she experiences "tough times" in her life and in the lives of family members. She also says that God "expects a lot – he wants us to be perfect". She says, "I don't know". It is all "confusing".* Mary is in transition between old beliefs, in which she doubts, and new truths for which she is searching. She says she prays to God who "makes me feel secure and know that there is something after this life". Mary finds the notion of God and of life hereafter a consolation. However, Mary does not experience God in her life. For her, "He's the one who makes things happen". Her relationship with God is "needs-based".

THE FORCE

Draconian Serenity (Fig. 8:2)

God is at the centre of the galaxies to representing that God is "the creating force of the universe". The words around the outside say, "Outside the membrane of human thought lies a blankness entwined with the secret mysteries borne out of the chasm of chaos/creation, where one and all are, were and have yet to become, forever eluding our avaricious minds".

These words indicate that God is "forever shrouded in incomprehensibility", and that "God will forever be alien to human understanding". In differentiating her concepts from those taught her, Serenity states, "I don't believe God is a father. To me it makes more sense for God to be a mother" because "the whole creating thing" is like "women giving birth." She has "settled on referring to God as an It, for I believe that God transcends all human understandings hence, gender." For Serenity, God is "an external force" that is "everywhere in the universe". The universe is "the total

embodiment of God ... God resides in the particles". Serenity's core concept is that of 'force'. This force is creative, and is "a catalyst of creation and of chaos". Her ancillary concept is 'the unknown', a strong component of her thinking. Serenity has 'subliminal' experiences of God. She says, "The way the universe works and the way people work ... amazes me". Commenting on her relationship with God, Serenity says, "My life's pretty complete. ... I don't need to have a benevolent person looking over me." The creative force of the universe "coincides" with her life; she feels that she needs to live in harmony with the force; but it is something that is in the 'background' of her life.

Gypsy *drew a beach sunset. She speaks of God as "it", and thinks of God as "more of a force and within nature". Gypsy experiences the presence of God when she is alone in nature, especially "a great view or a major sunset". She feels "awe-inspired". She also feels the presence of God in a large worship group. She says, "You can actually feel someone" there. Gypsy says she is an interconnected part of existence and that God is "part of my relationships with the world I'm in, with myself, with nature, with other people". She speaks of a "common connected sort of feeling".* Essentially, to Gypsy, God is a 'force' that penetrates and maintains the web of connectedness that binds all living things. Gypsy has 'occasional' experiences of God and a 'dependent' relationship with the life force that sustains her.

Erin *drew a group of pictures, all done in red pencil (see fig. 8:8). There is a full-length sketch of an angel (representing heaven and the otherworldly nature of God); a crucifix (symbolic of "God's suffering, for which he deserves some respect"); half of the picture is framed (indicating "sincerity and protection, at times"); there is a large, glowering eye ("he's always watching and he's vengeful"); and a tree (representing "strength, and a constant being that's always been there"). The picture exudes a sense of anger. Erin has always been taught to be respectful towards God, so when she sees suffering in the world, she cannot challenge God about it. This creates frustration. She also feels that "when things go well, people thank God. When things go badly, God's not to blame". This seems unfair and leads to the anger so clearly reflected in her drawing.* Erin is in transition from her old beliefs (which do not conform to her experiences of life, and which make her angry) to a new belief that is more consistent with her life. She makes contradictory statements that reflect her mental turmoil and indecision. She says that God is "a greater force looking out for us", but later explains she does not know in what she believes. She sees no evidence of a benevolent force "there for me or looking after me". For the moment, her concept of God is of a 'force'. She has no experiences of God. Her relationship with God is 'needs-based', reflected in her comment, "I usually pray to him when I want something or need something".

MYSTERY/ THE UNKNOWN

Raff (Fig. 8:3)

To Raff, God is "a mysterious something". The black in the picture represents the mystery of death and destruction in the world. The blue at the centre is the mystery of God. The amorphous shape that represents God, and the use of the word "it" to refer to God, represent Raff's notion that God is mystery, and therefore, does not possess form or gender.

Raff believes in God because "there must be someone looking out for us". At the same time, God is not "what the bible and the teachers make it out to be". At times, Raff doubts the existence of God. There have been many deaths in his family in the last few years. This, and the injustice in the world, "make it hard to believe there is a God". Raff has no experience of God in his life and he has a 'null' relationship with God.

Felicity *drew a cross in the centre of the page. Above it is an angel and below it is a devil. On either side are the words WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? CREATE WHEN IT GETS DESTROYED. A month before the drawing activity, Trent, an acquaintance of Felicity's, committed suicide. Felicity expresses her anger and questions through her artwork. The angel and devil express Felicity's wonderings about the fate of those who commit suicide: Does Trent have a chance at heaven, or does his act condemn him to hell? The words challenge God to explain why God creates us if we are all going to die. By the time of the interview, Felicity had found her answer to this question. She said that God "was clever to create us because we experience one world when we're living, but we experience another world when we're dead". In her reflection, Felicity writes, "Is God a he or she? ... Is God even a someone?... We do not know." To her, God is "within you like a spirit or your soul"; "God "guides you on your journey through life"; "God is something that tries to help you, even if you go down the wrong path in life"; God is "a good mate". Felicity experienced the presence of God comforting her after Trent's death. She says, "I felt someone was just there watching over me".* Felicity has 'occasional' experiences of God's presence in times of crisis. However, she only concerns herself with God when she is in need. She has a 'needs-based' relationship with God.

Teresa *drew a sun, partly occluded by white clouds. The sun represents God and the clouds represent her questioning of what she has been taught about God. Teresa writes, "I see GOD as something or someone who watches over us. Sometimes I question whether he really is helping me or watching over me through life because I find that when I am going through a tough time I feel like I'm alone".* [This statement seems to summarise her old ideas about God, which she questions.] *Teresa also believes that "God's out there", even though "I haven't found him yet". Teresa says, "I hope that I will one day be able to understand who GOD is and find him in me when I am ready, sort of like a change in life". She is looking forward to the time when she finds some of the answers she seeks and "things become clearer".* Although Teresa wrote that God is someone who watches over her, the whole tenor of her responses indicates that God is fundamentally a 'mysterious unknown', which she seeks to understand. Teresa has no experiences of God that she can recall. At the moment, God is not a part of her life. God is in the 'background' of her life.

CREATOR/CARETAKER

John Zaritsky (Fig. 8:4)

John's picture depicts creation with God watching over it. God is "Creator of everything that exists". God is "up in the sky, looking over us". God is "Almighty Father". John says that God is always there, looking over us, protecting us. God created nature and is happy with it.

God is important to John, who experiences God's presence during church services. John believes that God communicates to humans through their conscience. John holds traditional beliefs. His family is Italian and strongly Catholic. Clearly, the beliefs he shares with his family provide a satisfactory explanation for, and strong support for, his experiences of God and of his life. John's core concept of God is of a loving 'creator/caretaker'. His ancillary concepts are 'watcher' and 'guide'. His experiences of God are 'occasional' and his relationship with God is 'dependent'.

Boof *drew the smiling face of a young, bearded man (Jesus). Surrounding him are a heart (symbolising love), the sun (representing light, warmth, and guidance), and the words "cosy" and "peace" (indicating the qualities that are associated with Jesus/God). To Boof, God is "someone that's watching over us", and "is proud ... of who we've all become". When Boof experiences obstacles in her life, she becomes "a bit uncertain about whether he is there or not". Generally, however, Boof believes that God is a spirit that helps her, not physically, but emotionally. God is part of her life, helping her make decisions. God communicates "through our thoughts". Boof felt God's presence supporting her when her grandfather died.* Boof conceives of God as 'caretaker'. Her ancillary concepts are 'watcher' and 'guide'. She has 'occasional' experiences of God, in times of crisis. Her relationship with God is 'dependent'.

Michelle *drew a collection of symbols. Some of these relate to Jesus (a bearded man, a cross, a crown of thorns, and a rocky tomb); some relate to nature and creation (flowers, a river winding among trees, a dog, and Adam and Eve beneath the tree with the forbidden fruit); and others symbolise abstract concepts like love (a heart), power (a thundercloud and lightning), and peace (the peace symbol). There are words on the page, "A man of power who created all", which indicate the core concept of God held by Michelle. Michelle wrote, "Sometimes God isn't the easiest to believe". This is because "It is hard to believe that ONE man could create everything!!" She believes that God wants us to "have faith in ourselves" and "to trust ourselves to do the right thing". When asked about her experiences of God, Michelle said "Every now and then you'll do something and it will be special to you. ... [It will have a] God feeling around it".* Michelle believes that God is a man in a literal sense. This leads to confusion about the nature of God and creates an obstacle to belief. God is a distant person who rarely touches her life. Michelle's core concept is 'creator' and her ancillary concept is 'power'. She has 'subliminal' experiences of God and a 'background' relationship with God.

HIGHER/DIVINE BEING

Kezza (Fig. 8:5)

Kezza's picture of happy children playing reflects the happiness and security she experiences with her family (including her cousins). Kezza says you can see God in children, in their innocence and brightness. Kezza says that God is "amazing", "he created everything". Kezza is in transition between her old beliefs and finding new beliefs. Her old beliefs include the concept that God is a person or a father, and the doctrine of the virgin birth. Kezza doubts these. Her new belief is that God is a higher "divine being", but she is not sure if this is a valid description of God because it deviates significantly from her taught concepts. Kezza's belief in God is challenged by the existence of death and evil in the world. Kezza has 'subliminal' experiences of God. Of a visit to St Mary's Cathedral, she says, "It's there … you feel different". Kezza's relationship with God is 'background'.

Kurt Cobain *drew a large picture of Jesus' face in the clouds, surrounded by the sun, lightning, and fire (symbols of power). Kurt writes, "I think there is something our there, something higher than us and more powerful, but I don't really take any notice of 'him' and he has no relevance in my life. … If there was this so called almighty and caring Father why is there so much bad stuff in the world. I feel this way, as I guess I've never had any real God experiences and have not been brought up with God in my house (Family isn't religious)."* Kurt's core concept is 'higher being', his ancillary concept is 'power', his experiences are 'none' and his relationship is 'null'.

NATURE

Sally (Fig. 8:6)
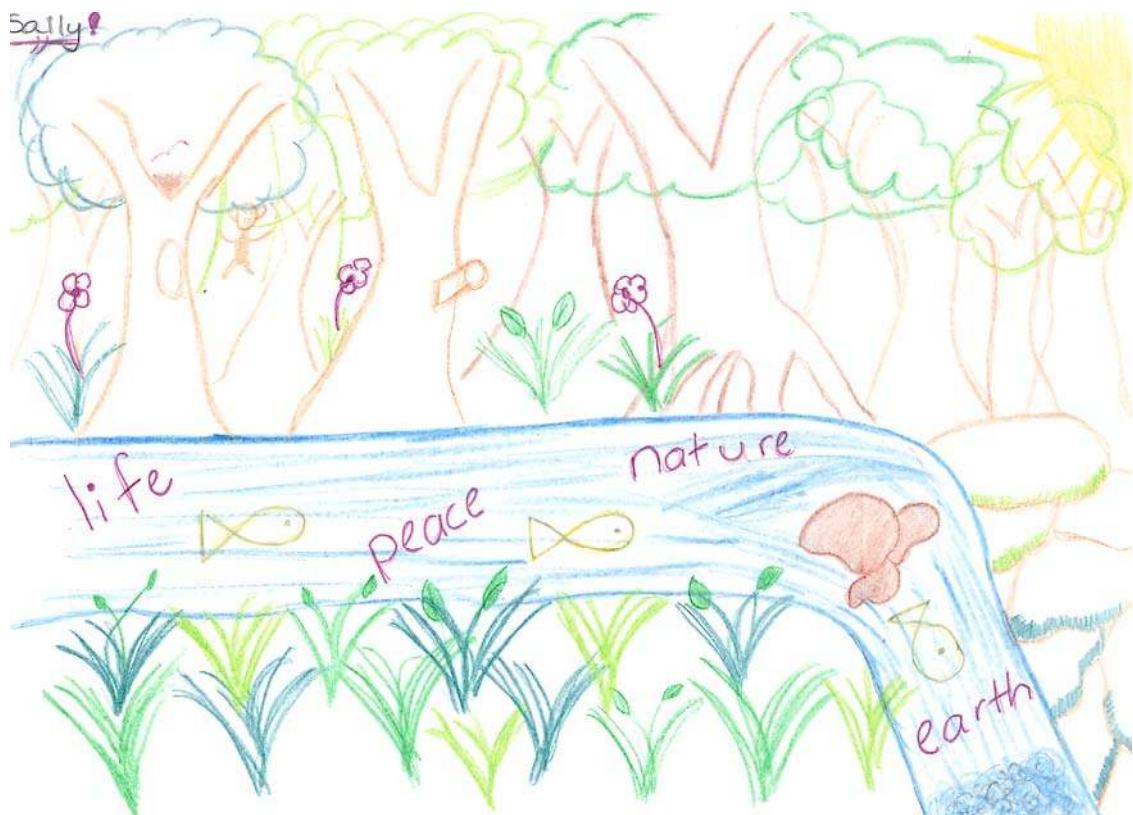
Sally's picture is of a lush rainforest, teeming with life. Sally writes, "For me there isn't a God, there is just nature and life. I don't know what is responsible for creating the earth and all things within it, but I don't believe that God, <u>one</u> God did it. I believe in spirituality and people being part of Earth and connected with nature, but I don't believe that God has put us here. I believe we make our own plan or destiny. I think that nature is GOD." Sally's concept of God is pantheistic. For her, God is the life force that exists within, and sustains, all living creatures. This concept deviates so much from the concept of God taught at school that Sally assumes what she believes is not God. Sally also believes that the rules of the church are not the rules of God. God would not emphasise going to church as much as being true to oneself. Sally experiences and communicates with God (or what she calls nature) when doing things that are peaceful, like going camping or spending time with nature. She says, "You feel more one with yourself". She experiences interconnectedness within herself, and between herself and nature. Her experiences are 'occasional' and her relationship is 'background'.

AGNOSTICISM

Alissa (Fig. 8:7)

This picture represents Alissa's thoughts and feelings about God. She describes it as "a kind of nothingness with some kind of hope in the middle". The faint blues and reds towards the centre represent the possibility that God exists. Alissa says, "I'm really conflicted. I don't know whether there is or there isn't" a God. She writes, "God has no bearing on my life. At this point, I don't believe in God, yet it is still uncertain for me as I don't think I have fully considered it because I don't feel the need to. ... Instead of putting my faith into something I am uncertain about or sceptical of, I think it is better that I rely on the things around me I know are real, in particular important people in my life, for example, my friends and family". Alissa speaks of "nice little bible stories" which are "nice to believe in when you're a little kid, but when you grow up they kind of don't have any relevance any more." She finds many of the stories "difficult to swallow". She adds, "I'm not going to swallow something because people tell me to". Alissa is agnostic. Her parents are nonreligious and leave Alissa to decide for herself in what she believes. Therefore, Alissa does not have any model or support for belief in God. In addition, she has no experiences of God. All these factors lead to a 'null' relationship with God.

John Smith *drew pictures of the sun and of lightning (symbolising power) and waves (representing peace). Around the outside is a solid frame (indicating restriction), and through the whole is a large red cross (signifying John's rejection of the beliefs these symbols accompany). John wrote, "I …find the whole God situation a little over the top and believe it is not true. Perhaps I don't understand correctly, but how come no one has ever seen God?? If God was real, surely there wouldn't be terror strikes on New York and war amongst different countries. God would stop it from happening." John summarised his beliefs by saying, "At the end of the day ... I haven't met God, I haven't seen God, I haven't seen him do anything for me, or anyone else, so I just don't think he's real. ...I will believe god when I see him."* John's parents are not religious, John has no experience of the presence of God in his life, and what he is taught about God contradicts the reality of the world in which he lives. He, therefore, does not believe in, or relate to, God and will continue with this disbelief until given a compelling reason to believe.

Roman Polanski *drew Adam and Eve, clothed in fig leaves, running along the beach. Above the clouds stands God, smiling and watching over them. This picture represents what Roman has been taught to believe, namely that God is a heavenly being, the creator of all that exists, who takes care of "his" creation. Roman thinks that God is "someone who everyone admires because he's got power to help everyone". However, "I personally don't believe in him. This is because I see all the terrible things in the world such as poverty and war, but he has the power to stop it but he doesn't." In conversation, Roman says that God probably exists, but that he does not know who or what God is.* It seems to me that Roman rejects not so much the existence of God, but what he has been taught about God. He has a suspicion that there is a God, but he is also aware that this God is unknown and probably unknowable, a notion that conflicts with the certainty underpinning the dogmatic statements made about God by priests and teachers. This creates confusion. However, Roman has no experience of God and has no compelling reason to believe in a God he finds is irrelevant to his life. He therefore has a 'null' relationship with God.

DISCUSSION

CONCEPTS

The 19 sixteen and seventeen-year-old students in this group express a variety of concepts, most of which highlight the mysterious, ineffable nature of God. Their responses detail their current resolution to the conflict between the public God taught in school and the private God of their experience, usually by setting aside the public God concepts and allowing their private God concepts to inform their theologising and their relationships with God. From this group come seven core concepts and seven ancillary concepts.

Table 8:1 – Core God Concepts of the Year Twelve Group

Core Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Presence	1	3	4
Force	3	0	3
Mystery/The Unknown	2	1	3
Creator/Caretaker	2	1	3
Higher/Divine Being	1	1	2
Nature	1	0	1
Agnosticism	1	2	3

The core concept of 'presence' appears in the work of Anthony, Guido, Alex, and Mary. The three boys experience this presence as an intimate, constant companion, guiding them in their lives. For Mary, this presence is a distant, transcendent, unknown being who has little influence on her life. 'The force' is a concept that appears in the work of Draconian Serenity, Gypsy, and Erin. The first two girls use the word *force* to denote the life-giving force of the universe, an energy that is the matrix within which everything exists. For the third girl, God is an unknown, greater force, or power. The concept of 'mystery' or 'the unknown' appears in the work of Raff, Felicity, and Teresa. These students conceive of God as the mysterious unknown at the centre of the universe, which intersects with their lives, but which cannot be comprehended. Kezza and Kurt Cobain think of God as a 'higher being' or 'divine being'. These concepts picture God as a transcendent, immutable, uninvolved being that exists, but has little relevance for everyday life. These four concepts, 'presence', 'force', 'mystery/the unknown', and 'higher/divine being', are all indefinite concepts that highlight the unquantifiable nature of God. The twelve students who hold these concepts plainly feel that God is something so wholly different from humanity that God cannot be named, described, or assigned an appropriate pronoun.[155] This notion of the ineffable nature of

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[155] Guido calls God "s/he", and Felicity asks, "Is God a he or she? …Is God even a someone?" Anthony, Alex, Raff, and Serenity answer Felicity's question by calling God "it".

God is in direct contrast to the concepts of God frequently mentioned in religious education classes and at Mass, where God is portrayed as a person, a male, a father, a king, a lord, and a shepherd. Rejection of these religious concepts is the catalyst that has prompted a re-evaluation of the meaning of God in the lives of these students, and led to the development of concepts that transcend the limited, male, human characteristics assigned to God by religion. Erricker and Erricker (1994:177) believe that the value of metaphors "depends on their usefulness. Their usefulness depends on their enabling power." Clearly, the concept of God espoused by religion has little enabling power in the lives of these young adults.

The two remaining concepts, 'creator/caretaker' and 'nature' are more definitive than the four concepts mentioned above, but less definitive than the traditional concepts to which these students are most frequently exposed. 'Nature' is similar to the abovementioned concept of 'force' in that it conceives of God as being a life force that pervades and sustains all living things. It differs in that, as Sally applies the concept, it refers only to the natural world on earth, and is therefore a more limited concept. 'Creator' and 'caretaker' name functions of God for which there is concrete evidence. John Zaritsky and Boof imagine God as a spiritual presence that creates and takes care of creation. Michelle's concept is that of a powerful, human male who created everything. This, however, causes her much confusion as "It is hard to believe that ONE man could create everything!!" It is this type of conflict that has caused her classmates to search for more satisfactory God concepts.

The final God concept category is 'agnosticism'. Alissa, John Smith, and Roman Polanski do not experience the presence of God in their lives, do not find meaning in the concepts of God they have been taught, and perceive much suffering and death in the world. These lead to a rejection of the God about which they have been taught, and a questioning of whether there exists anything to replace this God, or whether the whole 'God issue' is a fabrication.

Table 8:2 – Ancillary God Concepts of the Year Twelve Group

Ancillary Concept	Girls	Boys	Total
Guide	2	3	5
Watcher	2	1	3
The Unknown	1	2	3
Power	2	1	3
Friend	1	1	2
Spirit	1	0	1
Tyrant	1	0	1

As with the core concepts, the ancillary concepts mainly refer to God as an indefinite presence or being. The concept of 'guide' is used by Anthony, Guido, Felicity, John Zaritsky, and Boof to describe an action of God in their lives. God guides them to make the right decisions, to do what is right, and to become better people. 'Watcher' similarly names God's action of watching over creation, and is a complementary action to 'guide' for John Zaritsky and Boof. Mary employs the concept 'watcher' differently: For her, it refers to an impassive watching of people's actions. The mysterious, 'unknown' nature of God and the essential unknowability of God are ancillary concepts for Serenity, Anthony, and Alex. This concept names an attribute of God which in religious terms is often referred to *transcendent* and *ineffable*. Another attribute of God that appears as an ancillary concept is 'spirit'. Felicity utilises this concept to contrast the spiritual nature of God with the embodied, corporeal nature of humanity. 'Power' names another attribute of God. Mary, Michelle, and Kurt Cobain employ this concept to contrast God with comparatively powerless humanity. 'Friend' names a relationship with God. For Guido, God is an intimate, involved, loving friend upon whom he can always rely. In response, Guido is also God's friend. Felicity calls God "a good mate" because when she is in need, God acts in the way a good friend would by counselling and comforting her. Felicity, however, does not reciprocate. 'Tyrant' names a characteristic of God that appears in Erin's work (Fig. 8:8).

Erin says God "takes all the credit for everything good. … When things go well, people thank God. When things go badly, God's not to blame." God also "demands all this respect, and he wants everything, and he wants you to pray to him, and he wants you to be faithful to him, and he wants you to obey all **his** rules". This tyrannical attribute of God makes Erin angry, an emotion that is evident in her picture. [See page 211 for more of Erin's responses.] Erin's ideas about God come partly from her religious education and partly from her mother, who is "very, very into God". Erin rebels against her mother's God.

In her responses, she expresses her anger at God for allowing suffering in the world, and she expresses her frustration with her mother's beliefs and for not being allowed to blame God. At the same time, Erin is searching for a more balanced, just concept of God with which to replace the concept she rejects. In her interview she makes statements that illustrate three different levels of thinking. Firstly, she makes the above statements which reflect the God concept still strong in her mind, but which essentially she rejects. Secondly, she proffers the notion that God is "a greater force looking out for us", which reflects the God concept towards which she seems to be gravitating. Thirdly, she says that she really does not know in what she believes because she sees no evidence of a benevolent force "there for me or looking after me" and she sees much evidence that we live in "a generally pessimistic world where many are suffering or in pain". This represents the intermediate, searching phase of her conceptual shift. She is trying to reconcile her tentatively held new concept with the reality of life in the world.

Several students voiced their concerns about the role of religion in hindering their understanding of the God they experience. Raff and Alissa disagree with the church's emphasis on orthodoxy, that is, holding 'correct' beliefs and being involved in 'correct' forms of worship. In their opinion, God is more interested in orthopraxis, that is, "how you are as a person; how you treat other people". Gypsy says that for her "God is all about humanity and the world being as one". Different religions, "separating into different little groups, …defeats the purpose entirely". Guido says, "I don't particularly like the concept of religion. There's so many different religions around the world who all believe that they're right and the amount of deaths and things going on about that". Draconian Serenity rejects the concept of the duality between good and evil. For her, God transcends these. Teresa and Kezza have grave reservations about religion. Teresa says, "I don't think he [God] would have a church". Kezza added, "I think he would change the whole contraption. Because these laws are all made by priests and men who don't know what women go through anyway."

EXPERIENCES

The experiences of God of the year twelve students play a pivotal role in the development of their relationships with God and their concepts of God. Despite the fact that these students stress the mysterious, ineffable attributes of God, those who experience the presence of God in their lives find that these experiences can facilitate a close and meaningful relationship with God. Those who do not experience the presence of God in their lives tend to find God a distant, inexplicable phenomenon that is removed from their daily lives. Concepts of God seem to be the intellectual 'making

sense' of the experiences. This group of teenagers seems is comfortable in developing and expressing their personal theological stance and beliefs, which stem primarily from their experiences of God, coloured by their life experiences and personalities. Their religious education and faith life is either accepted or rejected depending on whether it contributes to an understanding of the experiences and evolving relationships with God, or conflicts with the students' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences of God. As with the previous groups, I have classified the experiences of this group under the headings 'none', 'subliminal', 'occasional', and 'everyday'.

Table 8:3 – Types of Experiences of the Year Twelve Group

Types of Experiences	Girls	Boys	Total
None	4	4	8
Subliminal	3	0	3
Occasional	4	1	5
Everyday	0	3	3

Alissa, Raff, Kurt, John Smith, Roman, Teresa, Mary, and Erin, do not experience the presence of God in their lives. The first five of these students have a 'null' relationship with God, Teresa's relationship with God is 'background', and Mary's and Erin's relationships are 'needs-based'. This group consists of equal numbers of boys and girls.

Three girls, Draconian Serenity, Kezza, and Michelle, have 'subliminal' experiences of God. They do not name what they experience as *God*, but they experience something out-of-the-ordinary. For Serenity, it is the awesome magnitude and complexity of the universe that triggers her experiences. Kezza feels something special in St Mary's Cathedral. Michelle says, "Every now and then you'll do something and it will be special to you … [and there will be] a 'God' feeling around it". These experiences are not significant enough to have much impact on the girls' lives. However, they are sufficiently significant to prevent the girls from rejecting God. These girls all have 'background' relationships with God.

Five students, Felicity, Sally, Gypsy, John Zaritsky, and Boof, have occasional experiences of God. Felicity and Boof experience the nearness of God in times of crisis, particularly death. Boof also occasionally experiences God as a quiet, guiding thought. John experiences God during Mass. Gypsy and Sally experience connectedness between themselves, others, and nature. Gypsy says that God is a power inside all humans that allows us to connect to each other. She feels this in nature and also in worship groups. She associates the experience of connectedness with God and this leads to the development of a 'dependent' relationship with God. Sally feels a connection with

existence. However, this is not something that she attributes to God; it is something that simply *is*. For Sally, God is in the 'background' of her life. Felicity's relationship with God is 'needs-based' and John and Boof have 'dependent' relationships with God.

Three boys, Alex, Anthony, and Guido, have everyday experiences of God. Anthony experiences God when he "chills out" and Guido experiences God "when I reflect on things and look at the things around me". For both these boys, a quieting of the mind and a detachment from thoughts of everyday concerns is the key mental requirement for the perceptive switch to occur. Alex speaks of experiencing God "as a father", always there to guide and help. He does not expand on what occurs to him mentally or physically to enhance this perception. Alex and Anthony have 'reciprocal' relationships with God and Guido has a 'partnership' relationship with God.

RELATIONSHIPS

This group's responses include many of the relationship categories encountered in previous groups. However, there is one relationship category that has not appeared before this. I have called it 'partnership'. Altogether, there are six relationship categories. They are, 'Null', 'Background', 'Needs-Based', 'Dependent', 'Reciprocal', and 'Partnership'.

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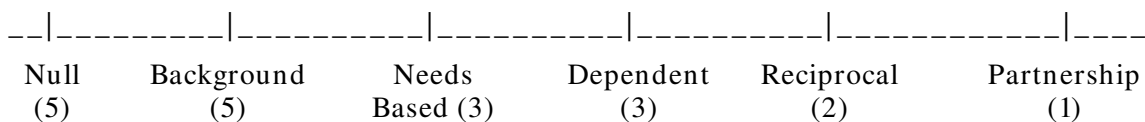| Null | Background | Needs | Dependent | Reciprocal | Partnership |
| (5) | (5) | Based (3) | (3) | (2) | (1) |

Fig. 8:9 - Continuum of Relationship Categories (Year Twelve)

Alissa, Raff, Kurt, John Smith, and Roman have 'null' relationships with God. They do not reject God; they merely do not perceive any connection between themselves and God. As Alissa says, "God has no bearing on my life". Alissa, John, and Roman are uncertain whether God exists; Raff thinks of God as 'the unknown'; Kurt imagines God as a 'higher being'. None of them has experience of God, and they feel no connection to a higher being.

Five girls, Teresa, Draconian Serenity, Kezza, Michelle, and Sally, relegate God to the 'background' of their lives. Serenity sums up this approach when she says, "My life's pretty complete. …I don't need to have a benevolent person looking over me." These girls recognise that there exists an unknown, higher being, but this being is not consciously experienced, and is conceptualised as so radically different from themselves, that there is no real connection between themselves and God.

Felicity, Mary, and Erin have 'needs-based' relationships with God. Felicity has 'occasional' experiences of God and the other two girls have no experiences of God. For these girls, God's main function in life is to grant requests. Therefore, they maintain a line of communication in the hope of having their prayers answered.

Gypsy, Boof, and John Zaritsky have 'dependent' relationships with God. For them, God is the 'force' or ground of our being (Gypsy), or 'creator/caretaker' (Boof and John). These concepts represent the students' interpretations of the 'occasional' experiences they have of the presence of God in their lives, a presence on which they feel they depend.

Alex, Anthony, and Guido have 'everyday' experiences of a 'presence' at work in their lives, guiding and helping them. They experience their dependence on this presence and they name this presence God. However, they are not content to take a passive, 'dependent' stance in regard to God. They do whatever they can to respond positively to God, out of a sense of gratitude. Alex and Anthony reciprocate God's involvement in their lives by doing what they believe God would wish them to do. Guido's relationship goes one step further: He speaks as one who has taken on himself the responsibility of a covenantal partnership. Guido makes himself open to God's promptings so that, as much as possible, God can act through him. He has a 'partnership' relationship with God.

Below is an overview of the relationships with God of the year twelve group.

Table 8:4 – Types of Relationship of the Year Twelve Group

Types of Relationship	Girls	Boys	Total
Null	1	4	5
Background	5	0	5
Needs Based	3	0	3
Dependent	2	1	3
Reciprocal	0	2	2
Partnership	0	1	1

There are equal numbers of girls and boys in the distant 'null' and 'background' types of relationships. There are more girls than boys in the 'needs-based' and 'dependent' categories, which is not surprising as girls tend to experience their dependence on, and need of, others, whereas boys tend to experience themselves as independent. There are three boys and no girls in the two closest and most intimate relationship categories. This seems to reflect the fact that, within this particular cohort, only boys have 'everyday' experiences of God. It seems that experience of God is a more important factor than gender in determining the degree of relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

The year twelve group of students displayed only a small range of concepts of God. For most of these students, transcendence and ineffability are the two most significant characteristics of God, with many of this group speaking of God as mystery, the unknown, a force, a presence, or a higher being. Even the three students who discussed their agnostic views commented that they did not know who or what God is. Only four students were more definite in their concepts of God. They related nature and the world around them to God, and envisaged God as creator, caretaker, and nature.

Another characteristic of this group is the appearance of a transition phase, where a student is in the process of abandoning concepts that are no longer functional, and adopting, or trying out, new concepts that more fully integrate the student's experiences of God and of the world. Often, this process involves the abandonment of taught religious concepts and elements of toxic faith. This type of transition can be seen in the responses of Teresa, Mary, Kezza, and Erin and is an example of Crawford and Rossiter's (1993:1-2) contention that

> Today's young people form their spirituality in ways that are different from those of previous generations; at least, different enough to have significant implications for classroom Religious Education. …Many young people can comfortably dissociate their search for a spirituality from the need to belong to any religion. They tend to locate *formal religion* in one corner of their lives and their *search for a spirituality* in another.

There are a number of elements that characterise the theologising of this group of students. One characteristic, mentioned above, is the reluctance of these students to offer definitive statements about God. God is essentially the transcendent unknown. Adopting this as a core concept involves the dismissal of definitive religious concepts previously learned, including the images of God as father, king, shepherd, male, and person. Instead, God is spoken of as *s/he* and *it*. Even when an image is expressed, for example Serenity's notion that "it makes more sense for God to be a mother" because "the whole creating thing" is like "women giving birth", the image is immediately negated, as with Serenity's comment that she calls God *It* because "I believe that God transcends all human understandings hence, gender."

Another characteristic of these students is their confidence in their ability to work out their own theological concepts. For example, Anthony, Guido, Alex, Serenity, Gypsy, and Sally independently arrived at their own version of the God concept 'ground of our being'. For them, God is the life force, the matrix, within which they exist. This is not a novel idea. It was expounded by Teilhard de Chardin almost a century ago. However, these students did not *learn* this concept; they *discovered* it. They express this notion

with confidence and certainty because it accurately names the God they experience. As Gunther-Heimbrock (1999:52) observed, people have the capacity "to develop their own theology", a capacity that is employed fully by several of these students.

The activity of creating their own theology also involves the abandonment of many taught religious concepts. This often leads to a negative evaluation of the spirituality of adolescents. Recently, in the local newspaper, there appeared an article reporting the concerns of a Catholic cleric who lectures in Catholic studies at a local university. He is reported to believe that "most students graduating from Catholic schools are 'baptised pagans' who reject the Church's teachings and say religion is irrelevant to their lives" (Hiatt, 2005). For these students, however, much of what they are taught about God seems unrelated to the God they experience and to whom they relate. The traditional concepts they are taught seem to them to be too narrow and dogmatic to accurately name or describe the transcendent unknown that permeates their lives. These students would agree with Scarlett and Perriello (1991:66):

> Our Western tradition has overemphasised the dogmatic element in religion; dogma is only a part of religion, perhaps even a minor part. Faith is not to be equated with belief. At the heart of the religious life is not so much dogma as what (William) James called a vivid sense of the 'reality of the unseen'.[156]

Ultimately, the issue depends on how one understands the role of religious education. If its role is to 'hand on the faith', then concern about the success of Catholic schools is valid, given that many students who attend Catholic schools do not affiliate themselves with the Catholic religion. There is, however, another way of perceiving the role of religious education. Groome (1980:22) claimed, "Religious education activity is a deliberate attending to the transcendent dimension of life by which a conscious relationship to an ultimate ground of being is promoted and enabled to come to expression". Thom (1993:35) maintained that one of the key issues in religious education is to "teach about God in such a way as to enable individuals to relate to a personal deity in accordance with each person's dignity and uniqueness". Liddy (2002:1) believed, "A fundamental responsibility of the classroom religious education curriculum should be to nurture the spiritual life of each one of these children". However, religious education does not have to be one or the other. Crawford &Rossiter (1993:1) wrote of "a *dual commitment*: to provide a religious education that does justice to the sponsoring church, while still fostering the spiritual development of young people". It seems to me that this is what is required in our religion-sponsored schools.

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[156] Marshall-Taylor (1996:67) also stated, "The transmission of doctrine rules supreme. As a result, very little thought has been given in the Church about ways of shifting the knowledge-heavy emphasis of Christian education and of cultivating children's existing spirituality. It is invariably assumed that this is a one-way process: children have always to be the recipients of adult wisdom".

CHAPTER NINE - PATTERNS

INTRODUCTION

My discoveries during the course of this study have strengthened my belief that spirituality is a highly individual aspect of a person's life. To be understood it must be approached holistically. When I approached my data in this way, it became apparent that no two respondents are alike. Each of the one hundred participants in this study responded in a unique way. This uniqueness invited a case study approach to analysing and interpreting the data. Indeed, my initial analysis of the data was on an individual case basis, enabling me to get a feel for the spiritual focus and orientation of each respondent. However, as the focus of this study is on the range of ways students experience, relate to, and conceptualise God, it became necessary for me to move beyond the individual expressions of spirituality and to explore the commonalities and links that existed within the data. When approached from this perspective, the data is seen to contain similarities, many of which form patterns.

In this chapter I present the key findings of this study. Firstly, I examine the **public God/private God** dichotomy that is evident in the data. Secondly, I present the **types of relationship** apparent in the data. From there I explore the notion of the **centrality of experiences** of God. Next I set out the key findings in relation to the respondents' **concepts**. I then discuss the **evolution** of experiences, relationships, and concepts. From there I present some **gender patterns** that appear in the data, followed by the **language patterns** employed by my respondents when conversing about spiritual matters. Finally, the **implications for religious education** of this research are presented.

In this chapter I again employ specific codes. When referring to the responses of a particular participant, I nominate the year level of the respondent and the page number on which his/her comments can be found. However, for the sake of simplicity, instead of writing Gypsy (year twelve, page 260), I write Gypsy (12:260). Also in this chapter I use numerals to nominate numbers, and I employ the method of numbering individual key points.

'PUBLIC' VERSUS 'PRIVATE' GOD

One of the key findings of this study is the presence of two co-existing patterns of thinking and speaking about God. One of these patterns reflects the official teachings of the religion and includes the language, symbols, images, and concepts of the Catholic religion which the children are taught. The other pattern reflects the personal, idiosyncratic concepts, images, and symbols of each respondent, and flows primarily from his or her experiences of God and relationship with God. This finding is not new. Nipkow and Schweitzer (1991:97-98) commented that their respondents differentiated "between *the religion of the Church* and *their own religion as individuals*". Hull 2005:10) observed, "A gulf has opened up today between institutional religion and a personal religion". Torstenson-Ed (2006:41, 42) found her respondents had "a private God. ... They speak to God in solitude, a personal everyday God, a private religion".

This notion of personal religion as opposed to institutional religion was first proposed by William James in 1902. According to Hyde (2004:41), James' 'personal religion' is today more commonly known as 'spirituality'. Hamer (2004:13) noted that religion and spirituality are two different types of phenomena. His research led him to conclude that spirituality is biologically in-built and is inherited. Religion, on the other hand, is culturally determined and is transmitted through "*memes*: self-replicating units of culture, ideas that are passed on from one individual to another through writing, speech, ritual, and imitation". The nature, origin, and mode of transmission of spirituality and religion are different. This may explain why adolescents seem to have little difficulty in separating their spiritual lives from their religious lives.

This separation of personal spirituality from formal religion is apparent at all ages among the respondents of this study. It can be seen in the conflicting language and concepts the respondents employ.[157] Among the preprimary and year three respondents, the two different ways of thinking and speaking about God seem to co-exist, each having a different function to fulfil. Within religious education classes or formal church assemblies, formal or 'correct' language and concepts prevail. However,

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[157] For example, Domenic (appendix, Fig. pre:5) drew a picture of his friend, Jesus, and himself going to buy ice-cream. However, Domenic (pre:107) wrote "God lives up in heaven coz my mum said". His experience of an immanent friend clashes with his mother's traditional concept of a transcendent being. Soni (3:141) held the private concept of a tyrannical God who sent his son to his death, yet he later gave the 'correct' answer by saying that "God is a loving father". Sarah (3:140) conceived of God as a fairy queen, but said that God is "a loving father". Brendan (6:174) drew a picture of a powerful, loving man in heaven, representing what he had been taught about God. His second picture, which reflected his private concepts and was drawn in response to my request for a picture that represented what **he** believed, was of God on the gallows. John Smith (appendix, Fig. 12:10) drew a picture containing symbols of power and peace, representing what he had been taught about God. When he realised that I wanted to know **his** ideas, he drew a big, red cross through his picture, indicating that his private concept negated all he had drawn.

in naming their experiences of God, their relationships with God, and the meaning God has in their lives, personal concepts and symbols, and everyday language, prevail. Appearing in year six and becoming more pronounced among the year nine group, the discrepancies between personal spirituality and formal religion cause conflict and confusion among a number of the pre-adolescent and early adolescent respondents. (For example, questioning, doubt, and confusion caused by a clash between personal God concepts and formal, religious God concepts appear in the responses of 4 year six respondents and in 7 year nine respondents.) The year twelve respondents tend to exhibit the pattern mentioned by Crawford and Rossiter (1993:2) of locating "*formal religion* in one corner of their lives and their *search for a spirituality* in another". These students give precedence to their own experiences of God in informing their worldview and their everyday choices. They clearly draw on influences other than religion and religious education to conceptualise and name the God they experience. (These influences will be discussed later.)

THEIR OWN THEOLOGY

Related to the separation of spirituality and religion is another tendency among my participants, a process Gunther-Heimbrock (1999:52) called developing "their own theology". This process of creative playing with theological principles can be seen in many of the responses. Four of the most striking examples are: Katie (3:142) who thinks that "God is inside you and he's having fun everywhere and he's having fun with everyone at the same time. … God shares himself in a hundred dimensions maybe"; Russell (6:165, 177) who drew his version of Michelangelo's <u>The Creation of Man,</u> and independently arrived at the theological proposition of synergism; Homer (9:190) who believes that "God lives on Earth in many forms through reincarnation"; and Serenity (12:210) who declared that God is "forever shrouded in incomprehensibility". This theologising is based on the respondents' experiences of God and draws on images and concepts gleaned from culture and from other, non-Christian religions. Other researchers have found a similar tendency among their respondents. For example, Janssen et al. (1994) noted that only a small number of their respondents believed in a traditional way, and that most of them were constructing their own kind of religion.

Among my respondents, "their own theology" exhibited a number of patterns. One of these involves the use of concepts of God. Many respondents understand on some level that "No image, symbol or word about God is ever an adequate expression of our understanding of God" (Darragh, 1991:13), and that "There is not one image that can totally encapsulate all that God is" (Nolan, 1996:19). This guiding principle can be seen

most clearly in Serenity's response. Serenity (12:210) says that "God will forever be alien to human understanding". Then she says, "I don't believe God is a father. To me it makes more sense for God to be a mother" because "the whole creating thing" is like "women giving birth." Immediately following this comment, she declares that she has "settled on referring to God as an It, for I believe that God transcends all human understandings hence, gender." For Serenity, God is "an external force" that is "everywhere in the universe". The universe is "the total embodiment of God. … God resides in the particles". This response contains four different concepts of God, each of which says something about God and is then negated by another of the statements.

Many of the year 9 and year 12 respondents conceptualised God in an indefinite way as a higher being, mystery, the unknown, presence, or force. There were 21 students (more than half the year 9 and year 12 groups) who employed one of these concepts, indicating a distinct conceptual pattern. Lane (1990:42) noted, "St Augustine points out that if you have understood, then what you have understood is not God. Aquinas states that the one thing we know about God is that we do not know God". This doctrine of 'the radical incomprehensibility of God' is something with which these students would agree. This contrasts with traditional theistic Christian beliefs which are still widely held, and are reflected in the language employed in religious services.

> Theism … views God as the Supreme Being who made all things and who rules all things. Although architect and governor of the world, it is essential to God's deity that 'he' (the theistic God is always referred to in male terms) be essentially unrelated to this world and unaffected by what happens in it so as to remain independent from it. … The theistic God is modelled on the pattern of an earthly absolute monarch (Johnson, 1992:19).

The examples above indicate that the adolescents in this study are most likely to deny not only that God is a monarch, but also that God is male, and that God is a person. For them, God transcends these limited notions and can only be hinted at, not named.

A second pattern apparent in the theologising of the respondents is the recurrent theme of relationship. Among all the groups, this theme appears as awareness and valuing of their relationships with God.[158] This finding is congruent with Hay and Nye's (1998) findings. Babin (1965:185) also noted that his respondents' comments were "personal replies about a being in relation with mankind [sic.]". A theme closely associated with relationship is that of connectedness and interconnectedness. The respondents evince

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[158] For example, Jessica (pre:107) depicted herself as a woman at the foot of the cross, suffering with Jesus and supporting him with her presence; Rosie (3:144) lives in intimate connection with a loving friend; Rebecca (6:163) thinks of God as "my best friend" who is "really close to me"; Innocence (9:194) values God like "another parent"; and Alex (p. 209) likens God to "a good father". Six of the seventeen responses in the data (more than one third) come from boys. Relationship with God is of great importance to boys as well as girls. Evidently, gender is less important as an influence on concepts than experience of God.

a clear pattern of experiencing and conceptualising reality as an interconnected whole.[159] These responses echo the findings of Heller (1986:111, 125) who reported that in his participants' work there was a theme of "a deity who weaves his work through human intimacy", and through the "connectedness, and the interconnectedness of lives".

In the respondents' formation of their own theology there is a third pattern – a process of experiencing confusion and conflict, rejecting unsatisfactory concepts, searching for more adequate concepts, and trying out a new concept. [160] This process does not occur for all students. For those who do experience it, it is more common among adolescents, and most often found among students who have low intensity experiences of God. Some of these students find that the existence of cruelty and suffering challenge their notion of a benevolent God. For others, their former, more concrete God concepts no longer adequately name the God they experience or imagine.

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[159] This perception can be seen in a basic form in the responses of Skye (3:131) who drew creation, which consisted of the earth upon which stood the people; the sun, rain, and lightning, symbolising the natural elements required by the people for their physical sustenance; and Mary and Jesus, who represent God's spiritual assistance to the people of earth. Above them all is God, who "lives everywhere", and who is "up the top of the world looking down on everyone" to see if everything's "all right with his people". Rose (6:169) and Eric (6:170) portray their apprehension of the radical and essential connectedness of God and reality. Lavenita (6:166) expresses her belief that "everyone's your brother and sister". Babi (9:187) describes God as the sun and humanity as the planets, forever revolving around, and dependent on, the sun. Daddy's Little Girl (9:193) perceives the interconnectedness between people, commenting, "We should all be together in love". Guido (12:208) believes that not only is God a part of us, but "we are a part of God as well. We reflect God." For Guido, God, humanity, and creation are all parts of an interconnected existence. Sally (12:216) says, "I believe in … people being part of Earth and connected with nature". Serenity (12:210) imagines God as (among other things) a life force that creates and sustains all life. Her expectations of herself are that she should live in harmony with this force. Gypsy (12:211) also thinks of God as a force within nature. She says she is an interconnected part of existence and that God is "part of my relationships with the world I'm in, with myself, with nature, with other people". She speaks of a "common connected sort of feeling" that she sometimes experiences.

[160] Confusion and conflict appear in a number of responses. Alissa (12:217) says, "I'm really conflicted. I don't know whether there is or there isn't" a God. Wednesday (9:187) finds that the terrorism, cruelty, and poverty, in the world conflict with her experiences of someone who is "just there to help me get through things." Dream Girl (9:192) says, "I know God is here and I've heard about him and I want to know him", but "he seems unreal". Mary (12:210) says, "I don't really know what to believe. …It's confusing". She has questions and doubts about the existence of a loving God when she experiences "tough times" in her life and in the lives of family members. Brendan's responses (6:171) reveal the conflict and confusion he has felt for some time, and the rejection of concepts which he is currently experiencing. Brendan does not believe in many of the miracle stories and, as he has no way to determine which of the bible stories is 'true', he angrily says he does not believe any of them. Mickey (9:189) expresses ideas similar to Brendan's. He says, "I'm very confused. I don't really believe in all that spiritual stuff. …I don't believe in God and how he does all the miracles." Then he adds, "I believe in a higher being. …He's an energy." Mickey has found a more satisfactory concept. Teresa's responses (12:213) exemplify the searching phase of transition from one God concept to another. Teresa drew the sun, partly covered by white clouds. The sun represents God and the clouds represent her questions about God. Teresa says, "I hope that I will one day be able to understand who GOD is and find him in me when I am ready, sort of like a change in life". Erin's responses (12:211) show how an individual can experience several phases simultaneously. Erin's old concept of God is that God "takes all the credit for everything good. …When things go well, people thank God. When things go badly, God's not to blame." Although this concept still has a strong hold on Erin's thoughts and feelings, she rejects it, saying that she does not know in what she believes. Later in the interview, however, Erin reveals a new concept that she has been considering, that of God as "a greater force looking out for us". Erin is experimenting with this concept, checking to see if it fits with reality as she experiences it. At one point she states this concept confidently. Later, she says that she sees no evidence of a benevolent force "there for me or looking after me" and she sees much evidence that we live in "a generally pessimistic world where many are suffering or in pain". Erin is trying to reconcile her tentatively-held new concept with the reality of her world.

A fourth pattern to appear in the theological principles adopted by the participants is the implicit acceptance of the supremacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy. Not one of the respondents mentioned or implied that **what** one believes is important. In contrast, many students conveyed the implicit notion that **how** one lived one's spirituality was of great importance.[161] What is important to these students is integrity, congruence between what one believes and how one lives.

In summary, the personal theology of my respondents is characterised by:

1) an unwillingness to name God in any terms other than 'the unknown' or 'mystery';
2) a sense of relationship and interrelatedness;
3) a process of actively rejecting older, less adequate concepts, and searching for concepts more able to name the meaning God has in their lives; and
4) a decided preference for orthopraxis over orthodoxy.

However, not all respondents exhibit this pattern of creating their own theology. Some find that the language and concepts of their religion satisfactorily name the meaning of God for them. David (6:163) provides an example of this kind of response. Other participants get caught in a phenomenon known as 'toxic faith'.

TOXIC FAITH

Arterburn and Felton (1991) coined the term "toxic faith" to denote "a caricature of faith" (p. xvii), "naïve faith" (p. 21), and "false belief" (p. 20). Arterburn, a Christian psychiatrist, investigated the role of faith in mental health, and discovered that "toxic faith" plays a part in mental ill-health. Examples he provides of toxic faith include the beliefs that "God's love and favour depend on my behaviour"; "God is too big to care about me"; "Problems in your life result from some particular sin"; "If you have real faith, God will heal you or someone you are praying for"; and "Material blessings are a sign of spiritual strength" (ibid:98). Erin (12:211, 221) exhibits several types of 'toxic faith'. She believes that God "takes all the credit for everything good". She also ponders, "If …somebody dies, is it because I've been lying so much or is it because I wasn't nice to this person, or is it my fault? …They say that everything happens for a

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[161] For example, Sally (12:216) believes that the rules of the church are not the rules of God. God would not emphasise going to church as much as being true to oneself. Lavenita (6:166) believes that God expects us "to look after everything he's made because everyone's your brother and sister. …I expect myself to …do whatever I have to love and help everyone and to be a better person". Daddy's Little Girl (9:193) believes that people should "spread the love because people don't show each other enough love. …They disrespect each other. …It's not what God intended for us to be like." Alex (12:209) thinks people should "do what is best for others and what is best for ourselves". Guido (12:208) says, "You've got to give and take"; because you are a part of God, you have to reflect God in your life, "to live through him as well". Decisions are "ultimately up to you", but they should reflect the presence of God in your life.

reason and you have to wonder if the connection with something as bad as death has to do with something you've done."[162] Other examples of toxic faith appear in the data. Some students misinterpret religious teachings (for example, Soni 3:138) which leads to the development of toxic beliefs about God. Some students project onto God parental expectations (for example, Timothy's belief that God expects him to "help his mum with the work" – 3:132). Other students, most notably Annabel (pre:111) and Makayla (pre:104), come in contact with the toxic belief that God is male, and deduce from this 'fact' that, as females, they are less acceptable to God than males.

There seem to be a number of reasons why toxic faith occurs. A respondent can develop toxic faith as a result of continued contact with someone who exhibits this type of faith. A respondent who is taught concepts which are cognitively too advanced may develop toxic faith. Adults who use God as a 'policeman' to enforce desired behaviour in their children can foster in them a toxic faith. Common religious misunderstandings, like the maleness of God, can be transmitted to children who may then develop toxic faith. There are clear implications for the teaching of religious education and for the development of children's spirituality in this finding.

A 'public' God and a 'private' God can be clearly distinguished in the data. Among the respondents of this study, there is a clear disparity between their own spirituality as expressed in their experiences and concepts, and the language and concepts of their religion which they are taught. Of the two ways, the personal experiences and their concomitant private concepts have precedence in the lives of most respondents. Nipkow and Schweitzer (1991:98) also noticed "the affirmation of individual faith over faith of the Church" in the responses of their adolescent participants. Rizzuto (1991:51) stated, "For the believer it is that subjective God that counts, because it is that God who is the specific object of a religious experience." She also noted, "The conceptual God of official religion and of many religious studies is but an aspect of the experientially richer God of private life" (ibid:52). This statement reflects James' (1902/1982) belief that personal religious experience is the primordial experience, with institutional religion a secondary phenomenon. Hay (1995:1270) also commented, "Spirituality is rooted in direct experience. It is only secondarily the subject of reflection or talk".

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[162] Another student who has relatives with toxic faith is John Smith. He described an occasion of a family gathering in late 1999. His aunt and uncle "were telling us how at midnight, the whole world was going to just disappear. …Everyone would be gone. …It had some connection with Jesus". [John is referring to the apocalyptic end-of-the–world beliefs that appeared at the end of the millennium.] "So being the rude parents my parents are, they said, 'Well, can we have your car keys and your house keys?' …Like a joke. But they [the aunt and uncle] were dead serious; they were dead serious that the world was going to end. And I just wondered how they felt the morning after when they were still alive." This example of toxic faith is one of the influences in John's life that causes him to take an agnostic view of religion and its God.

TYPES OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The importance of relationship with God is declared by a number of scholars. Theologian Dorothee Solle (1990:1) believed, "the object of theology can only be the relationship between God and human beings". Oser (1991:6) asserted, "Relationship to God is a crucial element of one's spirituality. This relationship provides a means to make sense of life, especially the incomprehensible and tragic elements of life." I concur with Solle and Oser, and find it puzzling that I was unable to discover any research that specifically investigates the types of relationship children have with God. This study, therefore, set out to discover something of the nature of the relationships the respondents had with God.

Table 9:1 – Types of Relationship of the Five Groups

Relationship	Prep.		Year 3		Year 6		Year 9		Year 12		Total	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
Negative	-		-		0	1	-		-		**0**	**1**
Null	1	0	0	2	-		1	1	1	4	**3**	**7**
Background	0	1	1	4	-		0	4	5	0	**6**	**9**
Duty-Based	-		-		1	4	-		-		**1**	**4**
Needs-Based	0	1	-		-		-		3	0	**3**	**1**
Supplier/Consumer	-		1	1	1	2	1	1	-		**3**	**4**
Separate Lives	2	4	4	1	2	1	2	2	-		**10**	**8**
Parent/Child	6	1	3	3	-		-		-		**9**	**4**
Dependent	-		-		2	3	4	3	2	1	**8**	**7**
Reciprocal	1	0	3	1	3	0	1	0	0	2	**8**	**3**
Partnership	-		-		-		-		0	1	**0**	**1**

I perceived 11 categories of relationship in the data. Most of these form pairs that are similar in most points, resulting in 6 essentially different types of relationship. 'Negative' and 'null' relationships occur only when respondents do not experience the presence of God (see Table 9:3). They either question the existence of God or find God irrelevant. To them, relationship with God is non-existent. It seems that the combination of the lack of experiences of God, the low esteem in which religious matters are generally held, the clash between 'religious facts' and 'scientific facts', and the secularising effect of culture contribute to the development of 'negative' and 'null' relationships among the respondents. The difference between the two is that 'null' relationships are accompanied by neutral feelings, whereas 'negative' relationships are

expressed in negative emotional tones. Belonging to these groups are 3 girls and 8 boys indicating a greater tendency for boys to perceive their relationships with God as being distant and non-involving. The preprimary group and years 3, 6, and 9 had either 1 or 2 members whose responses fell into these groups. Year 12, however, had 5 responses in this category, 4 of whom were boys. This may be an expression of the tendency of male adolescents to distance themselves from relationships with others in their psychological quest for independence.

'Background' and 'duty-based' name minimal relationships with God. Some of the students evincing these types of relationships do not experience the presence of God, but accept the existence of God because significant others assure them of this fact. In addition, they want to keep their options open just in case there is a God who can help them. Other students have 'subliminal' or 'occasional' experiences of God, but take God for granted. These respondents are the ones who treat most of the people in their lives this way, as means to an end. God is one other means in their lives. For these students, God is in the background of their lives and is only recalled when they experience a time of need. 'Duty-based' relationship has one additional element: the respondent feels a need to fulfil certain obligations, like 'obeying God's rules'. The responses of 7 girls and 13 boys fall into these categories, again indicating the tendency of boys to hold distant relationships with God. Years 3, 6, and 12 had 5 responses in these categories and year 9 had 4 responses in this category. However, in the preprimary group only one respondent had a 'background' relationship. The most likely reason for this is the tendency of these young children to perceive undifferentiated reality. They experience themselves as participants in reality, including spiritual and magical reality.

'Needs-based' and 'supplier/consumer' name an orientation towards God based on the idea that God is 'the giver of good things'. 'Needs-based' refers to responses where students interact with God only when they experience need. 'Supplier/consumer' contains the added dimension that respondents expect God to supply their (usually materialistic) desires. These types of relationship seem to occur for two reasons. In respondents who have no experience of God or 'subliminal' experiences of God, the possibility that there is a God who can give them what they want is sufficient reason for them to turn to God when they desire something. This tendency is reinforced by their religious education which encourages them to pray to God for what they need.[163] In students who have 'occasional' experiences of God, a different process is at work. These students experience God mainly when they are in times of crisis or need. Naturally, they develop the notion that God is the one who is there in times of need. Instinctively,

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[163] Children and adolescents in our materialistic society often confuse 'want' with 'need'.

they turn to God during these times, but neglect to reflect on these experiences, thank God for God's help, or attempt to reciprocate. This reflects the influence of our consumerist society with its 'take what you can get' mentality. Another influence seems to be the taught concepts of God that emphasise God's transcendent immutability and self-sufficiency and which implies that God needs and wants nothing from humankind. There were 6 girls and 5 boys who related to God this way. The girls' responses are evenly divided between the two categories, but of the boys' responses, 4 belong to the 'supplier/consumer' category. This may indicate the need of boys to feel a greater degree of control and command, whereas girls are more comfortable with feelings of dependence. Each of the 5 respondent groups had 1, 2, or 3 responses in these categories, signifying that this way of relating to God is not age related.

The category 'separate lives' stands alone. It is based on an awareness of the existence and presence of God, which the individual seems unable to integrate into everyday life. Almost all these students have 'subliminal' or 'occasional' experiences of God (see Table 9:3). However, when the experiential moment is over, the respondents return to their everyday lives, of which God is not a part. The spiritual nature of God and the transitory nature of the experiences seem to provide insuperable barriers to the integration of the experiences of God into the mundane lives of the respondents. There were 10 girls and 8 boys who responded this way, indicating no evident gender-related pattern. The number of respondents who evince this type of relationship with God shows a tendency to decrease with age. The highest number, 6, occurs in the preprimary group, while the year 12 group has no responses in this category. This may reflect the growing cognitive ability of the respondents to integrate life experiences into their worldview.

The categories of 'parent/child' and 'dependent' name relationships with God of which the chief characteristic is awareness of existential dependence on God. Many of these respondents have 'subliminal' or 'occasional' experiences of God which lead them to an awareness of the importance of God in their lives and of their dependence on God's goodness, help, and guidance. This awareness leads the younger respondents in the preprimary and year three groups to relate to God as a parent, the most important person in their lives and the person on whom they depend for the necessities of life. The respondents aged ten or over express this awareness through concepts that emphasise the radical dependence of humanity on God, like those of Simon (6:166) and Eric (6:170). The experiences of God of these respondents combined with the religious teaching of the transcendent power of God lead these students to an awareness of their own dependent nature and of the life-giving and life-sustaining role of God. There were

17 girls and 11 boys who related to God in this way, again reflecting the greater tendency of girls to accept their dependent relationships with others. The incidence of this type of relationship tends to decrease with age, with the preprimary group reporting 7 such relationships and the year 12 group reporting only 3. Again, the psychological need of adolescent males to develop their independence (a process that also involves disavowing notions of dependence) could account for this finding.

'Reciprocal' and 'partnership' are terms that denote relationships with God characterised by awareness both of the respondents' dependence on God and of God's need of their services. All but 2 of these respondents had 'everyday' experiences of God (see Table 9:3). These experiences engender in the respondents a close bond with God that is characterised by awareness of God's importance in their lives, gratitude for God's presence, help and guidance, and determination to do all they can to reciprocate God's love by being the best people they can be. The 'partnership' category differs from the 'reciprocal' category in that the commitment is more conscious and formal and the respondent's self-image is of being an 'instrument of God' or, as I prefer to call it, God's junior partner. (I use this term because junior partners, unlike instruments, make a conscious commitment to live in a particular way consistent with the wishes and needs of their senior partner.) The responses of 8 girls and 4 boys fall into these categories, supporting the contention of many researchers that girls conceive of God as being closer to themselves than do boys. There is no pattern of increase or decrease in the frequency of this type of relationship with age (see table 9:1). This finding refutes the conclusion of Eshleman et al. (1999) who found that children who were older perceived God as closer. In this study, the greatest number of 'reciprocal' relationships was reported in the year 3 group of 7 and 8-year-old children, a finding that probably reflects the personalities of these children rather than any particular age pattern.

There is a variety of types of relationship with God apparent in the responses of the participants. These range from a rejection of any form of relationship with God (however God is conceived) to a close, reciprocal partnership with One who is known and loved. The single most significant influence on the type of relationship participants will develop is the nature and degree of their experiences of God.

THE CENTRALITY OF EXPERIENCE

A third key finding of this study is the centrality of experiences of God in informing the spirituality of the respondents (as expressed in their experiences, relationships, and concepts of God). There is a clear correlation between the frequency and intensity of respondents' experiences, and the degree of closeness of their relationships with God. These experiences and relationships, in turn, influence the respondents' concepts of God. This understanding is supported by Nelson (1996:32) who maintained that relationships are built up on the experiences of the individual with significant others (in this case, God) and that "We internalize an image of a person in terms of our relations to that person".

In this study, I placed the experiential responses of my participants into one of 4 categories, depending on the frequency and intensity of the experiences. The 'none' category (25% of responses) represents students who had not felt the presence of God. The 'subliminal' category (26% of responses) represents students who seem to have had low-intensity spiritual experiences of which they are largely unaware. Over a third of the respondents (36% of responses) reported 'occasional' experiences of the presence of God, sometimes as a gentle presence only felt when the mind becomes disengages from everyday concerns, and sometimes in response to crisis or need. These latter experiences were accompanied by an intensity that impressed itself so clearly on the mind of the respondent that it could be vividly recalled years later. Some students (13% of the responses) had 'everyday' experiences of the presence of God in their lives. Many of these experiences were less intense than those in the 'occasional' category, but they occurred more frequently. It is this frequency and the familiarity it engenders that lead to these experiences greatly affecting the lives of the participants. These figures and their distribution are presented in the table below.

Table 9:2 – Types of Experience of the Five Groups

Experience	Prep.		Year 3		Year 6		Year 9		Year 12		Total	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
None	1	0	2	6	0	3	2	3	4	4	**9**	**16**
Subliminal	5	5	4	1	1	3	1	3	3	0	**14**	**12**
Occasional	3	2	4	2	6	5	4	5	4	1	**21**	**15**
Everyday	1	0	2	3	2	0	2	0	0	3	**7**	**6**

There is no discernible pattern of increase or decrease in reported experience of God through the year levels. This indicates that experiences of God are not linked to age. There is, however, a detectable pattern related to gender which will be discussed in the section on gender differences.

There is a pattern of correlation between experiences of God and relationships with God. The table below compares the data relating to these two elements.

Table 9:3 – Comparison of Experience and Relationship Categories

Experience	None		Sub.		Occas.		Every.	
Relationship	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
Negative or Null	3	8	-		-		-	
Background or Duty-Based	2	7	4	2	1	4	-	
Needs-Based or Supplier/Consumer	3	1	0	2	3	2	-	
Separate Lives	1	0	4	6	5	2	-	
Parent/Child or Dependent	-		5	2	11	7	1	2
Reciprocal or Partnership	-		1	0	1	0	6	4

The most noticeable correlations occur with the most distant and the closest degrees of relationship. All participants with 'negative' or 'null' relationships with God have no recollection of ever experiencing the presence of God. In contrast, 10 of the 12 students who have 'reciprocal' or 'partnership' relationships with God also have 'everyday' experiences of God. Clearly, frequent experiences of the nearness of God lead to the development of close relationships with God.

The most frequently occurring types of relationship with God are 'parent/child' or 'dependent' relationships. These are most frequently held by respondents who have 'occasional' experiences of God which tend to occur in moments of crisis or need. If respondents' most frequent experiences of God are when God helps them in times of need, it is natural that they will be more vividly aware of their dependence on God's help than of any other aspect of their relationship with God. The second most frequently occurring types of relationship are 'background' or 'duty-based'. These relationships occur most frequently in conjunction with no experience of God, which explains why these students find it easy to dismiss God from most of their lives. There are also 5 participants who have 'occasional' experiences of God, but still maintain 'background' relationships with God. One reason for this is the influence of lifestyle.[164]

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[164] For example, Felicity comes from a well-to-do family and is accustomed to getting whatever she wants. It is relatively easy for her, therefore, to take God for granted.

'Separate lives' relationships occur mainly with 'subliminal' and 'occasional' experiences of God. These 18 students, who occasionally spend time with God but consider God as separate from their lives, occasionally experience God's presence. 'Needs-based' and 'supplier/consumer' relationships occur mostly when respondents have no experience of God, but pray for what they need in the hope God does exist. Some of these respondents have 'occasional' experiences of God's help in times of need and therefore relate to God primarily as 'the one to whom I turn in times of need'.

There is a clear correlation between frequency and intensity of experience of God and degree of closeness of relationship with God. In fact, a key finding of this study is that relationship with God is more dependent on experience of God than on any other factor, including age, gender, or life experiences.

EXPERIENTIAL TRIGGERS

The participants who have 'occasional' experiences of God speak of specific occasions or occurrences that trigger their experiences. Some students have an affinity with nature.[165] These experiences are gentle and of low intensity. As the students describe them, they appear to be moments when a person becomes aware of another layer of existence, an unseen 'something there' that permeates concrete reality and brings with it a sense of oneness or connectedness with oneself, with the universe, or with God. Another condition which acts as an experiential trigger in many of the respondents is that of being mentally unfocussed.[166] These experiences also are gentle and of low intensity. Times of solitude are mentioned by a number of girls as occasions that precipitate their experiences of God.[167] These girls talk about being alone, often in their bedroom, a place where they can relax and be private. Their experiences are of a quiet presence with them, befriending them. Specifically religious occasions are nominated by several students as experiential triggers. There are 5 students[168] who find that they experience the nearness of God in church during religious ceremonies, and times of prayer are mentioned by 2 respondents[169] who experience the nearness of God when

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[165] For Timothy (3:132), Katalin (3:253), Patra (3:133), Jeremy (3:141), Michelle (6:163), Mickey (9:189), Innocence (9:194), Gypsy (12:211), and Sally (12:216), being in a natural setting precipitates an experience of God.

[166] Anthony (12:208) says that he experiences God when he "chills out", his way of describing defocusing his mind. Makayla (pre:104), Mario (pre:104), Domenic (pre:107), Jessica (pre:107), and Em (pre:112) speak about play as the time when they feel God close to them. At such times the children's minds are unfocussed and they are happy, two circumstances which create the appropriate mental state for experience of God to occur. Patra (3:133) and Emma (3:131) feel God close to them when they are in bed at night. At these times, the girls are approaching the liminal phase between waking and sleeping.

[167] These include Jade (pre:108), Renae (pre:109), Lavenita (6:166), Dream Girl (9:192), Innocence (9:194), and Paddle Pop (9:195).

[168] These are Domenic (pre:107), Jeremy (3:141), Babi (9:187), Gypsy (12:211), and John (12:218).

[169] These are Tom (6:167) and Kayla (6:168).

they pray, and 2 others[170] who feel the presence of God when God answers their prayers. Only the first 5 of these students experience God in the presence of others. The remaining 4 speak of private prayer time when they experience God. There are 7 students who find they experience the presence of God when they are in need of guidance, comfort, or reassurance.[171] In all of these responses there is a heightened level of emotional intensity that accompanies both the felt need and the experience of a 'spiritual encounter' with God. The most often reported occurrence that accompanies experiences of the presence of God is times of crisis.[172] All of these respondents speak of a time when a crisis shocked them out of their normal, everyday awareness, and precipitated an experience both of their own need and of God's empathetic, comforting, empowering presence. Times of crisis trigger the most intense experiences, both of the felt sense of being in dire need and of the presence of God, responding to that need.[173] Psychologists, like Hutsebaut (1972) and Nelson (1996), maintain that children imagine the God they need. I believe that children experience a God who responds to them according to their needs.

In summary, the occasions that precipitate 'occasional' experiences of God among my respondents are (in descending order of frequency of occurrence):

1) experiences of times of crisis;
2) times spent in nature;
3) experiences of particular religious occasions;
4) times of being mentally 'switched off';
5) times of emotional need; and
6) times of solitude.

Of the 52 specific responses mentioned above, 47 occurred when the respondent was alone. Only 5 of these experiences occurred when the respondent was in the company of others. This finding is consonant with that of Hay (1979) who reported that a majority of religious experiences occur during periods of solitude.

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[170] These are Joe (6:165) and Russell (6:165).

[171] These include Hannah (6:162) and Megan (6:163) who experience the presence of God when they are in need of guidance; for Rebecca (6:163) and Kristin (6:169) this occurs when they are feeling lonely or sad; and "tough times" of conflict, anger, and sadness precipitate experiences of God for Wednesday (9:187), Babi (9:187), and Hue (9:191).

[172] Daddy's Little Girl (9:193) and Felicity (12:212) had both recently experienced the death of loved ones and both mention being comforted by God's presence at the time. The death of loved ones were also occasions when Homer (9:190), Innocence (9:194), Paddle Pop (9:195), Travolta (9:195), and Boof (12:214) vividly recall experiencing the comforting and guiding presence of God. David (9:188) and Spoonfish (9:188) report times when a parent was very ill as occasions when they felt God close to them. Henry (3:132) speaks of a time when he was lost and God comforted him. Jasmine (3:134) mentions a time when her dad smacked her and God cuddled her. David (6:163) recalls experiencing God's presence when he is being bullied at school.

[173]. Tamminen (1983) also found that crisis, or what he called 'emergencies', formed the largest group of responses about events that trigger experiences of God.

In addition to the respondents who had 'occasional' experiences of the presence of God, thirteen respondents spoke of their 'everyday' experiences of the presence of God.[174] Of the respondents of this study, 36% reported 'occasional' experiences of the presence of God which were precipitated by specific events or states of mind, and 13% experienced the frequent and intimate presence of God guiding and supporting them. Altogether, 51% of respondents had 'none' or 'subliminal' experiences and 49% had 'occasional' or 'everyday' experiences. These figures are close to Hamer's (2004) finding that 47% of his respondents had the 'God gene' and 53% did not. It is possible that Hamer's proposition of the existence of biological factors that predispose almost half the population to heightened awareness of the spiritual dimension of life can partially explain the experiential findings of this study.

Throughout the data there appears a pattern: Those respondents who have 'everyday' experiences of God's presence in their lives, also tend to develop a close relationship with God that affects their whole orientation to life; those students who report 'occasional' experiences of God have a less intense and committed relationship with God that, nevertheless, is an important factor in their lives; those participants with 'subliminal' experiences of God's presence tend to go along with what they are taught about God, but maintain belief in God; and those students who do not experience God tend either to atheism, agnosticism, or the notion of the irrelevance of God. These findings are similar to those of Francis and Greer (1993:42) who found that "Pupils who report personal experience of God in their lives are likely to hold more positive attitudes towards Christianity than pupils of the same gender who display the same levels of church attendance, personal prayer and belief in the existence of God in their lives." The importance of experience can be seen in a comment by John Smith (12:218) who wrote, "At the end of the day ... I haven't met God, I haven't seen God ... so I just don't think he's real. ...I will believe God when I see him."

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[174] Jessica (pre:107) hears God speaking to her "in my heart", telling her that "he loves me and wants me". Aaron (3:132), Timothy (3:132), Katie (3:142), Alex (3:143), and Rosie (3:144) mention God speaking to them in their minds (or heart, in Alex's case) like a mental conversation. These conversations are about everyday matters ("what I had for tea"), praise (God saying "Thank you for being very, very good"), giving directions (God telling Aaron "to look after my pets"), and guidance (God tells us that what we are doing is wrong, "and he teaches us why"). Rebecca (6:163) experiences God when she daydreams, and Lavenita (6:166) feels God with her everywhere she goes. Babi (9:187) and Daddy's Little Girl (9:193) find that God is a constant, supportive presence, a helping hand, a guide, a protector, and an intimate and indispensable part of life. Anthony (12:208) says that God is "a presence that guides me and helps me in my life". Guido (12:208) experiences God "when I reflect on things and look at the things around me". Alex (12:209) speaks of experiencing God "as a father", there to guide and help.

CONCEPTS OF GOD

Tamminen (1991:160) noted, "The concept of God is very complex". Janssen et al. (1994) also noted that their respondents' image of God is complex. I also found that the God concepts of my participants are complex, multi-layered constructs. These concepts seem to arise in three different ways. Firstly, some respondents' concepts seem to arise from the experiences and relationships of the respondents with God, and are idiosyncratic representations of the meaning God holds for them. This type of concept occurs mostly with participants who have 'everyday' or 'occasional' experiences of God.[175] Secondly, some students employ traditional, learned symbols or concepts to name God. These concepts mainly occur in two types of students: those who have 'occasional' or 'everyday' experiences of God and who find that the concepts of their religion resonate with their experiences; and those who have 'subliminal' experiences of God and call upon traditional symbols and concepts because their experiences are too vague for them to be readily conceptualised.[176] The third type of concept is one that questions, doubts, or negates the existence of God. These concepts occur exclusively with respondents who have never experienced the presence of God and who find sufficiently compelling evidence to doubt or reject the existence of God.[177] The concepts of the participants, therefore, range from traditional, learned concepts to unique, idiosyncratic concepts. To complicate the issue, few respondents hold only 1 concept of God. Most participants hold 1 core concept of God, supported by 1 or more ancillary concepts that extend or qualify the core concept. In fact, the 100 participants of this study expressed 241 concepts, which resulted in 45 *different* concepts. However, there is an overlap between core concepts and ancillary concepts, with 12 (that is, half) of the core concepts also appearing as ancillary concepts. In addition, a concept can mean entirely different things to different people, depending on the experiences of the person.[178] When taking this individual meaning-making into account, it becomes apparent that God concept is unique for each respondent. This point has been noted by researchers for decades. Babin (1965:183) found that the responses of his participants were "absolutely unique"; Nelson (1996:35) concluded that the concept of God "is unique for each person"; and Kunkel et al. (1999:194) commented, "Even within developmental or social categories, individuals' God images seem to be highly personal and variable".

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[175] Examples of this type of concept are Jasmine (3:134), Kristin (6:169), and Sally (12:216).

[176] This type of concept occurs, for example, in the responses of Skye (3:131), Lukas (6:162), John Zaritsky (12:213), and Boof (12: 214).

[177] Examples of this type of concept occur in the responses of Brendan (6:171) and Fawlen Angewl (9:196).

[178] For example, Guido (12:211) and Mary (12:213) both conceive of God as 'presence'. For Guido, this means "God is a presence that I think is in all of us"; "s/he inhabits our every thought and action". God is immanent, intimate, a part of each person. Mary thinks of God as a powerful, protective presence overlooking creation. God is transcendent, distant, and uninvolved.

An overview of the participants' responses, however, reveals patterns in the way they conceptualise God. An investigation of the data reveal 4 categories of God concept:

1) concepts that name God according to God's actions,
2) concepts of the existential nature of God,
3) concepts that name God according to God's attributes, and
4) concepts that name God in relational terms.

I have added core concepts and ancillary concepts together, separated the concepts into the 4 categories, and amalgamated some concepts that have a similar meaning.

Table 9:4 – Concepts of God's Actions

Action Concepts	Pre		Yr 3		Yr 6		Yr 9		Yr 12		Total	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
Watcher	2	0	4	5	1	3	3	3	2	1	**12**	**12**
Creator	1	2	5	4	1	3	0	2	1	1	**8**	**12**
Helper (Guide)	1	0	-		1	0	6	3	2	3	**10**	**6**
Caretaker (Sustainer)	3	1	0	4	3	1	2	2	1	0	**9**	**8**
Carer (Comforter)	-		6	3	4	0	-		-		**10**	**3**
Protector (Guard)	0	3	0	1	0	1	1	0	-		**1**	**5**
Provider	0	1	1	1	-		-		-		**1**	**2**
Ruler or Manager	-		0	2	1	1	-		-		**1**	**3**
Tyrant	-		0	1	-		-		1	0	**1**	**1**
Saviour	1	0	-		-		-		-		**1**	**0**
Wizard	-		-		0	1	-		-		**0**	**1**
Total	**8**	**7**	**16**	**21**	**11**	**10**	**12**	**10**	**7**	**5**	**54**	**53**

Altogether, 11 concepts and 107 responses are based on God's actions, making this the most popular way of conceptualising God.[179] God as 'watcher' is the most frequently occurring concept. For most, this concept means that God is a higher being who sees and protects all (so is powerful) and who watches over and responds to the needs of all (so is loving). The transcendent, powerful nature of God is implicit in the first aspect, and the immanent, relational nature of God is implied in the second aspect, making it popular with both boys and girls. In fact, this concept is held equally by girls and boys. The concept of 'creator' emphasises the power of God and the transcendent distance of God and is held by more boys than girls. The concept of 'protector' also highlights the

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[179] Janssen et al. (1994:117) also noted, "At a conceptual level, God is primarily described as acting. Most respondents …define God in relation to the effects God produces".

power and sovereignty of God and, therefore, is favoured by boys. In contrast, the concepts of 'helper' and 'carer' emphasise the relational nature of God, the immanence of God, and the empathetic, loving, responsive nature of God. They are favoured more by girls, who value the actions of caring and comforting more than boys.[180] 'Caretaker' is more of a neutral concept than the other concepts in this group, and is held almost equally by boys and girls.

Table 9:5 – Concepts of the Nature of God

Nature Concepts	Pre		Yr 3		Yr 6		Yr 9		Yr 12		Total	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
Heavenly/Higher Being	-		2	3	2	3	2	5	1	1	**7**	**12**
Jesus (Man)	4	4	2	2	3	2	-		1	0	**10**	**8**
Presence	-		-		-		4	1	1	3	**5**	**4**
Energy or Force	-		-		-		1	1	3	0	**4**	**1**
Spirit	-		1	1	1	2	-		1	0	**3**	**3**
Nature	-		-		-		-		1	0	**1**	**0**
Agnosticism	-		-		0	1	-		1	2	**1**	**3**
Atheism	-		-		-		1	0			**1**	**0**
Total	**4**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**6**	**8**	**8**	**7**	**8**	**6**	**32**	**31**

There are 8 concepts and 63 responses based on the nature of God. The most frequently occurring concept is that of 'heavenly being' or 'supreme being' or 'higher being'. These concepts emphasise the transcendence of God, both in the sense that God is a distant figure and in the sense that God is vastly more powerful. These elements of the nature of God appeal more to boys than girls. Primary school children favour the concept of God as Jesus. Jesus, as a fellow human being, is a concrete role-model for these children and seems to act for them as the human face of God. In contrast, the adolescents prefer more intangible concepts like 'presence', 'energy', 'force', and 'spirit'. This may be because these students have greater cognitive ability including the ability to think in abstract terms. This enables them to envisage God in more abstract ways and to employ abstract terms to denote the nature of God. Four students are unsure whether God exists, and one student is sure that God does not exist. These expressions of doubt or disbelief in God occur mostly with older adolescents.[181]

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[180] These findings are consistent with those of Hutsebaut (1972), Potvin (1977), Heller (1986), and Tamminen (1996), among others.

[181] These figures contrast with Potvin's (1977) findings that 31% of adolescent respondents doubt or do not believe in God, and with those of Janssen et al. (1994) who found 16% of respondents in this category. The difference is probably due to the fact that my respondents were selected from faith-based schools.

Table 9:6 – Concepts of God's Attributes

Attribute Concepts	Pre		Yr 3		Yr 6		Yr 9		Yr 12		Total	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
Power		-		-	1	7	0	3	2	1	**3**	**11**
Unknown		-		-		-	1	4	3	3	**4**	**7**
Different (Alien)	4	0		-		-		-		-	**4**	**0**
Light		-		-	1	1	0	1		-	**1**	**2**
Same as Me	0	2		-		-		-		-	**0**	**2**
Life		-		-	0	1		-		-	**0**	**1**
Total	**5**	**2**		**-**	**2**	**9**	**1**	**8**	**5**	**4**	**13**	**23**

There are 6 concepts and 36 responses based on God's perceived attributes. Almost double the number of boys prefers this type of concept. The concept of 'power' is the boys' favourite, with almost 4 times more boys than girls conceptualising God in this way. Half the responses come from year 6 boys. Perhaps, as they enter puberty these boys need to feel that there is a powerful ally on their side. Boys are also more likely to think of God as the unknown, which is an unexpected finding. This concept is held only by adolescents. The notion that God is the 'same as me' also came from boys. For girls, the most outstanding attribute of God is God's difference from themselves. This concept is found only among the preprimary girls and results from the clash between their images of themselves and their incipient awareness that God is imaged as male.

Table 9:7 – Relational Concepts of God

Relational Concepts	Pre		Yr 3		Yr 6		Yr 9		Yr 12		Total	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
Friend	8	5	3	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	**14**	**6**
Parent	1	0	3	2	1	0	2	0		-	**7**	**2**
Partner		-		-	0	1		-		-	**0**	**1**
Total	**9**	**5**	**6**	**2**	**2**	**1**	**3**	**0**	**1**	**1**	**21**	**9**

There are 3 concepts and 30 responses based on relationship with God. These concepts are more common among girls. In fact, more than two-thirds of relational concepts are held by girls. This preference is noted by most researchers who have investigated the gender patterns of children's God concepts. God as 'friend' was the most popular concept in this category. The closeness and sharing implied in this concept makes it popular with girls, who value these characteristics. 'Friend' was held mostly by 4 to 8-

year-old children, who tend to think of God as being like themselves and an everyday part of life. The concept of 'parent', again more popular among girls, is more common among 7 and 8-year old children than any other group. These children are expressing both the closeness of God to them and their sense of their dependence on God, both characteristics more likely to be recognised and acknowledged by girls than boys.

THE GENDER OF GOD

As would be expected, most respondents thought of, and referred to, God as male. This was done unconsciously, and reflects an internalisation of the notion of the maleness of God implicit in most Christian teachings about God (and indeed, of all religions of the Word). This largely unconscious, but pervasive idea about God was reflected in the use of the pronoun "he". Only 2 respondents, Lauren (9:192) and Michelle (12:215), specifically called God "a man". This notion of the maleness of God had evident negative effects on several of the preprimary girls who had only recently been exposed to this idea. Of these girls, 2 graphically depicted their sense of inferiority in light of the maleness of God. The girls in the other, older groups did not allude to their feelings about this issue. It is unknown whether they had simply accepted their imputed inferiority as an inescapable fact, whether this notion still provided a silent challenge to their self-esteem, or whether the issue was irrelevant to them.

There were 5 respondents who, while referring to God as "he", depicted a God who is female.[182] Clearly, this way of conceptualising God is meaningful for some students, even though they would not have been exposed to the notion of God as female. Of the 5 respondents, 4 are girls, indicating a need within some girls to imagine God as female.

Some respondents evidently had reflected on the issue of the gender of God. In all, 15 respondents alluded to this issue. Of these, 3 participants drew pictures of a human figure of indeterminate gender[183] and 5 respondents drew neutral images, held neutral concepts, and employed non-gendered language.[184] Felicity (12:212) asked whether God is a he or a she, Guido (12:208) called God "s/he", and 5 other students called God "it".[185] The 7 students who specifically mentioned the issue were all in year 12. This leads me to wonder whether this particular class had discussed the issue of the gender of God.

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[182] Em (pre:112), Jasmine (3:134), and Emily (3:134) depicted God as 'mum', sharing their activities and comforting them. Anthony (12:208) spoke of God as being like his mother, helping him with his homework. Sarah (3:137) portrayed God as a fairy queen.
[183] These participants are Rosie (3:144), Corey (9:190), and Dream Girl (9:192).
[184] These students were Simon (6:166), Eric (6:170), Mickey (9:189), Ashlee (9:194), and Anthony (12:208).
[185] These students were Alex (12:209), Serenity (12:210), Gypsy (12:211), Raff (12:212) and Sally (12:216).

ANTHROPOMORPHIC IMAGES

Some researchers discuss their respondents' concepts of God using the anthropomorphic/non-anthropomorphic dichotomy.[186]   However, there is a discrepancy in the way the term is employed. Tamm (1996) applies the term to any concept that likens God to a human being whereas Tamminen (1991) utilises the term only in cases where the respondent refers to God as being a human person. I found that the responses of my participants were difficult to categorise in this way.[187] It can be difficult to determine whether an "anthropomorphic" picture or phrase is intended metaphorically or literally. To determine this, it is necessary to examine all the data of the respondent. The data generated in this study indicate that few of my respondents conceive of God in a purely anthropomorphic way, and these are no more common in young children than in adolescents, a finding consistent with that of Tamminen (1991).

Of more interest to me is whether respondents include an image of God in their artwork. Coles (1990:40) noted that all but 13% of his respondents drew pictures of God's face in response to a request for a picture of God. Tamm (1996:42) concluded that "The graphic medium can force children and young people to express their conception of God concretely and give it an anthropomorphous form". However, I question whether this is due to the graphic medium or the instructions given.

Table 9:8 – The Inclusion of Images of God in the Artwork

	Pre	Yr 3	Yr 6	Yr 9	Yr 12	Total
God image	14	17	12	4	5	**52**
No God image	3	7	8	16	14	**48**

The table indicates that 48% of respondents did not include an image of God in their artwork. This tendency to avoid imaging God increases with age, matching the adolescents' avoidance of naming God in anything but non-specific terms. The fact that 80% of the year nine respondents and 74% of the year twelve respondents did not draw an image of God indicates a clear preference among adolescents for conceptualising God in non-human, non-specific ways that match their stated beliefs about the

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[186] These include Tamminen (1991), Barrett and Keil (1996), Tamm (1996), and Kunkel, et al. (1999).

[187] For example, Reesha's drawing (pre:l09) at first glance appears to be an anthropomorphic image. Closer inspection, however, shows that the man has a large head, mouth and eyes, an atrophied body, and almost non-existent arms and legs. The head is a symbolic representation that God watches over all people and loves them, and the body and limbs symbolise that God does not need these, in effect pointing out that God is *unlike* humans. Reesha shows that she understands something of God, the unknown, by comparing and contrasting God with what she knows, human beings. In contrast, Michelle (12:215) drew a collection of symbols indicating that Michelle has "advanced" to symbolic conceptualisation. However, Michelle's verbal responses make it clear that she conceives of God in limited, human terms. She wrote, "Sometimes God isn't the easiest to believe" because "it is hard to believe that ONE man could create everything!!"

unknowable mystery of God. These figures also indicate to me the value of artwork, when combined with carefully-worded, non-leading instructions, in enabling respondents to depict and engage with their meaningful concepts of God.

THE TRANSCENDENCE OR IMMANENCE OF GOD

Another way of approaching concepts is to examine them in terms of their implied distance from God. The table below presents this type of information.

Table 9:9 – Degree of Distance of God Implicit in Concepts

God's Distance	Pre		Yr 3		Yr 6		Yr 9		Yr 12		Total	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
Transcendent	3	2	5	11	2	6	5	8	7	5	22	32
Immanent	6	5	4	1	4	1	2	0	3	2	19	9
Transcendent Immanent	1	0	3	0	3	4	2	3	1	1	10	8

The term 'transcendent', when applied to God, is used to mean both that God is far away and that God is different from and superior to humanity. The term 'immanent' means that God is perceived as being close in either the physical or emotional sense.[188] The above table indicates that, between the ages of 7 and 14, more boys than girls in this study prefer transcendent images and more girls than boys prefer immanent images. This finding is consistent with the notion that girls prefer closer, more relational images of God than do boys. However, the youngest and oldest of the respondents do not follow this pattern, with transcendent images being held by slightly more girls and immanent images being preferred by slightly more boys. There are 2 points that can be made in partial explanation of this finding. In the preprimary cohort, 5 girls expressed their awareness that God is different from them. This awareness leads to conceptualising God as 'different from me' and therefore more distant. In the year 12 cohort there are 3 boys who have 'everyday' experiences of God and therefore conceive of God as being close to themselves. This finding does not fit the overall pattern of more girls than boys reporting 'everyday' experiences (see Table 9:1). Overall, however, there is a distinct pattern of girls preferring immanent concepts of God and boys preferring transcendent concepts of God. Of the respondents, 18 perceive God as being both transcendent and immanent. This perception is found in all the age groups and occurs most frequently among the 10 to 14- year-old respondents. These students tend to hold more complex, multi-dimensional concepts of God.

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[188] There is no correlation between having a close relationship with God and holding immanent concepts of God, or of distant relationships being linked with transcendent concepts.

INFLUENCES ON CONCEPTS

Although not a specific focus of this study, the key influences on the respondents' conceptualising often became apparent during the interviews. These include, in descending order of apparent importance:

1) the role of experiences of the presence of God in one's life,
2) the impact of the beliefs and spirituality of significant others,
3) the impact of respondents' life experiences,
4) the influences of culture, and
5) the effect of religious education.

The centrality of experiences of the presence of God in one's life has been mentioned above. These experiences are usually vivid or frequent enough to have a great effect on the respondent's relationship with God and concept of God. The concepts of God most frequently found in the responses of participants who have 'occasional' or 'everyday' experiences of God emphasise different aspects of God for them. The concepts of 'friend' and 'Jesus', with 14 responses, emphasises the likeness of God and the respondents. These are concrete images held mainly by the younger respondents. 'Presence', 'spirit', or 'unknown', with 11 responses, is the way the participants denote the ineffable nature of the God they experience. These concepts are more frequently found among adolescents. The concepts of 'watcher', 'carer', 'caretaker', 'helper', and 'guide', with 25 responses, capture the loving, caring, involved, responsive nature of God which form a core part of the respondents' experiences of God. These concepts primarily name God as an immanent, loving being who is intimately involved in the lives of the respondents.

A second influence on the respondents' notions of God is the spirituality of significant others. This influence can work in a positive or negative way. Anthony (12:208) and Guido (12:208) find that the positive examples of the faith and spiritualities of their family members help to form their own perceptions of, confidence in, and expressions of their spiritualities.[189] In contrast, Erin (12:211) experiences anger and confusion about God which flows from her mother's misguided 'toxic faith'. John Smith (12:221) finds the toxic faith of his relatives a confirmation of his atheistic views. The faith of these family members exemplifies a statement by Fischer and Hart (1986:18): "Ironically, one of the greatest stumbling blocks to belief turns out to be believers".

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[189] Other respondents who reveal the positive effects of family spirituality include Em (pre:112), Jasmine (3:134), Emily (3:134), Romey (3:135), and Katie (3:142).

Culture, especially as it is portrayed in the media, is a potent influence on the ideas of children and adolescents. Not only does it communicate the general values of society, but it provides a variety of ways of perceiving and naming reality, including God. Elements of myths and fairytales can be seen in the responses of several children.[190] The influence of video games is apparent in a number of responses.[191] Films like <u>Fantasia</u> and <u>Bruce Almighty</u> and television shows like <u>The Simpsons</u> provide some participants with non-traditional ways of imagining and naming God.[192] Less specific, but more pervasive are notions culled from popular science fiction such as the <u>Star Wars</u> movies and <u>The Matrix</u> movies. These influences can be seen in concepts of God like 'the force', and the idea of God being the matrix within which we exist. This finding of the influence of culture is not new. Over forty years ago Babin (1965:192), commenting on the responses of his sixteen to nineteen-year-old respondents, commented, "At this age, we find reflected in these youthful minds all the religious ideas which are in the air, popularized by literature, radio, cinema. The influence of their own social *milieux* is here predominant."

A fourth influence on the God concepts of this study's respondents is their life experiences. These influences can be profound. Daddy's Little Girl (9:193) and Felicity (12:212) found that the death of a close relative or friend challenged their spirituality and provided an opportunity to reflect on existential issues. On the other hand, these influences can be a part of everyday life. Makayla's (pre:104) concept of God included the notion that "he" did not want to play with her, reflecting a similar experience in her life. The interplay of life experiences and spirituality is mentioned by Reyes (1994:1), who noted, "Religious experiences are part of human life and human development. These experiences are embedded in many children's life experience."

A fifth influence on the concepts of my respondents is education. Formal religious education provides children with concepts and language about God. This contribution can be positive: many respondents used learned concepts and language to name their private, meaningful God concepts. However, the contribution of religious education can be unintentionally negative. The misunderstandings about God of Soni (3:141) and Brendan (6:174) are examples of the negative impact of religious education on the spirituality of children. There are other, less significant, influences on the respondents' spirituality. Among these are the influences of age and gender, which are discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter.

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[190] They are: Ross (pre:106), Chelsea (pre:113), Alana (3:135), Sarah (3:137), and Kendrick (3:140).
[191] Most notably Christopher (pre:110) and Em (pre:112).
[192] These include Zeke (6:164), Russell (6:165), Kristin (6:169), and Daddy's Little Girl (9: 193).

EVOLUTION

Patterns of evolution in the spirituality of the participants (as expressed through their experiences of God, relationships with God, and concepts of God) are apparent in their responses. In the preprimary group, the children have their own ideas about God which are only now being confronted by (and either challenged or confirmed by) the public concepts of the religion.[193] These children are now faced with the dilemma of what to do about the differences between their ideas of God and the concepts of God taught at school. The year 3 group holds in tension their perceptions of God and the ideas taught to them about God. Many of them have a private belief system that operates on a day-to-day, experiential level and that brings meaning to their life experiences. This system diverges significantly from the public system that operates at school and at church.[194] These children seem to be mentally separating the private and public realms, and have no difficulty in adhering to one system or the other, depending on the circumstances. Those respondents who do not experience the presence of God and find God irrelevant to their lives, tend to abandon their earlier ideas and, publicly at least, adopt the concepts they are taught. The year 6 respondents question why they must believe what is taught them about God when this contradicts their experiences and ideas. These students are beginning to feel the need for congruence between what they believe and what they profess, they have an increased confidence in their own opinions, and they are experiencing less impulse to please their parents and teachers by conforming to the notions of adults. This results in the appearance of heterodox and highly idiosyncratic concepts of God. Also, for the first time, there appear agnostic beliefs and comments indicating doubt.[195] The opinions and beliefs of others carry little weight with the year 9 group. What is of importance to them is congruence between what they experience, what they believe, and what they profess. However, many of them do not know in what they believe because neither their earlier concepts, nor the concepts of the religion, satisfactorily address the existential and ontological questions that beset them. This leads to doubt and questioning.[196] This state of confusion and searching is the chief characteristic of the year 9 respondents for whom God is a part of their lives. Those students who have no experiences of God experience less conflict. Some take the path

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[193] For the first time girls are becoming aware that God is always referred to in male terms, implying that God is male. Many of these girls have entertained female concepts of God, notions that have no place in what they are learning about God from others. This leads many girls to experience the potentially unsettling awareness of God as 'different from me' and 'alien'. In contrast, the boys have their male concepts of God confirmed, and they experience the empowerment that flows from knowing that God is 'like me'.

[194] This juxtaposition of opposites can be seen in the responses of Sarah (3:137) who depicts God as a fairy queen, but later says, "God's our father" and "God died for us".

[195] For example, Hannah's (6:162).declaration, "I don't believe that he could feed all those people with just a few fish and a loaf of bread and how he created the whole earth".

[196] In fact, the words 'conflicted' and 'confusion' appear regularly in the responses of these participants.

of least resistance and go along with what they are taught. Others reject concepts that to them seem highly improbable.[197] The year 12 students also feel the need for honesty in professing their beliefs. However, the confusion evident in the responses of the year 9 group is largely absent from this group. Many of these students have rejected simplistic notions of God, both their own earlier concepts that no longer seem adequate in explaining their experiences of life, and the limited, anthropocentric, androcentric, patriarchal concepts of their religion.[198] Replacing these are concepts largely based on the mystery and ineffability of God, which are consistent with the students' experiences of God, and which provide an adequate base upon which to build theories about the nature and meaning of existence. At the same time, these students have developed confidence in their theologising and in the religious conclusions they have reached. This leads to the confident declaration of their beliefs.[199]

These findings are consistent with those of other researchers. Babin (1965) found among his fourteen and fifteen-year-old respondents a period of insecurity, instability, and doubt. Among the sixteen to nineteen-year-olds Babin noted the appearance of doubt and disbelief. He also commented, "What they discover about God must link up with what they experience" (p. 193). Hutsebaut (1972:405) noted that older adolescents show more doubt as well as individuality of expression. Nipkow and Schweitzer (1991:95) found that "Many of the students had moved away from what they considered to be childhood convictions to a state of questioning. Furthermore, the basis of their questioning was always to some degree their personal experience and their own ways of making sense of the world." Tamminen (1994:83) reported, "the development during puberty and adolescence moves … toward a more critical and doubtful attitude".

There is, however, one implication found in previous research with which I disagree. It is that children move from an uncritical acceptance of others' beliefs to questioning, doubt, and disbelief. I have found that this is only true of the public God concepts of the respondents. The private God concepts tell a different story. In essence, the meaningful concepts of young children are held privately and separately from taught God concepts to which they give public assent. As they approach puberty, the growing independence, self-confidence, and need for congruence of these children leads them to

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[197] For example, Fawlen Angewl (9:196) believes, "Everything in the world can be explained by science. Not everything in the world can be explained by God. …God/Jesus are all in the mind, something people look to for guidance".

[198] For example, Alissa (p12:217) speaks of "nice little bible stories" which are "nice to believe in when you're a little kid, but when you grow up they kind of don't have any relevance any more."

[199] For example, Anthony (12:208) says, "I don't know what God is. I don't know who God is. But it's a presence that guides me and helps me in my life". John Smith, with equal confidence, writes, "I …find the whole God situation a little over the top and believe it is not true".

voice their doubts about public God concepts, and sometimes to publicly disavow these. During early adolescence, in addition to this public process, the students often undergo another, private process, that of reviewing, questioning, and replacing their private God concepts. This presents itself as a period of confusion, but the confusion is not about whether God exists, but about which concepts and images of God most adequately conform to, and explain, their experiences and perceptions of life. It is the students who experience the presence of God who undergo this process and who frequently arrive, in late adolescence, at a mature and sometimes profound understanding of the meaning of God in their lives. Students who do not experience God undergo an easier and simpler process. In early adolescence they not only disavow their public God concepts, but they reveal their growing private conviction that God does not exist.

The evolving spirituality of the respondents influences their God concepts and their perceptions of their relationships with God. However, such changes do not appear in regard to experiences of the presence of God, which occur with approximately the same degree of frequency in all age groups. Differences in the results reflect personal differences or specific idiosyncrasies of the study rather than age-related differences.[200] Experience of God, therefore, is not age-related.[201]

THE EVOLUTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD

Age-related patterns occur in both the perception and the interpretation of respondents' relationships with God (see Table 9:1). The preprimary group has fewer responses in the 'background/duty-based' type of relationship, which is caused by a perceptual difference apparent in this age group. These children tend to perceive themselves spiritually as participants in an all-encompassing, undifferentiated, spiritual and magical universe. Anything that is non-corporeal belongs to this world and touches them. They relate to God as either a friend who has a 'separate life' or as a 'parent' who touches their lives more intimately and upon whom they depend. A second pattern is evident in the gradual decline in the number of respondents who have 'separate lives' relationships with God. As they get older, children seem to opt either to relegate God to the background of their lives where God is only remembered when they want something, or to have a more intimate and continuous relationship with God. This may

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[200] Table 9:2 indicates that more children in the preprimary group than any other group have 'subliminal' experiences. This finding, however, reflects the inability of children of this young age to name or describe their experiences of God, thus leading me to assign these responses to the 'subliminal' category. In the year 6 group, a larger proportion of respondents have 'occasional' experiences than any other group. This may reflect the fact that 8 of these participants were volunteers from a class and therefore likely to be more religiously motivated than the remainder of the year 6 cohort.

[201] This finding reflects those of Robinson (1977), Heller (1986), Coles (1992), Hay with Nye (1998) and Hamer (2004).

be due to the increasing capacity of children to integrate the different aspects of their lives into a more holistic worldview. A third pattern is the decrease with age in the incidence of 'parent/child - dependent' relationships. The preprimary group reports 7 such relationships and the year 12 group reports only 3. The preprimary and year 3 children seem to be more aware of their dependence on others, including God, and to be comfortable in accepting this state. The year 6 and year 9 respondents, on the other hand, dislike the notion of being dependent on others. They have begun to question and doubt religious teachings about God and they are more actively involved in theologising. In addition, the year 9 group's responses evince much confusion and conflict, a transition state between adherence to others' religious teaching and adoption of their own theology. The year 12 respondents show much less confusion than the year 9 group, they have a more developed theology of their own, and they are more confident in their own ideas. They have achieved a greater degree of independence which is reflected in the way they perceive their relationships with God.

THE EVOLUTION OF CONCEPTS OF GOD

There are 3 evolutionary conceptual patterns apparent in the data:

1) a pronounced move from concrete, personal, anthropocentric concepts to transcendent, vague, ineffable concepts;

2) a progression from the use of concrete and anthropocentric symbols to more abstract forms of symbolism in order to depict God; and

3) a trend from conceptualising God as a limited adjunct to my life (an egocentric concept) to the notion of a limitless higher being in whose life I mysteriously participate (a theocentric concept).

The first 2 of these findings are consistent with those of several other researchers. Tamm (1996:39, 41) noted that "the concept of God as mystery increases significantly with increasing age" and that "older children draw symbolic compositions more frequently than younger children". Ladd et al. (1998:49) also found "a linear increase in the use of symbols with age".

Changes in God concept preferences are evident in the participants' responses (see Tables 9:4-7). The overwhelming favourite of the preprimary group is 'friend', accounting for 13 of the 26 preprimary concepts. It carries with it a sense of familiarity, equality, and shared lives. This concept is personal and egocentric, reflecting the limited concerns of these 4 and 5-year-old children. 'Jesus' as the human incarnation of

God is held by 8 respondents, and reflects the impact of religious education. The notion that God is 'alien' or 'different from me' is held by 5 girls and reflects the clash between their images of God and their new-found awareness of the androcentric nature of public God images. The year 3 respondents favour concepts that view God as a transcendent entity, who is related to the world around them, and who watches over and cares for all creation, including themselves.[202] These concepts reflect the children's expanding sphere of interest and concern, and indicate that they view themselves as part of a wider whole. These concepts imbue God with the characteristics of a human person. The boys of the year 6 group show a clear preference for the concept of 'power'.[203] The concepts of 'creator' and 'watcher' are also popular. The idea that God is an enormously powerful being is of significance to these boys. They seem to derive satisfaction from the notion that, despite evidence to the contrary, the world is in good hands. All-powerful God, the creator, watches over "his" creation. The year 6 girls, in contrast, prefer more immanent concepts like 'carer' and 'caretaker'. These nurturant images provide emotional reassurance that they are cared for. These concepts mostly view God in an anthropocentric way. Among the year 9 respondents, the concept of 'helper' is very popular, especially with the girls.[204] At this age, the respondents are experiencing confusion about God and about life in general. The notion of God as a helper in times of difficulty is an example of children imagining the God they need or of the respondents experiencing the God who responds to their needs (depending on one's point of view). Boys tend to prefer the more transcendent concept of 'heavenly/higher being'.[205] Also popular among both boys and girls are the concepts of God as 'unknown' and 'presence'.[206] The popularity of the last 3 concepts marks a shift away from the more concrete, human-like concepts of the primary school respondents, to recognition of the essentially transcendent, unknown quality of God. A concomitant move away from more concrete representations to more symbolic representations is also observed. The year 12 respondents overwhelmingly prefer vague concepts that maintain the essentially unknowable quality of God. Altogether, the concepts 'unknown', 'presence', and 'energy/force' appear 13 times. The shift away from anthropocentric concepts is pronounced. Evidently, respondents of this age employ their cognitive ability for abstraction to help them discover concepts that circumvent the limited nature of both traditional God concepts and their own earlier concepts. Connection to this ineffable being is reflected in the concept 'helper', held by 5 respondents. There is also a noticeable preference for the use of symbols to represent the God concepts of the group.

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[202] God as 'creator' is reported 9 times, as are the concepts of 'watcher' and 'carer'. 'Heavenly/higher being' is used 5 times, as is the God concept of 'parent'.
[203] 7 boys and one girl hold this concept.
[204] 6 girls and three boys hold this concept.
[205] 5 boys and two girls hold this concept.
[206] Each of these is held by 5 respondents.

GENDER PATTERNS

Many researchers have noted a gender difference in their data. In this study I also discovered gender-related differences among my respondents. The key differences are:

1) the reluctance of boys to acknowledge their experiences of God;

2) the tendency of boys to perceive their relationships with God as distant and girls to perceive their relationships with God as close;

3) the preference of boys for concepts naming God's attributes and the preference of girls for relational concepts of God; and

4) the negative effects on girls of the use of exclusively male imagery and language in relation to God.

These differences are apparent in the students' perceptions of their experiences of God, in their interpretations of their relationships with God, and in their concepts of God.

In this study it is impossible to learn about the students' actual experiences of God. All that can be known are their perceptions of these experiences.[207] These perceptions reveal a gender-related pattern (see Table 9:2). Overall, 28 of the 51 girls (55%) and 21 of the 49 boys (43%) report 'occasional' or 'everyday' experiences of God, while 23 girls (45%) and 28 boys (57%) report 'none' or 'subliminal' experiences. It may be that girls experience the presence of God more than boys. However, another explanation presents itself: it may be that some boys are reluctant to publicly acknowledge their experiences of God.[208] This notion is supported by the data in Table 9:3 which indicate that the difference between the experiential responses of boys and girls is much more pronounced in 2 of the 4 categories. Boys are almost twice as likely as girls (33% compared to 18%) to state that they do not experience the presence of God in their lives, and they are less likely than girls (31% compared to 41%) to acknowledge their 'occasional' experiences of God.[209] The need of boys to feel and appear active and in-control of their lives may account for their apparent reluctance to acknowledge both the presence of God in their lives and their need for God's help.[210]

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[207] Robinson (1977) also recognised the distinction between the experience itself and its interpretation and expression.

[208] This conclusion is consonant with my 30 years of teaching experience. My observations of boys' ways of interpreting occurrences in their lives are that they seem much less inclined than girls to give credit to others for something well-done or prized. They are more likely to present their version of events in such a way as to highlight their part in the proceedings.

[209] As noted in the section on The Centrality of Experience, 'occasional' experiences most frequently occur when the respondent is in need. Boys seem less comfortable than girls in admitting need. They seem to feel that they should be tough, strong, and self-sufficient.

[210] This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Elkind and Elkind (1962) who noted that more girls than boys report their experiences of God. Greer (1982) also found that 17% of girls, but only 10% of boys reported experiences of the presence of God.

The respondents' perceptions and interpretations of their relationships with God also reveal gender-related differences (see Table 9:1). 'Negative' or 'null' relationships with God are held by only 6% of girls, but by 16% of boys, and 'background' or 'duty-based' relationships occur in only 14% of the girls, but 27% of the boys. However, 'needs-based' relationships are reported by 6% of girls and 2% of boys; 'parent/child' and 'dependent' relationships are found in 33% of girls, but only 22% of boys; and 'reciprocal' and 'partnership' relationships appear in the responses of 16% of girls and 8% of boys. There are only two categories in which the gender differences are slight: in the 'supplier/consumer' category 6% of girls' responses and 8% of boys' responses are present; and in the 'separate lives' category can be found 19% of girls' responses and 16% of boys' responses. A pattern is apparent in these data. Categories that name distant relationships have a higher percentage of male responses and categories that name needy, dependent, or close relationships contain more female responses. Clearly, boys perceive themselves as more distant from God and girls perceive themselves as closer to God.[211] This seems to reflect the masculine perception of self as being active and independent, and the feminine perception of self as being passive and either dependent or interdependent.[212] Concepts that name God as a separate entity or as a supplier of needs, and are therefore neutral as far as relationship is concerned, are held almost equally by boys and girls.

The respondents' God concepts also reveal gender-related patterns. Equal numbers of girls and boys report concepts based on the nature of God and on God's perceived actions. However, concepts based on relationship with God are favoured by girls (with 41% of girls and 18% of boys holding these).[213] Specifically, the concept of God as 'friend' is held by 27% of girls and 12% of boys, and the concept of 'parent' is held by 14% of girls and 4% of boys. These figures are consistent with the data presented in Table 9:8 that boys perceive God as more distant while girls perceive God as closer to themselves (43% of girls and 65% of boys primarily view God as transcendent and 37% of girls compared to 18% of boys conceive of God as immanent).[214] In keeping with boys' preference for transcendent concepts is the finding that 'heavenly/higher being' is held by 14% of girls and 24% of boys, and that 'unknown' is held by 8% of girls and 22% of boys. This finding is also consonant with the conclusions of many other researchers.[215]

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[211] This finding echoes those of Heller (1986), Blombery (1991), and Tamminen (1991, 1996).

[212] This is consistent with the findings of Gilligan (1982).

[213] Unlike the percentage figures for experiences and relationships, where each respondent holds only one response, the figures for concepts are based on the 235 concepts contained in Tables 9:4-7, where respondents may hold 2 or 3 separate concepts.

[214] The above figures on relationships also support these findings.

[215] Including: Babin (1965), Hutsebaut (1972), Heller (1986), Tamminen (1991), and Devenish (1999).

The category of concepts based on God's attributes is favoured more by boys (with 25% of girls and 47% of boys holding these). The boys' favourite attribute concept is 'power', with 6% of girls and 22% of boys holding this concept. The power of God is also implicit in the concepts of 'creator' (16% of girls and 24% of boys), 'protector/guard' (2% of girls and 10% of boys), and 'ruler/manager' (2% of girls and 6% of boys). These concepts also emphasise the activity of God. In contrast, girls prefer concepts that are intimate and relational, passive, and highlight the importance of God for them by emphasising their dependence on God. These include the abovementioned concept of 'friend' as well as 'carer' (with 20% of girls and 6% of boys) and 'helper/guide' (with 20% of girls and 12% of boys). [216] Concepts that do not imply power or activity (preferred by boys), or passivity, relationality, or dependence (preferred by girls) are held by similar numbers of boys and girls. For example, the concept of 'watcher' is held by 24% of both boys and girls, and the concept of God as 'Jesus' is held by 20% of girls and 16% of boys. Evidently, the psychological make-up of both boys and girls influences their preferences for God concepts. In summary, the boys' favourite concepts are: 'heavenly/higher being', 'creator', and 'watcher' (with 24% of boys preferring each of these), and 'power' (held by 22%). The girls' most popular concepts are 'friend' (27%), 'watcher' (23%), 'carer', 'helper', and 'Jesus' (each with 20%).

One consistent finding of other researchers that is not borne out by this research is that significantly more boys than girls report doubting or denying the existence of God.[217] Among my respondents, 4% of girls' responses and 6% of boys' responses were classified as 'agnostic' or 'atheist', a difference that is slight. As noted earlier, boys are almost 3 times more likely than girls to report that they have a 'null' relationship with God, a findings which conforms to a gender stereotype of non-involvement among males. However, as far as the issue of the objective existence of God is concerned, boys are almost as likely as girls to agree with this proposition. It is possible that the above-mentioned studies, which do not separate boys' perceptions of the objective existence of God from their perceptions of God's involvement in their lives, have collapsed the two essentially different perceptions, leading to their findings. I have found that lack of experience of God is a more important indicator of agnosticism or atheism than gender.

Another common gender-related finding is the impact of male images on girls. Eshleman et al. (1999) found that for young children when God was perceived as male, boys felt closer to God than did girls, but when God was perceived as female or in non-

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[216] These preferences are noted by Hutsebaut (1972), Potvin (1977), Heller (1986), Tamminen (1991) and Devenish (1999).

[217] This conclusion is found in the studies of Babin (1965), Vergote (1969), Vergote and Aubert (1972), Tamayo and Desjardins (1976), Nelson et al. (1985), Blombery (1991), and Tamminen (1991).

masculine ways, girls felt closer to God. If 'closer' is intended to mean psychologically closer, then the findings of this study concur. Among the preprimary respondents, Daniel, Harry, Mario, and Domenic exhibited in their comments a closeness to God and an enjoyment of their's and God's shared masculinity, their sameness. In contrast, Makayla, Jade, Annabel, and Chelsea referred to the alienness or difference of God from themselves. Makayla also seemed to experience the unacceptability of her femaleness, and Annabel portrayed the insignificance of women in the face of a male God. Reesha and Renae did not experience these difficulties: they imagined God as a 'watcher', a gender-neutral term. In contrast, 3 girls in year 3 who evinced well-developed self-esteem are Jasmine, Emily, and Sarah. These girls imagined God as female: Jasmine and Emily portrayed God as mum, and Sarah thought of God as a fairy queen. Skye and Rosie, in year three, had close, 'reciprocal' relationships with God. These girls imagined God as 'creator' and 'spirit friend' respectively, both gender-neutral terms. Clanton (1990:71-72) commented: "The way women conceive of God affects their level of self-confidence. The women in my research sample who see and speak of God as more than masculine scored higher in self-confidence than those whose God is masculine". Other researchers have expressed similar concerns. These include Osiek (1986), Coll (1994), Schneiders (1996b), and Eshleman (1999). I also have found in the comments of my female respondents a troubling tendency for girls who accept the maleness of God to consider that their femaleness renders them different from God and less acceptable to God. This finding has implications for religious education.

The gender-related differences present in the data can be summarised as follows: Boys conceive of themselves as more like God than girls, but boys also perceive God as more distant from themselves both emotionally and relationally. Girls conceive of themselves as less like God than boys, but girls also perceive God as closer to themselves both emotionally and relationally. For some girls, conceiving of God as male has a detrimental effect on their self-esteem.

LANGUAGE PATTERNS

Hay with Nye (1998:53) asserted, "Much research has either an overt or hidden assumption that spirituality, if it is to express itself, must do so via the language and concepts of Christianity". This assumption is not corroborated by researchers who have specifically addressed the issue. Berryman (1985:125) pointed out that Robinson's work showed religious experience does not have to be expressed in traditional religious terms. Dahlin (1990:79) concluded, "Children do indeed ponder over existential questions, but not in traditional religious terms". Halbfas (1971:58) maintained that a specific, theological vocabulary is unnecessary.

> To talk about God you do not have to use theological terms. The word "God" itself is often unnecessary. ... The "content" of religious discourse is "God", but it is not this word, together with the vocabulary of Church doctrine, that communicates God, but only the life-revealing language of one's fellowmen [sic].

In keeping with Halbfas' contention, Hay with Nye (ibid.) discovered that although some of their respondents used religious language, many did not. This led them to conclude that spiritual talk can be classified into two categories: dialogue that employed religious ideas and language, and non-religious dialogue that implicitly conveyed that the child was engaged in something more than the casual or mundane. Although the topic of my research is narrower than that of Hay with Nye, being limited to children's discourse about God, my findings are similar to theirs. Within the discourse of my respondents I discovered three ways of communicating their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and assumptions about God: 'everyday' language, 'religious' language, and 'symbolic' language. Indeed, one way that I differentiated between the private and public God concepts of my young respondents was to observe which form of language they employed.

In the discussion section of the preprimary data analysis, I commented that very little specific religious language is present. This is not a surprising finding. Until the children began attending school three months prior to data collection, most of them had not been exposed to specifically religious discourse. To them God was an everyday part of life and was spoken of in everyday language culled from their culture and meaningful to them. By year three, the children had two quite distinct ways of talking about God. When they were chatting to me about their ideas, they mostly employed everyday language. When they felt they were being asked to display their knowledge of 'proper religious ideas', they lapsed into an almost rote repetition of the 'correct' words and phrases. From year six onward, there was a variety of patterns in language usage. Students who did not experience God and who felt little interest in the 'God issue',

either used everyday language to inform me that God is not real or avoided committing themselves by making use of formal religious language. Those students who did experience the presence of God in their lives often described their ideas in everyday language. However, some students evidently found that religious language adequately named their experiences and concepts, so they adopted this form of language when communicating their ideas.

EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

As the name implies, this type of language is used by the respondents in their everyday communications. It is a language usage that is culture specific and is built up from the assumptions, experiences, and interpretations of a particular culture or sub-culture. This is the language most frequently employed by the respondents in describing and discussing their private concepts of God and the related experiences and relationship with God. The data contain many examples of 'everyday' language. Here are a few of them: Ross (pre:106) spoke about Jesus being a "good guy" whom the "bad guys" killed.[218] Jessica (pre:107) commented that God is going to have a stay over. Her letter says, "Dear God. I would like to give you kisses". Jade (pre:108) reported that God talks to people through "fairy dreams". Jasmine (3:134) spoke of a time when daddy smacked her. "I talked to God and it was like he was cuddling me." Emily (3:134) said, "God is lovely". Katie (3:142) thinks, "God is inside you and he's having fun everywhere and he's having fun with everyone at the same time." Hannah (6:162) wrote, "God is a bit fake because how could he of [sic] invented the world". Zeke (6:164) explained, "There are some things that I don't believe …like making Jesus rise from the dead and stuff like that". Brendan (6:171) asserted, "God is a fairy story". Mickey (9:164) wrote, "I don't really believe in all that spiritual stuff. …I don't believe in God and how he does all the miracles …mumbo jumbo. The bible; crap basically." Lauren (9:192) believes, "God is our friend". Serenity (12:210) stated, "I don't believe God is a father. To me it makes more sense for God to be a mother" because "the whole creating thing" is like "women giving birth." Felicity (12:212) wrote that God is "a good mate". Alissa (12:217) spoke of "nice little bible stories" which are "nice to believe in when you're a little kid, but when you grow up they kind of don't have any relevance any more." She finds many of the stories "difficult to swallow".

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[218] Domenic (pre:107) and Fraser (3:142) also used these terms.

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

'Religious' language is the formal language of the religion, employed in church and often during religious education. This use of a separate language implies that God is a separate reality and not a part of everyday life. This is one of the ways 'religious' language differs from 'everyday' language. Another difference is that 'religious' language is often formulaic and static. 'Everyday' language, while having its own formulaic conventions, is constantly in flux, and children (especially adolescents) can contribute to new forms, making the language theirs. The responses of the participants abound with 'religious' language. Here are a few examples: Daniel (pre:105) said, "God is in heaven and in church". Jade (pre:108) believes, "God likes all the children". Aaron (3:132) said, "God cares for us". Timothy (3:132) "thought about God creating animals". Patra (3:133) asserted, "God is in our souls". Sam (3:134) stated, "God is a shepherd". Sarah (3:137) said that "God died for us". Kendrick (3:140) volunteered the information that "God created heaven and earth" and "God loves us and forgives our sins". Jeremy (3:141) stated, "God is our father". Tom (6:169) wrote, "I think God is the almighty ruler of everything". David (6:163) said that Jesus "shows you the way and the light". He also spoke of "the body and blood of Christ". Spoonfish (9:188) commented, "God created all things". Dubbo (9:192) claimed, God is "the hope of the world". Erin (12:211) thinks that God is "always watching and he's vengeful". Teresa (12:213) wrote that God is "someone who watches over us". John Zaritsky (12:213) said God is the "Almighty Father". Note in the above examples that the preponderance of replies come from year three respondents. It is in middle primary school that children seem to possess facility with both 'everyday' and 'religious' language, and the ability to readily switch from one to the other.

SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

Otto (1958) emphasized the centrality of a nonrational element in religious experience which goes beyond words. Harms (1944) concluded that the concept of God is a deeply psychological concept which cannot be matched with the use of words. I found that young children, in particular, often can't explain, but they can express, largely through symbol. There is a large range of symbolism present in the data, from the four-year-old preschoolers to the seventeen-year-old young adults.[219]

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[219] Although adolescents employ a richer, more diverse repertoire of symbolism, it is incorrect to conclude that symbolic usage is absent in pre-adolescents. In fact, I found that the only way to adequately converse with preschoolers about God is to enter into their world and communicate symbolically.

There are different types of symbolic usage present in the data. The most important of these for this study is pictorial symbolism. Gunther-Heimbrock (1999:54) argued that much analysis of children's art is based on a false premise, that of "taking pictures to be a mere translation or reproduction of what is first developed by children in their minds". He believed that pictures are more than this. After observing the process of producing art work undertaken by my respondents, I concur with Gunther-Heimbrock. On many occasions, the participants did not know what they were going to draw until they had already begun. In a few cases, the respondent had to complete the artwork and reflect on what had been drawn before being able to understand what it was that had been expressed.[220] For the preprimary children, artwork compensated for their linguistic inexperience, and revealed their often sophisticated concepts.[221] Artwork provided the year three and year six respondents with an additional method of communicating their private God concepts.[222] The adolescent respondents, many of whom felt confusion and conflict, found that pictures conveyed their feelings and ideas more readily than words.[223] These students also found that artwork provided a form for their expressions of the transcendence, ineffability, or presence of God.[224] Undoubtedly, the symbolic expressions permitted through the medium of artwork allow communication of concepts, experiences, and feelings that cannot be adequately articulated in words.

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[220] The artwork and responses of Eric (6:170) are a good example of this.

[221] For example, Makayla's picture (Fig. 4:1) represents the alienness of God through the portrayal of "his" alien mother. Chelsea (Fig. 4:9) expresses her perception that God is unlike her by drawing God as a legless, antennaed alien. Reesha (Fig. 4:4) communicates her perception of God's loving watchfulness by representing "him" with large eyes and a smiling mouth, and she portrays her perception that God is existentially different from humanity by giving God an undersized body with tiny arm and leg buds. Jade (Fig. 4:3) and Annabel (Fig. 4:7) express their awareness that God is considered to be male by drawing "him" with a penis. In addition, Annabel represents the comparative insignificance of women by drawing Mary one-sixth the size of her son. Christopher (Fig. 4:6) communicates the power of God by portraying "him" as a hero who defends "good people" by battling with, and defeating, alien invaders.

[222] For example, Jasmine (Fig. 5:3) portrays the benevolence of God by drawing God preparing a feast for her to thank her. The maternal love of God is portrayed by Emily (Appendix 3:6) in the figure of her mother, who goes horseriding with her. Sarah (Fig. 5:6) depicts both the femaleness and the magical power of God through her depiction of God as a fairy queen. Soni (Fig. 5:7) expresses his perception of God's tyranny through his picture of an autocratic king expelling his tearful son. Kendrick (Fig. 5:8) depicts the invincibility of God through his portrait of a muscled superman withstanding the fiery breath of dragons. Alex (Fig. 5:11) portrays the managerial role of God by drawing a control tunnel leading from heaven to earth, inside which is an invisible God manipulating the controls. Zeke (Appendix 6:6) portrayed the creative power of God in the form of a wizard. Russell (Fig. 6:10) expresses his notion of the partnership of God and humanity through his version of Michelangelo's Creation of Man. The purity of God and the contrasting sinfulness of humanity is portrayed by Simon (Fig. 6:3). Kristin's picture (Fig. 6:6) of God's "Helping Hand" conveys her perception of the intimate role God plays in her life. The creative and sustaining power of God is depicted by Eric (Fig. 6:8) as a ball of immense light. Brendan (Fig. 6:9) communicates his disdainful and agnostic concept of God by drawing God on the gallows.

[223] These expressions can be seen in the pictures of Mickey (Fig. 7:2), Corey (Fig. 7:3), Homer (Appendix 9:6), Raff (Fig. 8:3), Felicity (Appendix 12:6), and Alissa (Fig. 8:7).

[224] See, for example, the artwork of Ashlee (Fig. 7:5), Travolta (Fig. 7:6), Anthony (Fig. 8:1), Mary (Appendix 12:3), Draconian Serenity (Fig. 8:2), Gypsy (Appendix 12:4), Teresa (Appendix 12:5), and Sally (Fig. 8:6).

In addition to the symbolic expressions found in the artwork of the respondents, there are many instances of linguistic symbolism. These take the form of poetic language, analogies, and metaphors. An example of poetic language can be found in the artwork of Draconian Serenity (Fig. 8:2). Around the periphery of her artwork, framing it, are the words, "Outside the membrane of human thought lies a blankness entwined with the secret mysteries borne out of the chasm of chaos/creation, where one and all are, were and have yet to become, forever eluding our avaricious minds". For Serenity, poetic language provides a linguistic medium unfettered by the bonds of traditional language usage ('poetic licence') that enables her to voice something of God, who is in essence ineffable.

Many respondents employ analogies to help them hint at something of the indescribable nature and ways of God. Often, these analogies are couched in the language of similes. Lavenita (6:166) says God is "like another father".[225] Kristin (6:169) conceives of God as "a helping hand". Brendan (6:171) believes God is "a fairy story". Hue (9:191) finds that God is "like an invisible presence". Babi (9:187) thinks of "us being like the planets and God being like the sun". Homer (9:190) asserts that God is "like a jigsaw puzzle; hard to put together". For Guido (12:208), God is "a lifeline". Draconian Serenity (12:210) maintains that God is like a woman giving birth.

Whereas analogies posit a direct line of similarity, metaphors are less direct. Some metaphors contain the element of surprise by positing a line of similarity between fundamentally different entities. Several of these metaphors appear in the responses of the adolescent participants. Wednesday (9:187) depicts and refers to God as a lion king (symbolising that God is "the almighty ... ruler of everything. He controls everything; when we live, when we die, what happens to us."). Humanity appears as multi-coloured mice (indicating that "we're all insignificant things in the universe"). Daddy's Little Girl (9:193) expressed several unusual comparisons. She declared that "God is like a really big elephant because he's really big and he can see everything and remember everything." God provides "protection like rubber - 99%". "God is like a hippie; God is cool and would say, 'Peace, man'".

Zuercher (1991:27) asserted, "The choice is our own; we can address the Divine in terms that fit for us, and we will do so differently at various moments of our lives". The respondents of this study would agree with her.

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[225] This simile for God is also found in the response of Alex (12:209) who says God is "like a good father". A variation comes from Innocence (9:194), who says "God is like another parent". Even more unusual is Anthony's (12:208) notion that God supports him like "my mum supporting me in my homework".

IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Liddy (2002:13) asserted, "The students who come to Catholic schools today are from a variety of religious and secular backgrounds. A fundamental responsibility of the classroom religious education curriculum should be to nurture the spiritual life of each one of these children." Several of the findings of this study have implications for the ways teachers fulfil this responsibility.

The first finding is a resounding confirmation of the notion that children and adolescents do have a meaningful, idiosyncratic spirituality. They are not empty vessels that need to be filled with adult wisdom. Rather, many of them have experiences of the presence of God in their lives that leads to the development of close relationships with God. These students possess an openness to the divine and an ability not only to entertain, but to create, novel ways of imagining and naming the God they experience.

The second finding is my repeatedly mentioned observation of the dichotomy between what children truly believe and what they are taught, between what Rizzuto (1979) called children's 'private God' and their 'public God'. Crawford and Rossiter (1993:2) wrote of their adolescent respondents locating "*formal religion* in one corner of their lives and their *search for a spirituality* in another". I found that not only my adolescent respondents, but my primary and preprimary participants engaged in this separation process.

These two findings highlight for me two of the main flaws in Catholic religious education in Australia today. Firstly, there is a lack of understanding of, and respect for, the personal spirituality of students. Secondly there is a lack of congruence between students' spiritual needs and the content of religious education.[226] Rymarz and Graham (2006:86, 87), in their study of religious education in the Catholic schools of Australia, noted:

> The Catholic school ... does not appear to provide ... an engaging religious education program. ... Students do not dislike religious education, but do not see it as an engaging discipline that can help them deal with some of the difficulties that they experience with religious beliefs.

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[226] An anecdote that encapsulates this problem comes from Bosacki & Ota (2000:203), who relate the responses of two ten-year-old girls. "Mrs Baker tells us about the things she believes and imagines and like it sort of confuses you because you've got your own beliefs of how things are".

I believe there needs to be a balance between the religious enculturation of students into a particular faith tradition and addressing the individual spiritual needs of students. Crawford &Rossiter (1993:1) wrote of "a *dual commitment*: to provide a religious education that does justice to the sponsoring church, while still fostering the spiritual development of young people". It seems to me that this is what is required in our religion-sponsored schools.

How can teachers begin to address this dual commitment? The answer to this question has been supplied time and again by researchers and teachers committed to the spiritual development of children, and the answer is unanimous: we must listen. Bosacki & Ota (2000:217) declared, "Our work has convinced us of the need to look at how we listen and respond to the voices of all young people". Cram (1996:70-71) argued, "The first step of any program of Christian religious education … is not proclamation but listening. … We need to listen to the knowledge of the children." Liddy (2002:14) maintained, "The crucial point educationally is the reality of the child's world, of beginning with the child's experiences of life and relationships. All education must begin and end with children's own inwardness." She also reflectively commented, "It leaves me asking if we can really undertake contemporary religious education unless we have a much richer understanding of the worldviews and meaning-making of the students in Catholic schools" (ibid:13). Ramsey (1999:117) reminded us that "Teachers are aware of the importance of beginning with the children's own experiences of life and relationships". Strangely, this educational maxim is frequently disregarded when it comes to teaching religious education. If teachers were to listen to their students, they would discover the rich spiritual lives of their students.

The second step for teachers to take is to recognise the twofold nature of their task. One strand of religious education needs to be the expression and exploration of the students' own spirituality, especially their concepts, beliefs, and questions. A second strand is the exploration and understanding of the teachings of the faith tradition. Ultimately, the teacher's task is to create a dialogue between the faith tradition and the personal spirituality of the students. [227] This synthesis of the public and the private has the capacity to ground the students' individual spiritualities in the faith tradition, and to introduce a sense of relevance of the faith tradition for the lives of the students.

There is, however, a major stumbling block to the implementation of this manner of teaching religious education. Within many teachers throughout Australia there is a

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[227] Erricker & Erricker (1994:174) concur. They wrote, "We need to provide a systematic approach that takes seriously the children's imagination and interpretations of their experiences, as well as scrutinising how we present religious world views".

lack of knowledge and understanding about the Catholic Christian faith. Rymarz and Graham (2006:88) noted, "It appears that most religious education teachers working in Catholic schools do not have sufficient training and background to teach these topics [for example, creation]". This conclusion may be surprising to some, who point to the requirement for teachers to be appropriately accredited in order to teach religious education. As a former lecturer of religious education, mostly to trainee teachers, I can offer several observations that may partially explain Rymarz and Graham's conclusion. Firstly, a teacher need only study three units in religious education to be accredited to teach this subject in both primary and secondary schools in Western Australia. This number is considerably lower than the number of units required to accredit a teacher in all other subject areas. The majority of these units are methodological. Secondly, it is assumed that students who wish to *teach* in Catholic schools have formerly *studied* in Catholic schools and become thoroughly cognisant with the Catholic faith in their 12 years of religious education. There are four flaws apparent in this assumption. The first flaw is the assumption that Catholic students will have attended Catholic schools and received religious education. The second flaw is the assumption that the teaching of the *beliefs* of the religion will result in an *understanding* of the religion.[228] The third flaw is the assumption that the religious education received by these trainee teachers was conducted by competent and professionally trained teachers.[229] The fourth flaw is the assumption that, after 12 years of religious education, adolescents who leave school at the age of seventeen will have acquired an excellent understanding of what is essentially an adult faith, an understanding for which they are not maturationally or experientially ready.[230] These four, ill-founded assumptions are based on expectations that do not take into account the educational concept of readiness, that ignore observations of what actually is happening in religious education classrooms, and that do not take into consideration the religious knowledge of Catholic students educated in state schools. It would seem, therefore, that a priority for Catholic religious education today is a thorough education of teachers in the beliefs, teachings, and religious issues of their faith.

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[228] My extensive experience of Catholic education is that it is more focussed on catechising (or persuading people to accept its tenets) than it is about helping people to understand its beliefs (and, therefore to assimilate the faith into their lives). This focus results in the majority of adolescents dismissing the faith as irrelevant and "tuning out" in religious education classes. A minority of students may know the teachings of the Catholic faith, but will have little understanding of it; certainly not enough to teach a topic like "creation".

[229] This, however, is rarely the case. In my own experience, Catholic high schools are more likely to employ teachers who specialise in science or maths or English and who have completed the requisite 3 religious education units, rather than employ a specialist religious education teacher. In addition, Rymarz and Graham found that many of their respondents complained that their religious education classes contained material they had covered many times before. Apparently, many teachers repeat basic, simple content rather than address topics they feel ill-equipped to handle.

[230] In essence, just when these young adults are becoming able to enter into an adult understanding and appreciation of their faith, they stop receiving religious education because they are considered to already be educated in the faith.

Two other findings of this study have implications for religious education. One is the prevalence of the respondents' use of everyday language to describe the God they encounter. This is an example teachers could emulate. Although there are times when specifically religious language is appropriate to describe the otherness of God, this needs to be balanced with an understanding of the closeness and involvement of God in everyday life, an understanding fostered by the use of everyday language.

The second finding was the disturbing discovery of the negative impact of androcentric God concepts and language on girls. Over half the preprimary girls indicated in some way that God's maleness renders "him" different from them and alien. Two girls concluded from this that they are unacceptable (Makayla, Fig. 4:1) and inconsequential (Annabel, Fig 4:7).[231] I am convinced that this is not a finding peculiar to this group. Other researchers, male and female, who are sufficiently sensitised to this issue and who followed my methods, would arrive at similar findings. It is important that a much broader range of God concepts be made available to children, including neutral and female concepts, and that feminine as well as masculine language be applied to God. This conclusion is not new. Johnson (1992:7) pointed out that "The reality of God is mystery beyond all imagining. So transcendent, so immanent is the holy mystery of God that we can never wrap our minds completely around this mystery and exhaust divine reality in words or concepts". Nolan (1996:19) explained, "For this reason it is vitally important that we constantly use different images of God in our spoken and written language, as continual use of one image only could easily lead to identifying God with that concept or image and no others". This is what has happened within Christianity. The androcentric God concepts that almost exclusively name God have led to the devaluing of women and girls and their exclusion from full participation in the religious life of most Christian Churches.[232] Meehan (1991:73) gets to the core of the problem when she states, "Since God is both female and male and neither female nor male, there is a need for an inclusive language for God that utilizes the experiences of both women and men". If this advice were heeded, the self-esteem and self-respect of girls would be greatly boosted. Unfortunately, this is not likely to occur. The words of Erricker & Erricker (1994:176), written over a decade ago, may prove prophetic.

> To continue doing theology on the basis of outmoded metaphors of
> God is hurtful. ... We risk alienating pupils because they cannot identify

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[231] A friend of mine, who is a priest, intellectually assents to the notion that God is neither male nor female, and therefore it is appropriate to speak of God in both male and female terms. However, when I apply female pronouns to God during our theological discussions, he becomes uncomfortable, and corrects my speech. Apparently, on an emotional level, availing oneself of female language in reference to God is to speak of God in a derogatory way. The derogation of women and girls implied in this response (which is by no means unique) will only begin to be reversed when both girls and boys are exposed to positive female language and concepts of God.

[232] This is despite the fact research overwhelmingly concludes that women are more religious than men and make up more than 70% of church membership.

their concerns and relationships within the metaphorical paradigms [of traditional religion]. The understandable response of individuals in this situation is to turn their back on an outlook within which their own identity is devalued.

The potential for teachers of religious education to enhance the spiritual development of their students is explained by Hill (1988:109).

> Human experience is revelatory, and often people are having deeply spiritual happenings in their life without naming them spiritual or religious. But when they find themselves in a trusting atmosphere, they are often willing to speak of such special experiences and the questions and insights connected with them. The religious educator can play an important role in giving people the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the significance of these moments and to share them with other people. It is important that people connect their valued human experiences with spirituality and not see spirituality as foreign to everyday life.

Liddy (2002:19) encapsulated the direction ahead for religious eduction if it wishes to fulfil its potential.

> Coles' research, in particular, attests to the power of the formal religious dimension in helping children develop their spirituality. But this must be done in ways which first begin with the questions children are asking and not with the answers the Christian Tradition can supply. Coles would have us establish fruitful relationships with our students where we really listen to them and only then attempt to respond. New religious education Guidelines contain wonderful summaries of the Catholic Christian worldview but give less evidence of awareness of the questions students are asking and the experiences they seek.

Vardy (1997:2) offered his vision for religious education in Australia. "It is suggested that the time has come for Australian schools to look again at their religious and values education methods, to produce a vision that is distinctively Australian but which nevertheless engages children and is acceptable to parents. Any such vision must embrace a wide range of topics which are rooted in Australia's heritage, which give real insight into key areas of religious belief and which are relevant to young people today."

CONCLUSION

The one hundred participants of this study, who responded generously to my request to share with me their spiritual experiences and insights, provided me with a fascinating glimpse into the spiritual world of children. I found that many of these children had moving and meaningful experiences of God which led to the development of occasionally profound relationships with God. These experiences and relationships, along with the children's mundane life experiences, their religious education, and impacts from their culture and significant others, contributed to a rich tapestry of spiritual meaning-making that the children employed in addressing the important questions in their lives. The interpretive, philosophical, and theologising ability of many of my respondents, including many of the four-year-old children, was amazing. These children were clearly involved in spiritual problem-solving of a sophisticated kind. The image many adults have of children being spiritually immature or, even worse, of being incapable of meaningful spiritual experiences or understanding, is patently refuted by the responses of these children.

This study highlighted for me the central role experiences of God play in the spirituality of these children. In almost all cases, children's experiences of the presence of God (and the degree and frequency of these experiences) were the best indicators of whether children maintained a close, distant, or non-existent relationship with God, and whether or not they developed positive, relevant, meaningful God concepts. It was obvious to me that some children had an ability to experience God in a profound way, while others seemed unable to perceive the spiritual dimension hidden within the mundane world. Hamer (2004) would say that many of these children possess the so-called 'God gene' while others do not. Perhaps he is correct.

Zohar and Marshall (2000:3-4) developed a theory of spiritual intelligence. They described it as "the mental aptitude used by human beings to address and find solutions to problems of meaning and value and to place their lives and actions into a wider, richer, meaning-giving context". Within the parameters of this definition, many of the respondents of this study proved themselves to be spiritually intelligent. How wonderful it would be if more of their teachers and parents were aware of this fact.

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APPENDIX

PICTURES

The pictures that were not presented in the main document are presented here, in the order in which the supporting comments appear.

PREPRIMARY PICTURES

Mario Pre:1
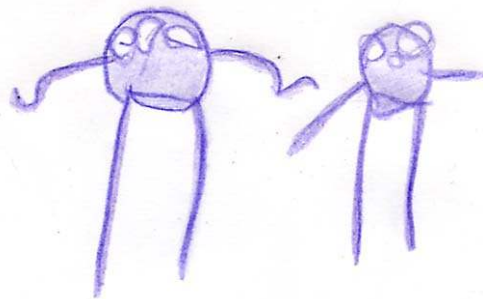
Harry Pre:2

Daniel Pre:3

Ross Pre:4

Dear God,
Please buy some icecream because it's so nice,
and some hot chips.
Love Domenic
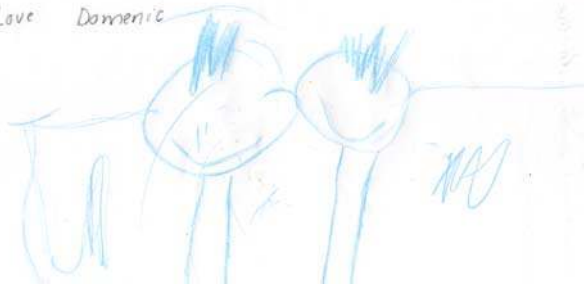
Domenic Pre:5

Jessica Pre:6

Emily Pre:7

Renae Pre:8

YEAR THREE PICTURES

Emma 3:1

Henry 3:2

Aaron 3:3

Timothy 3:4

Patra 3:5

Emily 3:6

Sam 3:7

Braydon 3:8

Alana 3:9

Justine 3:10
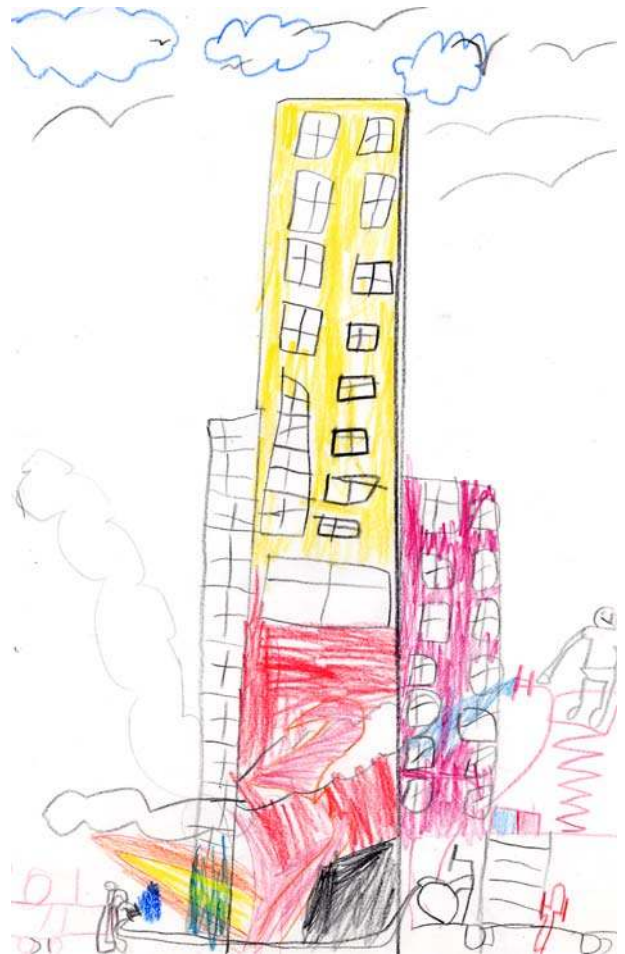
Carlton 3:12

Fraser 3:11

YEAR SIX PICTURES

Hannah 6:1

Megan 6:2

David 6:3
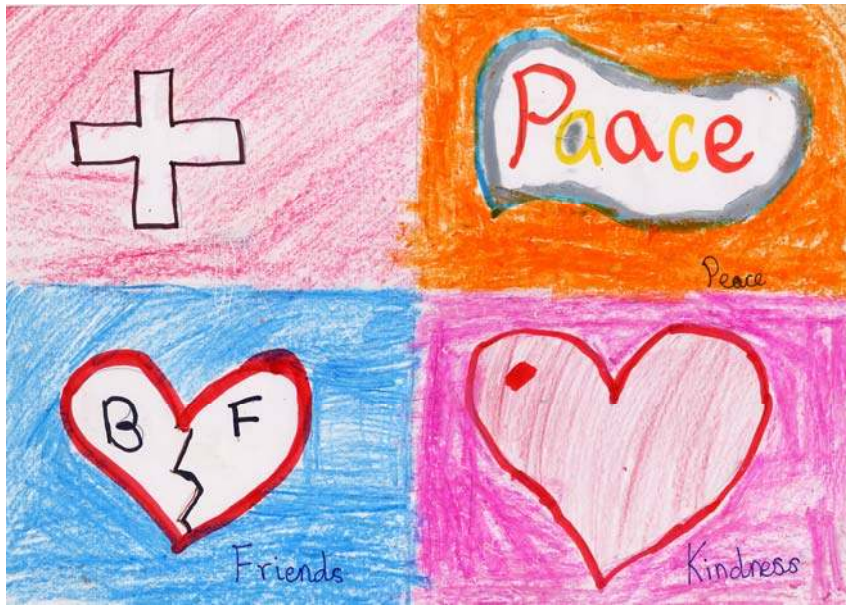
Rebecca 6:4

Joe 6:5

Zeke 6:6
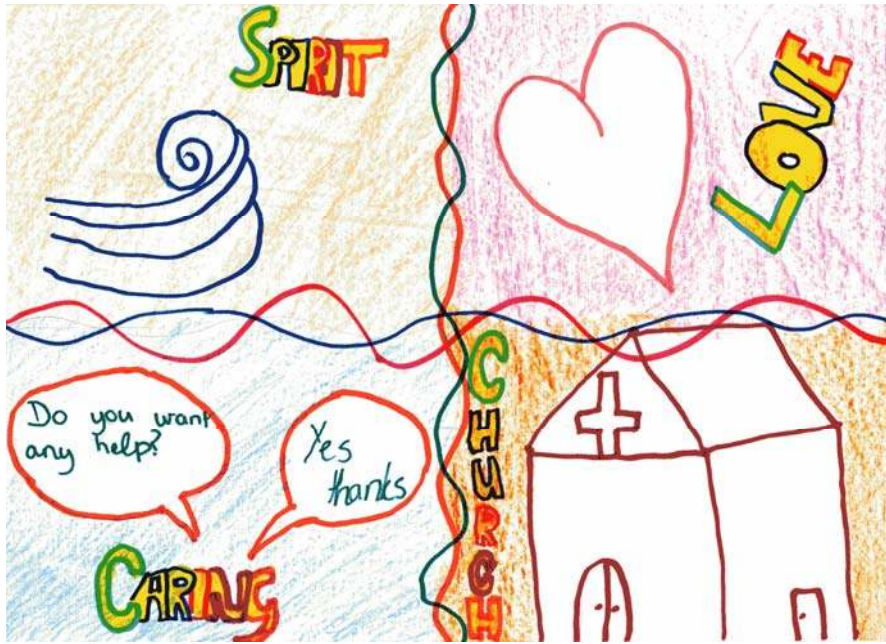
Lavenita 6:7

Thomas 6:8

Tom 6:9

Michael 6:10

YEAR NINE PICTURES

Babi 9:1

David 9:2
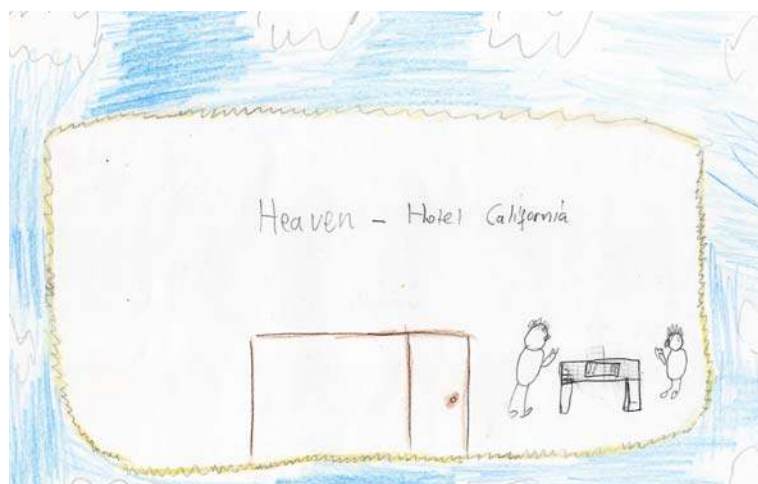
Bob 9:3
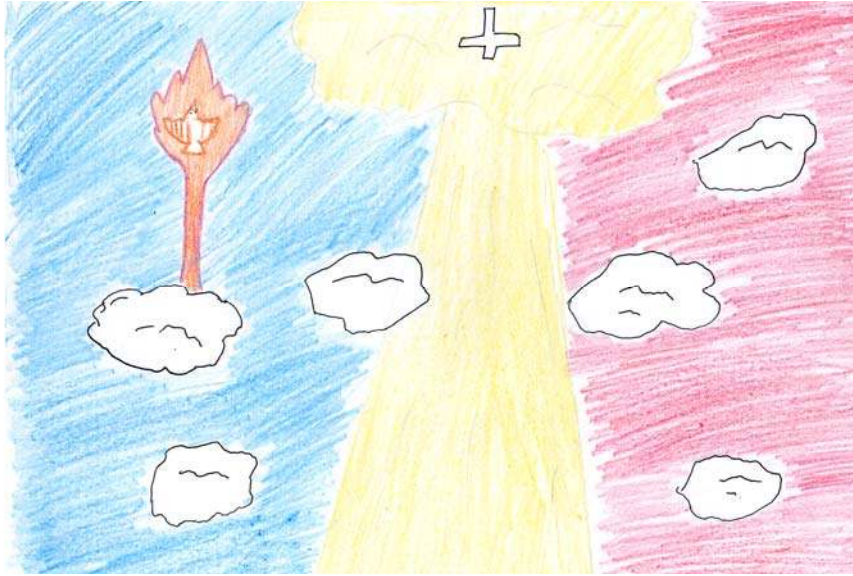
Spoonfish 9:4
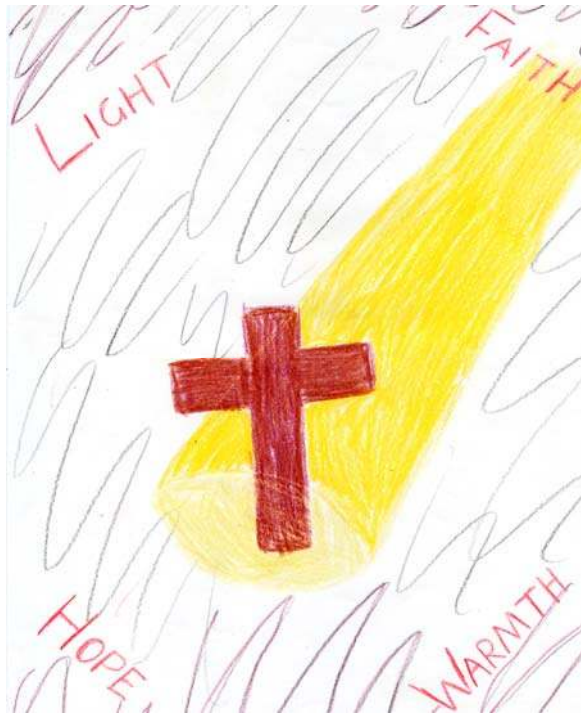
Ben 9:5

Homer 9:6

Phil 9:7
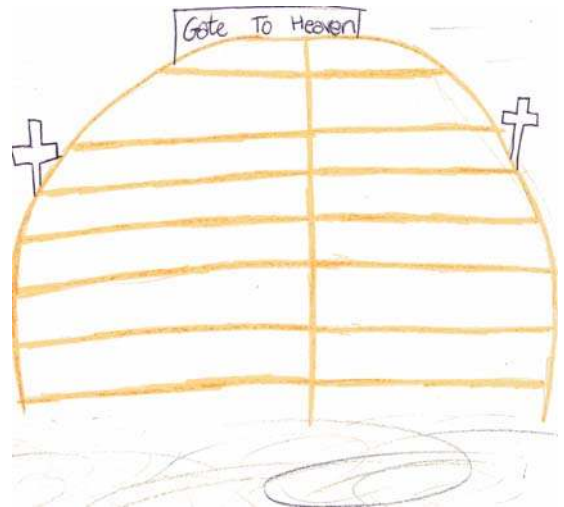
Hue 9:8

Dream Girl 9:9

Lauren 9:10
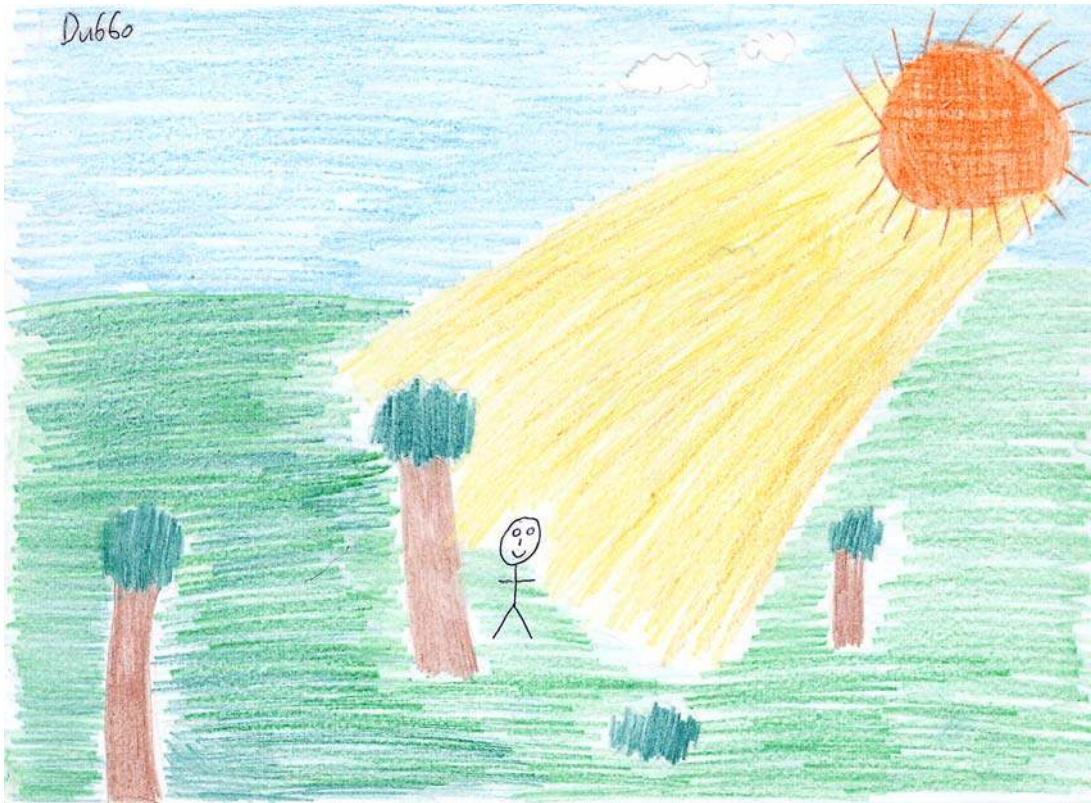
Dubbo 9:11

Innocence 9:12
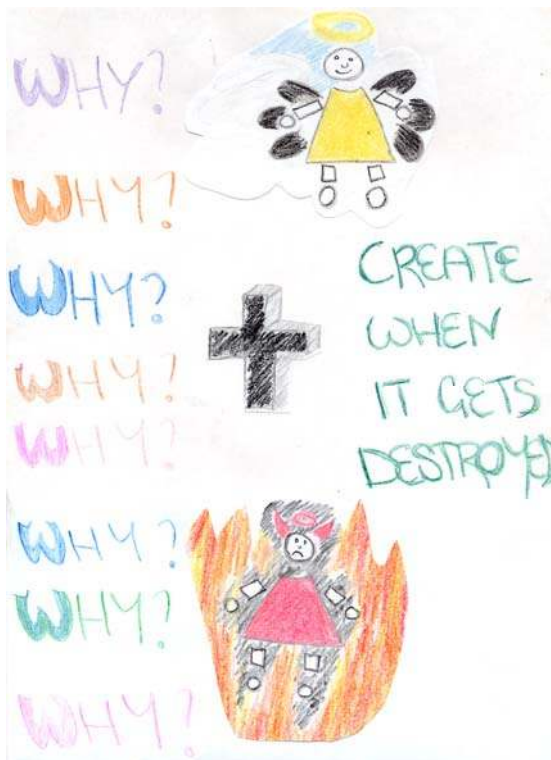
Paddle Pop 9:13

YEAR TWELVE PICTURES
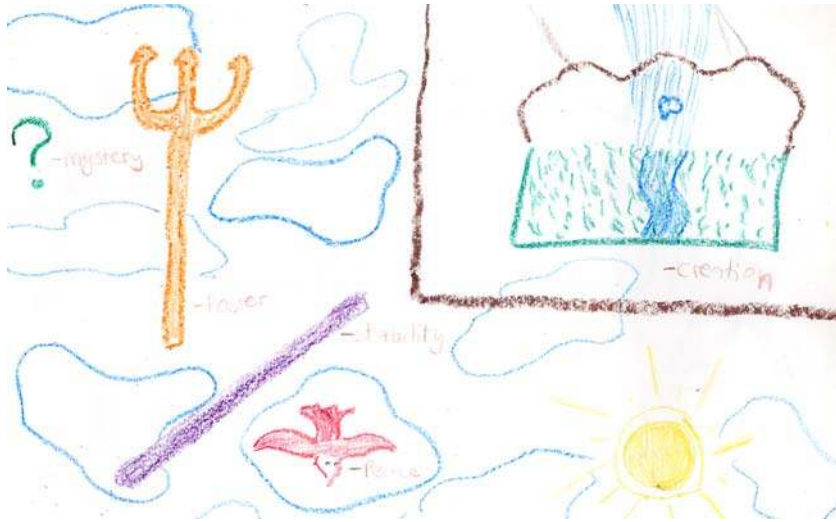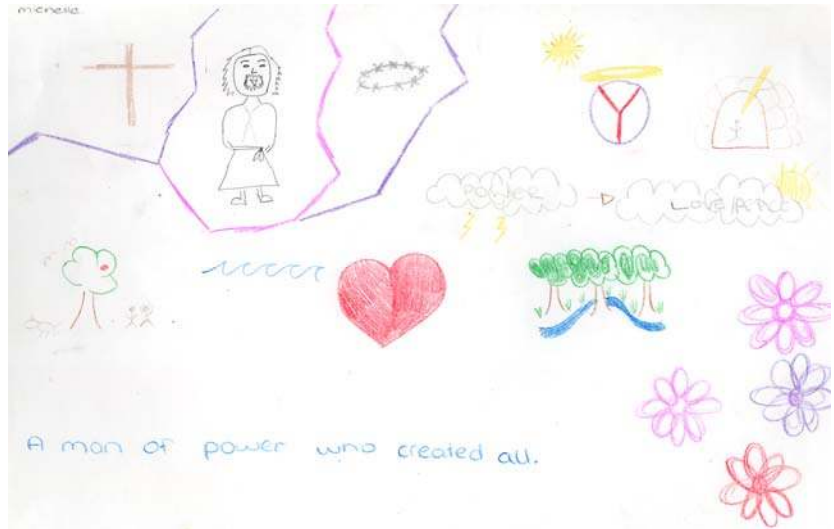
Guido 12:1

Alex 12:2
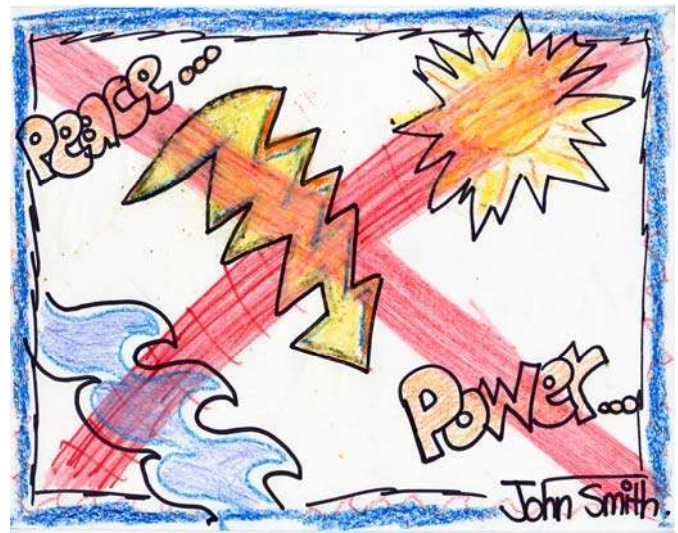
Mary 12:3

Gypsy 12:4

Teresa 12:5

Felicity 12:6

Boof 12:7

Michelle 12:8

Kurt 12:9

John 12:10

Roman 12:11