The meaning of God today: A phenomenographic study of the art and language of a group of senior secondary students

Anne P. Devenish

Edith Cowan University

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THE MEANING OF GOD TODAY

A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY
OF THE ART AND LANGUAGE
OF A GROUP OF SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS.

BY

ANNE DEVENISH B.Ed. G.D.A. Dip.T.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Award of

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at the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences,
Edith Cowan University

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ABSTRACT

Relationship with the Divine is the core of Christianity and the professional concern of a number of ministries, including that of religious education. Knowledge about what God means to children and adolescents would be beneficial to teachers. However, research has provided little useful information in this area. Most research conducted so far has been quantitative in nature and does not uncover the lived experience or the participants' personal understandings of this phenomenon. The qualitative research that has been done focuses mainly on the range of concepts of God held by participants. It is concerned with uncovering some of the elements that lead to the formation of these concepts, and not with determining which concepts are meaningful to respondents. This study sought to discover the nature of the meaning of God for a group of senior secondary students at a metropolitan Catholic high school. It focused on such issues as what God is to these adolescents, what concepts of God are meaningful to them, what mediates God to them, and what influence God has on their lives. The purpose of this study was to provide teachers with useful information that could help to guide them in their educational endeavours. The theoretical paradigm adopted was that of critical liberal feminist theology. The research methodology was that of phenomenography. The methods used for the collection of data were drawing, journalling, and the in-depth interview.
DECLARATION

I certify that this theses does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature......................................

Date......1.5.-12.-95..............
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Living in relationship with the divine is the core of Christianity. Much of the Christian religion is devoted to exploring and explaining the nature of God, the nature of humankind, and the nature of the relationship between the two. Theologian Dorothee Solle (1990) maintained that “the object of theology can only be the relationship between God and human beings” (p. 1).

Fostering relationship with God is a key component of a number of ministries. Pastors, chaplains and faith educators are all involved in this endeavour in some form or another. Its importance in faith education is mentioned in the work of Babin (1965), Macdonald (1990) and Thom (1993). Thom expressed this idea when she said that one of the key issues in religious education was 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” (p. 35).

For teachers to be able to teach about God in this way, it would be useful for them to know what images, concepts and language speak to their students, and how their students encounter, experience, and are influenced by God in their everyday lives.
THE PROBLEM

Research by Babin (1965), Cavalletti (1983), Blombery (1989), Rizzuto (1979, 1991) and Thom (1993), among others, indicates that there is a range of language about God and concepts of God, and that people use these in different ways.

Effective teaching in the area of religious education, therefore, does not depend on knowing the correct language and concepts. It is more a matter of knowing the types of language and concepts that have meaning for one's students, and the ways these interrelate with, and foster, students' relationships with God. "Only by establishing where people are can one hope to communicate with them. By coming to terms with their present thinking one can challenge and extend them into new ideas and realisations" (Blombery, 1989, p. 85).

Most of the research into God-language, God-concepts and relationship with God is quantitative in nature and does not investigate the meaning or function of these phenomena for the research respondents. In his article 'Can Research Challenge and Foster Religious Education?', Kuiper (cited in Dahlin, 1990) asks, "What is shown in these data about the value these youngsters place on their belief? Are these answers well developed personal answers or reactions to the unattractive conventional answers of other people?" (p. 75). He concluded that "it is a bit disappointing that as a planner one cannot benefit more from this research" (ibid.). His concerns are well founded. Much research in this field simply requires students to respond to answers provided by other people.
SIGNIFICANCE

Phenomenographic research seeks to understand “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 118). Its purpose is to discover the meaning for each respondent of the phenomenon being researched.

Dahlin (1990), speaking of the usefulness of research for religious education, believed 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. (p. 75)

This study used phenomenographic methodology in an attempt to uncover and elucidate the meaning of God for a group of adolescents. This information should benefit teachers in the following ways:

(a) Knowing the ways students use language, and the kinds of God-language that communicate to students most effectively, will enable teachers to appropriate this language for themselves. Increased effectiveness in communication could result.

(b) Knowing what images and concepts of God have meaning for their students will enable teachers to employ these more frequently, making their teaching more relevant to their students’ needs.

(c) Knowing how students encounter God and relate to God, and what helps and hinders this relationship, will be useful in planning and implementing religious education lessons that are meaningful, relevant and effective.
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to describe, analyse and interpret something of the meaning of God for a group of senior secondary students at a Catholic high school. The objectives of the study were to:

(a) describe the meaningful God-concepts, God-language, and relationship with God of a group of senior secondary students;
(b) analyse those descriptions;
(c) extrapolate patterns of meaning inherent in the data;
(d) derive from the above procedure recommendations for teacher practice, theory development and further research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central question addressed by the research was: 'What is the meaning of God for a group of senior secondary students at a Catholic high school?' The following subsidiary questions guided data collection:

(a) What does the word 'God' mean to this group of students?
(b) What are these students' ideas of God?
(c) What do these students think God is like?
(d) How do these students feel God communicates with them?
(e) How do these students feel God relates to them?
(f) How do these students encounter God in their lives?
(g) What effect does the experience of God, or lack of experience of God, have on the students' lives?
OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

GOD-LANGUAGE: the language used when speaking about God or to God.

GOD-IMAGE: the mental picture one has of God.

GOD-CONCEPT: the images held concerning God, together with ideas about the qualities, characteristics, role and relational nature of God.

FUNCTIONAL CONCEPTS OF GOD: God-concepts that carry meaning for the individual.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD: the nature of the perceived relationship between self and God, including null and negative relationships.

MEANING OF GOD: the complex constellation of concepts, feelings, experiences, reflections and actions which both inform and result from experience of God and relationship with God.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this review are:

(a) to examine the key concepts which relate to the research topic;
(b) to examine the main theories which relate to the research topic;
(c) to review the research conducted in fields relating to the research topic.

Of the literature reviewed, five categories have emerged. They are:

(1) relevant concepts and theories about the nature and function of language;
(2) concepts and theories about religious language;
(3) the relevance of artwork in exploring questions about God;
(4) previous research into (a) God-language,
    (b) God-concepts,
    (c) relationship with God,
    (d) the use of artwork;
(5) relevant theories and conclusions arising from the research.
Since the time of the early Greek philosophers, people have understood language as being primarily descriptive in nature. Whorf (1956) described it thus:

Natural logic says talking is merely an incidental process concerned strictly with communication, not with formulation of ideas. Talking, or the use of language, is supposed only to 'express' what is essentially already formulated nonlinguistically. Formulation is an independent process, called thought or thinking, and is supposed to be largely indifferent to the nature of particular languages. (p. 207)

This approach to language, which is called the classical approach, views language as corresponding to a hidden reality. Habermas (1968) called this understanding the "correspondence theory". According to this theory, the function of language is to describe and, thus, reveal reality.

Earlier this century, however, Whorf developed the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis, which Whorf called the "linguistic relativity principle", proposed a very different understanding of the nature and function of language:

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group...We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir, cited in Whorf, 1956, p. 134)
This approach to language is still evident today. Coll (1994) drew upon this understanding when she said, "Language is an arbitrary and powerful symbol created by humans who are, in turn, created by language. Language conditions our thinking; the extent of our language is the extent of our thought" (p. 21). Harris (1987) incorporated this understanding into her theories. She said "All our thinking and knowing is shaped by the metaphors we use....if we do not have appropriate language we cannot see" (pp. 19, 20). Orwell (1949) also reflected this understanding in his famous novel 1984, when he explained how Big Brother eliminated illegal ideas by expunging from the language the words that described these ideas, rendering them literally unthinkable.

Eventually, opposition to this theory led Whorf to modify it. In its new form, the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis proposed that language functions both to express and to constitute reality, thus recognising a dialogic relationship between language and the perception of reality (cited in Moore, 1985). This modified theory reflected the developing understanding of linguists that language influences the way we think, and that language is, in turn, shaped by the culture of the speakers. This revised form of the hypothesis is accepted today in a wide variety of disciplines: Habermas (1968), a philosopher, spoke of the 'consensus theory of truth', a theory very similar to the modified Sapir/Whorf hypothesis. Lindfors (1987), a linguist, said that language is inextricably entwined with our perceiving. Kasper (1989), a theologian, claimed "all human knowing occurs through the medium of language, which always provides us with pre-existent symbols and schemata for interpreting reality" (p. 4). Mitrano (1990), an educationalist, spoke of "the power of language to shape thoughts and actions" (p. 51).
RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

In the theological field, the issue of the nature and function of religious language is of great importance, as it is the key to revelation (making God known). Many different approaches to religious language can be detected in the writings of theologians. These approaches can be seen as forming a continuum. Such a continuum might look like this:

```
Literalistic  Cultural-Linguistic  Analogical  Metaphorical
```

Leonard, Packer, Lindbeck, O'Grady, McGrath, Crossan, McFague

Figure 1. Continuum of Religious Language

The literalistic approach, sometimes called the literal approach, is found in the work of many scholars, especially those whose theological orientation is fundamentalist. Exemplified by such writers as Leonard, Oddie, and Foh, this approach holds that language functions to actually describe God.¹

¹ Bishop Leonard (1989) stated that the revelation of God in scripture is definitive and literally correct. He went on to say that God has chosen to reveal himself in certain ways, that is, in masculine language and with an emphasis on the concept of father. This language, therefore, constitutes divine revelation and is to be understood as a definitive description of God. Oddie (1984) concurred, adding that God must be understood and addressed as 'Father' and 'He', and that any attempt to use feminine language or concepts for God is blasphemous. Foh (1979) agreed with this assessment. She understood the definitive, revelatory nature of biblical God language as a directive from God that women be submissive to men.
The cultural-linguistic approach, a school of thought that arose within postliberalism, is exemplified by Lindbeck. Akin to the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis, the cultural-linguistic approach is described by McGrath (1994) as follows:

The ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach denies that there is some universal unmediated human experience which exists apart from human language and culture. Rather, it stresses that the heart of religion lies in living within a specific historical religious tradition, and interiorising its ideas and values. This tradition rests upon a historically mediated set of ideas. (p. 110)

Within this school of thought, theological language is understood as primarily descriptive, and truth is equated, at least in part, with fidelity to the distinctive doctrinal traditional of the Christian faith (ibid.)

The analogical approach views language about God as presenting an analogy of God, or a model of God, as a way of understanding something of God. This approach focuses on the similarities between God and the analogy or model used to describe God. The work of McGrath, exemplifies this way of thinking. This approach can also be seen underpinning the writings of many theologians such as Crossan (1994), Darragh (1990), Dulles (1974), Kasper (1989), Lane (1990), MacQuarrie (1967), McBrien (1992), McCloskey (1991), Meehan (1991), Mollenkott (1977), O’Grady (1994), Russell (1985), and Solle (1990).

2 For example, McGrath talks about the “analogical nature of theological language by which persons or social roles, largely drawn from the rural world of the ancient Near East, were seen to be suitable models for the divine activity or personality. One such analogy is that of a father... To speak of God as father is to say that the role of the father in ancient Israel allows us insights into the nature of God. It is not to say that God is a male human being.” (1994, p. 206).
The metaphorical approach, exemplified by McFague (1987), is found in the work of scholars such as Carr (in McGrath, 1995), Johnson (1986), Saussy (1991), Trau (1992) and Zuercher (1991). It is an approach often found within the work of those scholars whose orientation is towards feminist theology. Quoting McFague, Carr describes the metaphorical approach thus:

A new theory of the thoroughly metaphorical character of religious language has emerged in the light of feminist discussion of the doctrine of God. This theory argues that traditional analogical understanding has tended to stress the similarity between human concepts and God’s own selfhood while a metaphorical theology should focus rather in the God-human relationship and on the unlikeness of all religious language in reference to God even as it affirms some similarity. (in McGrath, 1995, p. 130)

This idea expresses the limits of religious language: God always transcends our language of God; God is always ‘more than’, ‘other than’. Many different concepts of God are encouraged in the beliefs that no one concept can encapsulate God, and that all language is capable of revealing something of the nature of God.
RELEVANCE OF ARTWORK IN EXPLORING GOD-QUESTIONS

Research into religious phenomena has tended to be both cognitively and linguistically oriented. Hyde (1990, p. 70) comments that much research was aimed at discovering "children's understanding of theological concepts". However, a number of problems arise when the affective, intuitive, and symbolic aspects of religiousness are neglected.

Hyde (1990) reached the conclusion that in much of the research he reviewed, "the ideas of children are only verbalisms, words repeated in a correct context without proper understanding" (p. 82).

Goldman (1965) also spoke of what he called the problem of "verbalism", that is, the problem of a discrepancy between children's concepts and their ability to verbalise these. Kuiper (cited in Dahlin, 1990) complained that much research does not present well developed personal answers by the respondents, but requires them to react to others' "unattractive, conventional answers" (p. 75).

Hyde (1990), in speaking of the respondents to a survey by White in 1970, comments 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 rather than an existential faith, and . . . they practised nominal theism" (p. 72).
Hyde (1990) noted that our concept of God is related to what we feel about God. He pointed out that despite the fact that feelings are an essential part of religion, the study of the affective aspect of religion has often been neglected (pp. 64, 165).

Harms (cited in Tamm, 1996) said, "The concept of God is a deeply psychological concept which cannot be matched with the use of words. The individual cannot express his or her innermost experiences verbally but must employ symbols, images and metaphors" (p. 34).

Coles (1990) noted 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. The drawings then frequently provoked comments and descriptions (p. 196).

This research set out to uncover the meaning of God. To explore this dimension, feelings, intuitive perception, and relational issues needed to be included. Clearly, also, symbolic and pictorial expression had to be a significant component of the data collected.
PREVIOUS RESEARCH

GOD-LANGUAGE

The importance and significance of God-language is noted by a number of scholars.

The influence of religious language on religious thinking is mentioned by Chittister (1987), Harris (1987), McGrady (1987), Marriage (1989) Clanton (1990) and Thom (1993). Consider, for example, this comment by Clanton: "Language is crucial to the way we think and experience God" (p. 56).

The fact that what one calls God affects one's relationship with God was spoken of by Gaden (1992) and Thom (1993). Thom notes that "the language we use speaks volumes about our theology and this in turn determines to a considerable degree, how we relate to the person we call 'our God'" (p. 38).

The overwhelming preponderance of masculine religious language was commented on by Hyde (1990) and Foster and Keating (1992). The latter noted that their data indicated that "the majority of these subjects either conceived of God as male, or at least used masculine language to refer to God" (p. 369).
The difficulties of this type of language, especially for girls, surfaced in the writings of Clanton (1990), Hyde (1990), Saussy (1991), Gaden (1992), and Spong (1992). In discussing her research, Clanton comments: "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" (pp. 71-72).

Russell (1985) and Moore (1989) spoke of the need to study the impact our God-language has on people. They noted the power of language to influence our concepts of God and our relationships with God.

The need for a revision or expansion of God-language was mentioned by Scharleman (1985), McFague (1982, 1987) Bulkeley (cited in Hyde, 1990), Treston (1990), and Kaufman (cited in Thom, 1993), among others. For example, in discussing Bulkely's conclusions, Hyde says:

From this demonstration of the importance of the image of the mother in influencing children's images of God, he argued at length that it was necessary to broaden religious language to express more adequately maternal aspects of God. (p. 94)

Nevertheless, there appears to be little research undertaken on this topic. Most research tends to focus on religious concepts, alluding only occasionally to religious language without actually investigating the function or impact of such language. No research has been found which investigated the religious language approach that people have or the impact of language on concept development or relationship with God.
GOD-CONCEPT

The God-concepts of people have been well-researched and much documentation is available in this area.

Much of this research is quantitative and focuses on the cognitive dimension. In 1964, Goldman systematically investigated a child’s religious thinking and concept development, using Piaget’s (1953) theory of cognitive development. The work of Elkind and Elkind (1962) and others was also based on Piaget’s research and used a similar method, that of the clinical interview. Fowler (1981) also used Piaget’s structural developmental theory in his research on faith development.

Researchers have tended to focus on the characteristics of God, described by a series of adjectives. One of the first tests developed with this focus in mind was the factor-analytic approach developed by Spilka, Armatas, and Nussbaum in 1964, and modified by Benson and Spilka in 1973. Later, the Adjective Rating Scale, based on Spilka’s instrument, was developed by Gorsuch (1968) and subsequently modified by Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls, and Frease (1986).

Problems with this approach have been noted by Goldman (1964), Blombery (1989), Rizzuto (1991), Hay, Nye and Murphy (1996).

Goldman (1964) reported what he called the problem of "verbalism", that is, the problem of a discrepancy between children's concepts and their ability to verbalise these.

Blombery (1989) noted that respondents are limited to single words and simple descriptions which do not reveal the personal interpretations an individual may place on a particular description of God.

The importance of this personal interpretation was highlighted by Rizzuto (1991), who spoke of the difference between an individual's "personal God" and the "official God" of their religion. She noted that it was the personal God-concept that was significant in a person's life.

In their review of the research in religious education, Hay, Nye, and Murphy (1996) observed that research has tended to neglect the investigation of children's personal expressions of spirituality and concentrated on children's cognitive comprehension of religious themes.

Researchers who have approached the study of God-concepts from a psychological perspective, have been interested in understanding the factors leading to the formation of God-concepts. Potvin (1985) investigated the variables that impacted on adolescent God-images. Buri and Mueller (1987) investigated the relationships between respondents' conceptions of self, conceptions of parents, and conceptions of God. Buri (1990) investigated the psychological bases for one's image of God. Nelson (1996) reviewed different theories about the formation of a God representation.
A few researchers have used a more affective or holistic approach to the study of God-concepts.

Cavalletti (1983), who investigated the religious potential of the child, spoke of the "changing field of relationships" between various aspects of one's religiousness (p. 13). She thus hinted at the complex, interdependent and dynamic nature of religious development. Because of this, Cavalletti used an informal, discursive approach to her interviews.

The above researchers sought to discover either the nature of children's God-concepts, or the factors which led to the formation of these concepts. None of them tried to determine the patterns of relationship between differing God-concepts and various relationships with God.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Blombery (1991), in her report on her survey into the faith and religiousness of Australians, concluded that God concepts influence relationship with God. Berryman (1985) studied the link between God-language and relationship with God by reviewing seven major lines of inquiry into religious experience and its relationship to religious language. His conclusion was: "We need to reframe the study of children's spirituality and religious language" (p. 126). Both of these quantitative studies began to touch on the nature of the relationships between these aspects of religiousness, but because of their lack of depth, were incapable of more than a superficial treatment of this topic.
The shortfall with the above research is that "a person's relationship to God does not come within the bounds of human measurement. Nor can it be quantitatively known" (Wakefield, 1975, p. 122). Qualitative description would appear to be a more appropriate method for uncovering something of the nature of relationship with God. Berryman (1985), after reviewing seven different types of inquiry, states: "Perhaps, phenomenology's method holds a clue for studying the quality of the child's relationship with God" (p. 125).

Hutsebaut (1972) reviewed research by the Centre of Religious Psychology of Louvain. He reported on an open question study of "the meaning of God for male and female adolescents in an attempt to elucidate the content of the relationship with God" (p. 396). He says, "However broad the scope of the items is, it nevertheless remains limited by the choice which necessarily must occur among all the possible items. In fact, the primary objective of the study was to inventorize the adolescents' representation of God" (p. 396). The study was more interested in deriving categories of content than in describing the nature of the respondents' lived experience.

**Using Art**

In 1944, Harms asked children to draw a picture of God, and he asked adolescents to draw what God meant to them. They were asked to write a description of their drawings on the reverse side. Harms then analysed the drawings. He determined that three developmental stages were apparent: the fairy-tale stage, the realistic stage, and the individualistic stage (cited in McGrath, 1987, pp. 25, 26). Harms seems to
have been focussed on finding evidence to support a developmental theory about concepts of God, rather than on discovering the importance and relevance of these concepts for the religious lives of the respondents.

Hindley, in 1965, used drawings because he "regarded art work as a more reliable means of expressing religious concepts" (cited in Hyde, 1990, pp. 75, 76). He then, however, asked children to write an essay about God and draw a picture illustrating it. He thus begins with the cognitive, linguistic elements, and relegates artwork to an illustration of it, rather than as a medium of expression of its own.

In 1976, Pitts (cited in Hyde, 1990) asked children to draw a picture of God and of another person. He found that anthropomorphic images of God predominated. This is not surprising, since Pitts juxtaposed the drawings of God with representations of other people, and he used 6 to 10 year olds as his respondents. Pitts himself had reservations about this method, saying that children might well have ideas which they could not express in this representational way (p. 75).

Heller, in 1986, compared and contrasted the ideas of God of forty children. Heller asked the children to tell him about the most important thing they believed in, and then focussed the rest of the interview on that name or notion. He also asked them to express their visions of God through drawings and doll play, and to write an original story about God. This fascinating study revealed some meaningful and useful data about the God concepts of children. Like Hindley, however, Heller began his study by talking to children about their ideas of God, and followed this up with pictures of their ideas. It is questionable whether his data would have been the same if he had begun with the pictorial expression.
Bassett et al. (1990) used artwork to develop a standardised set of pictures that would indicate developmental changes in perceptions of God. He noted that, "Researchers have developed a number of measures assessing God concepts. Most of these measures have looked at God using words...However, words may not always be the best way to describe God" (73). Bassett et al. hoped that their work would "provide a developmental look at God concept when words are insufficient" (p. 73). Bassett's work was aimed at verifying that a Piagetian developmental framework was in operation. He also asked children to think about God and draw what they thought. However, he did not differentiate between meaningful God concepts and concepts only assented to. Also, the bulk of his work was asking children to respond to pictures others had created. It is impossible to tell how closely the selected pictures corresponded with the participants' own images.

In 1990, Coles reported on the research he had done into children's ideas of God. Coles used interviews and drawings to elicit information. His interviews resulted in interesting and original comments about children's ideas of God. Of the drawings, however, Coles says, "I have accumulated 293 pictures of God; all but 38 are pictures of His face... These are pictures made in response to my request for 'a picture of God'" (p. 40). Clearly, picture drawing is a more illustrative element of data collection. The instructions given lead children to assume that they have been asked for a portrait. It illustrates the need to be very careful, and fairly non-specific, in one's instructions, if one's aim is to collect pictorial data of the meaning and importance of God for one's respondents.
Thom (1993) conducted some very interesting research into children's concepts of God. Her instruction to her respondents was 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". The variety and originality of the responses Thom obtained verify that a carefully worded, non-specific instruction is an important factor in the collection of meaningful pictorial data. Thom was concerned primarily with collecting data about children's conceptions of God, and did not investigate such issues as relationship with God.

In 1996, Maare Tamm reported on her study of the qualitative differences in children's God concept, reflected in their drawings. This phenomenographic study involved a total 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 to give a verbal commentary on what they had drawn. The drawings were then categorised according to qualitative differences noted in them. The methods of data collection and analysis are sound and useful: the wording of the instruction is questionable. In asking children to record what they think about God, Tamm runs the risk of being given what the children think is the correct or expected answer. It then becomes difficult to assess the level of meaning of these responses for the lives of the respondents.
RELEVANT THEORIES AND CONCLUSIONS

The following are some of the chief findings and theories that emerged from the research reviewed. Several of these provided useful approaches through which to analyse the data that emerged from the present study.

That God-language and concept are almost exclusively masculine was one of the findings of Nelson, Cheek, and Au (1985), Hyde (1990), and Foster and Keating (1992). This contrasts with the findings of Blombery (1989) and Thom (1993) who noted a number of feminine and neutral God images in their studies. Nevertheless, all of these researchers noted a strong masculine bias in God-language and conceptualisation.

A number of researchers noted a gender difference in conceptualising and relating to God (Babin, 1965; Nelson, Cheek, and Au, 1985; Heller, 1986; Lewis, 1988; Blombery, 1991, Tamminen, 1996).

This discovery 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). Babin concluded that girls develop a more personal relationship with God.

Heller (1986) also noted a difference. He found that boys relate to God in a rational way, while girls relate in an aesthetic way. Girls also feel closer to God, conceptualising God in a more passive way, according to Heller.
Tamminen (1996) found that boys tended to emphasise the greatness and powerfulness of God, whereas girls focussed on God as the giver of security.

These findings appear to contradict both the research evidence and the theoretical conclusions of another group of scholars who have said that the predominantly male language and imagery of God is problematic for girls (Johnson, 1986; Osiek, 1986; Clanton, 1990; Hyde, 1990; Saussy, 1991; Coll, 1994). These scholars concluded that because God is always 'other' for girls but not for boys, girls feel a greater distance from God and also feel lesser as beings-in-themselves.

Reflecting the concepts used by many theologians, McFague (1982, 1987) spoke of two different ways of imaging and relating to God: God as 'transcendent Being' and God as 'immanent Being'. Gorsuch (cited in Potvin, 1977) saw God-concepts as being divided into the ideas of a 'loving' or a 'punishing' God.

Another dichotomy is found in the categories of intrinsic/extrinsic religious motivation postulated by Hunt and King (1971), Hoge (1972), Morris and Hood (1981), and Bassett et al. (1990). These researchers found that their respondents expressed their relationship with God either as an integral part of their being that gave meaning and motivation to their lives, or as a non-essential instrument which is subordinated to self-interest. A problem with this research is that it dichotomises the respondents' answers. There are only two categories into which responses can be placed, intrinsic and extrinsic. This implies that people are not capable of having an approach that is compounded of the two approaches. An alternative model for
interpreting these data is the continuum, which recognises that there are many gradations between the two extremes postulated by this study.

A related theory is that of the concepts of committed and consensual religiousness discussed by Allen and Spilka (1967), Hammersla (1986), Blombery (1989), Bassett et al. (1990), and Rizzuto (1991). These researchers categorised their respondents as religiously committed (that is, holding functional images of God to which one is committed), or religiously consensual (that is, holding official images to which one assents). These studies highlighted the significance and importance of committed religiousness in the experience of people. The above-mentioned problem with using dichotomies as a model for data interpretation applies equally to this particular study.

Finally, a number of researchers have provided categories of God-concepts that have emerged from their research. These include Babin (1965), Hutsebaut (1972), Nelson, Cheek, and Au (1985), Hammersla (1986), Roe (1988), Darragh (1991) and Curran (1993).
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of a theoretical framework is to guide the investigation in accordance with a particular perception, based on previous research, others' beliefs and values, and personal values (Field and Morse, 1985). However, difficulty was experienced in establishing a theoretical framework that precisely matched the intent and direction taken by this study. The nearest approximation to an adequate theoretical framework that has been found is the theoretical assumptions of critical liberal feminist theology.

In addressing the issue of the contribution of feminist theology to the more well-established branches of theological thought, Alastair McGrath (1994) noted that:

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). (p. 101)

Critical liberal feminist theology maintains what Schussler-Fiorenza (1984) termed a “hermeneutic of suspicion”. This is actually a feminist critique of the assumptions upon which traditional theology is based. This perspective can be seen in the work of writers such as Ruether (1983), Russell (1985), Carr (1988), and Schneider's (1991).
McGrath (1994) identified three areas of theology with which feminist theology particularly takes issue. They are the maleness of God, the nature of sin, and the person of Christ.

The only one of these three issues that directly impinges on this study is the issue of the maleness of God. In describing the feminist position on this issue, McGrath (1994) said:

The persistent use of male pronouns for God within the Christian tradition is a target of criticism by many feminist writers. It is argued that the use of female pronouns is at least as logical as the use of their male counterparts, and might go some way toward correcting an excessive emphasis upon male role models for God. (p. 101)

Writers other than McGrath have identified issues that have received the attention of feminist theology. These include the following critiques of elements of traditional theological thought, process and formulation.

(a) Traditional theological methods have tended to emphasise the role of cognition in dealing with God issues. Feminist theology recognises the importance and role of feelings, imagination and senses in coming to know God and in relating to God (Moltmann-Wendel, 1989).

(b) Traditional theologies have tended to treat elements of religiousness as discrete entities. Feminist theology takes a more holistic view, proposing that any element to be studied must be seen in the context of the lived experience of the individual (Russell, 1987; Moltmann-Wendel, 1989).
Feminist theology maintains that there are multiple perspectives from which to view and understand any religious phenomenon (Schussler-Fiorenza, 1984). The influence of this principle is not as evident in traditional theologies.

Feminist theologies tend toward a metaphorical approach to religious language, as noted in the discussion about the metaphorical approach to religious language on page 18.3

This study sought to examine the meaning of God for adolescents, and to explicate emerging patterns of language about God, God-concepts, relationship with God, and any observable interrelationships between these phenomena. In accordance with the theoretical assumptions of critical liberal feminist theology, the following applied:

(a) The phenomena studied were viewed in a holistic context that consisted of many factors, including the impact of feelings, imagination, sensory input, and thought processes.

(b) Since each person's experience is unique, this study aimed to "present cases from which a pattern might be said to emerge" (Cavalletti, 1983, p. 17).

(c) A critical perspective regarding the nature and impact of God-language and concepts was maintained.

3 MacGraith (1994) made the following comments about this issue: "Sallie McFague's Metaphorical Theology (1982) argues for the need to recover the idea of the metaphorical aspects of male models of God, such as 'father': analogies tend to stress the similarities between God and human beings; metaphors affirm that, amidst these similarities, there are significant dissimilarities between God and humans (for example, in the realm of gender) (p. 101)."
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 & Le Compte, 1984). The conceptual framework which guided this research is derived from personal observation and experience, and from a review of the relevant literature, especially the feminist perception of the inter-relationship of various factors involved in making meaning about God.

This study posits an intricately interwoven relationship among God-concepts, relationship with God, and God-language, as elements of the meaning of God for adolescents. Drawing, writing, and interviewing were the methods used to explore the complex phenomenon of the meaning of God in an individual's life. Questions such as 'Who is God?' 'How is God encountered?' and 'How can people relate to God?' guided the collection of data. Patterns of concepts of God, relationship with God, and language about God were analysed and described. Other patterns of thought, such as the prevalence of comments about nature, and about the tendency of students to question notions of God, together with concepts that did not fit the general patterns, were also examined and presented.

It was discovered that the three areas of concept of God, relationship with God, and language about God were not of equal importance in the responses of the students involved in this study. The responses tended to focus on concepts of God. Some of the students also described or implied something of their relationship with God. Few students explicitly reflected on language about God. This element was explored by analysing the language the students used when writing or talking about God.
Figure 2 - Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Meaning of GOD

concept

relationship

language

Who is God?

How can people relate to God?
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

"Nothing is more difficult to express than who one's God is!" noted Catherine Thom (1993, p. 35). A review of the previous research has indicated that the quantitative approach does not adequately address the complexity of the topic of this study. Therefore, this study used the qualitative methodology of phenomenography.

According to Tamm (1996):

Phenomenography is the study of our understanding of phenomena in the world around us. This method focuses on the qualitative or thematic content of perceptions. Phenomenography deals with both the conceptual and the experiential, with what is thought of as well as that which is lived. Phenomenography seeks to define, analyse and understand human experiences of various aspects of reality, in this case God. The phenomenographic method attempts, using collected data as a basis, to discover and describe qualitatively distinct contents in the phenomenon that is being examined. Through analysis of the data, a number of differing understandings of the phenomenon are discovered, which are then compiled in descriptive categories by the researcher. The descriptive categories are not pre-defined by the researcher, either on the basis of theory or on earlier research in the area. (p. 35)

The experiences and assumptions of the researcher form part of phenomenographic research. To be aware of possible bias and take steps to deal with this, it was necessary for me to do four things:
(i) Declare theoretical assumptions.

(ii) 'Bracket' these assumptions. [This does not mean forgetting one's assumptions: it means being mindful of them in order to hold them deliberately at bay (van Manen, 1990).]

(iii) Take steps to ensure credibility through techniques such as searching for disconfirming evidence.

(iv) Display theoretical sensitivity. [This means that one must come to the research situation with awareness of the subtleties of meaning within the data, and sensitivity built up through previous reading and experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).]

SAMPLE

This study was conducted with senior secondary students. This was because "adolescents have the ability to conceive of God in symbolic, abstract and spiritualised ideas" (Goldman, 1965, p. 239). Problems with the literal understanding and lesser communicative abilities of younger children is noted in the work of Buckland, (1979) and Goldman (1965).

The sample group consisted of the six year 12 classes of an average, co-educational, metropolitan, Catholic school in Perth, Western Australia. There were 96 respondents in all, 61 girls and 35 boys, most of whom were of middle class, Anglo-Celtic descent. The ages of the respondents were as follows: 1 boy was 18; 52 girls and 25 boys were 17; 9 girls and 9 boys were 16, but would turn 17 within three months. Many of the students had received 12 years of religious education at school.
INSTRUMENTATION

DRAWING

The first method of obtaining data from respondents was through drawing. The value of drawing as a method of collecting meaningful data about respondents’ deeply held perceptions, ideas and concepts has been utilised by such researchers as Catherine Thom (1993). Problems with previous research has indicated that:

(a) art needs to be used as a medium of expression, not as an illustration of written expression;

(b) drawing God-concepts needs to be an activity by itself, and not coupled with other drawing activities;

(c) instructions given must be carefully worded to avoid specifying to the respondents the type of response expected by the researcher;

(d) data collection should begin with the drawing process and focus on the perceptions and feelings of respondents, in order to minimise the possibility that respondents will “trot out the correct answer”.

All of these precautions were kept in mind in the planning and execution of this aspect of the data collection process.

WRITING

The second method of data collection employed was journal writing. This occurred two or three days after the initial drawing session. All students present on the day participated in this activity.
The purposes of the writing session were to give the respondents the opportunity to:

(a) reflect on what they had drawn;
(b) clarify for themselves what it was they were trying to express in their drawings;
(c) let these reflections lead them to articulate more fully what their experiences and beliefs about God were.

INTERVIEWING

Interviewing was the third method of data collection. Interviews were used firstly to enable students who wanted to share more fully their experiences and beliefs about God to do so, and secondly to enable me to gather further information about respondents' experiences of God.

All students in the sample were invited to participate in this activity. Only those who wished to discuss or amplify their previous responses accepted this invitation.

Interviewing "is most useful when the emphasis is on the qualitative aspects of the data [or] when the topic is difficult conceptually" (Keats, 1988, p. 18). Both criteria apply to this study.

In-depth interviewing using an interview guide was chosen as the most suitable method of interviewing. The interview guide provided a list of topics to focus the development of the interview. This method has a number of advantages, as Patton (1990) notes:
(a) All the topics on the interview guide are covered with each respondent, so the researcher is able to obtain the same information from a number of people;

(b) the interviewer is free to explore, probe and ask individually-tailored questions;

(c) because the interview is open-ended, the people being interviewed respond in their own words, expressing their own personal perspectives.

The interview guide consisted of the following items:

1) What does the word 'God' mean to you?

2) What are your ideas of God?

3) What do you think God is like?

4) How do you think God communicates with people?

5) How do you think God relates to people?

6) What do you think God expects of people?

These questions were not asked directly, but were used as a checklist during interviewing to ensure that relevant information regarding these topics was included. The interviews were recorded on a tape recorder, with the respondents' permission.
PROCEDURE

A meeting with the R.E. staff of the sample school elicited interest and offers of co-operation from some of the teachers. After permission was granted by the school to conduct research there, further meetings with interested staff led to the conclusion that it would be easier for me, and less disruptive to the students, if I were to conduct two of the scheduled religious education lessons with each of the six year 12 classes in the school.

It was extremely important that I gather, as far as possible, the students' own ideas, not their perceptions of what I wanted from them. I therefore kept explanations and instructions to a minimum.

The first of these lessons was the art lesson. I had set out the art equipment before the students entered. When they were seated, I told them my name and where I was from. I explained that I was conducting research I wanted them to help me with. I told them that we were going to do an art lesson, which they could choose to keep or give to me. I told them to think of a fake name, and to write it on the back of the paper on their desks, along with their date-of-birth and 'f' or 'm' to denote their gender.

The lesson began with a brief meditation session, during which I led the students to relax, and to go to a place in their minds where they felt comfortable and relaxed. I then directed them to notice what images, feelings, and thoughts arose when they heard the word 'God'. After a pause, the students were brought back from the meditation, with their images, feelings, and thoughts. They were then directed to
put down on paper whatever they could of what had arisen in their minds. They were supplied with blank, white, A3 paper and packets of crayons. At the end of the lesson, the artwork was collected.

The second lesson began with the artwork being distributed, along with sheets of lined writing paper. The students were asked to reflect on their artwork, to write what it meant to them, and to add any other thoughts about God. At the end of the session, the students were reminded to write their pseudonyms on both pieces of work. They were then invited to give me their work. Altogether, 102 pieces of artwork were collected. (Six students wanted to draw additional ideas and, having sufficient time, completed two pieces of artwork.) 81 written responses were collected. (15 students decided not to hand in their written work, this being an option offered to them.)

During the following religious education lesson (approximately two days later), students who wished to talk to me about God were given time to do so. An office was provided for our use. At the beginning of each interview, I asked permission to tape the interview. Then we would discuss the student's work. Using this as a basis, I would ask the students to elaborate on some of the points they had made, or to answer any questions on the interview schedule that hadn't been covered. 11 students presented for interviews and were taped.
DATA ANALYSIS

The first step in data analysis was the transcription of the interview tapes. Following that, the written comments of the students were entered into a computer.

"Interpretive inquiry makes use of inductive analysis, which means that the patterns, themes and categories of analysis emerge from the data" (Strauss, 1987; Patton, 1990). Keeping the above point in mind, I immersed myself in the data, studying each picture and reading the accompanying notes. I also read the transcripts of the comments of students whom I had interviewed. I tried to get a feel for them, for the essence of what was being drawn, written and said. As much as possible, I used the students' own notes and comments as a basis for interpreting the meaning of the pictures. I only ventured to add my own interpretation when it extended or clarified a student's comment, when the student admitted to not understanding her/his own work, and when no notes were provided.

As I sifted through the data, patterns began to emerge. I noticed similarities between pictures, and between comments. I noticed certain types of comments being repeated in different ways, and some comments that were unique and unusual. I made notes about the patterns that I saw, and anything else that interested me. I then organised these notes into a framework to fit the patterns seen in the data.
VALIDITY

Guba & Lincoln (1982) comment that inquiry is always value-bound. Inquiries are influenced by the values of the inquirer, by the paradigm that guides the investigation, and by the theory and methods used to guide data collection and analysis (p. 238). Qualitative methodology seeks neutrality, confirmability, and auditability.

NEUTRALITY

"Any credible research strategy requires that the investigator adopt a stance of neutrality with regard to the phenomenon under study. This simply means that the investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths" (Patton, 1990, p. 55). The practice of bracketing as well as searching for disconfirming evidence and being assiduous in reporting it, are ways to ensure neutrality attempted in this study.

CONFIRMABILITY

The confirmability of one's findings can be enhanced in several ways. One method for determining confirmability is triangulation. In research, triangulation is the combination of two or more theories, data sources, methods or investigators, contrasted with one another to cross-check data and interpretation (Denzin, in Kimichi, 1991). This study employed theory triangulation, where several theories, outlined in the literature review, were applied to the data to test for 'fit'. Methods triangulation, the inclusion of two or more methods of data collection, was also employed.
AUDITABILITY

"A study and its findings are auditable when another researcher can . . . . arrive at the same or comparable but not contradictory conclusions given the researcher's data, perspective, and situation" (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 33). I have attempted to comply with this requirement by asking a colleague to examine and analyse my data to test for similarity of conclusions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study is limited to senior secondary students, in one Catholic secondary school, within the Perth metropolitan area. The study, then, describes the experiences of a very specific group, at one point in time.

It would be interesting to know whether the findings of the study provide adequate descriptions of the experience of God of senior secondary students in other Catholic schools, in schools of other denominations, with students of different ages, and with these same students at a different point in time. However, no claims can be made about the applicability of the results of this study to any of these alternative contexts. Investigation of the above mentioned points could become the focus of future research.

Since this topic has not been researched before in this way, this study is exploratory and descriptive research. As such, it is a beginning, rather than an end.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of God for an individual is a complex constellation of concepts, feelings, experiences, reflections, and actions which cannot be exhaustively described. However, some insight into the nature of the meaning of God for each person can be gleaned by examining certain elements of the phenomenon by themselves, and by noting how these elements interact with each other to form a meaningful whole. This is what this study has attempted to do. The elements explored in this study are:

- the concepts of God held by the respondents, together with the images of God embedded within these concepts;
- the relationship with God that the respondents report, together with their ideas about how they encounter God in their lives;
- the type and nature of the language the respondents use when communicating ideas about God.

Data collection posed a problem that required careful attention. If I wished to make sure that I obtained data about each of the above elements from each of the respondents, it would have been necessary to specifically request them to supply the required information. However, the corollary of such a request would be to ask the students to engage in metacognition and metalanguage, that is thinking about thinking, and talking and writing about language. In other words, I would be asking
the students to examine and report on their God-thinking and their God-language. As Eisenberg discovered earlier this century, the act of collecting data alters the data collected. In other words, in carrying out this request, the students' unconscious, intuitive and felt responses would be altered by the mere fact of specifically focussing and reporting on these elements.

An alternative method of collecting the data would have been for me to enable the students to recall or relive the meaning of God in their lives and to capture this meaning in pictorial and written form. One of the advantages of this method is that it obtains, as accurately as is possible, the actual meaning of God in the lives of the respondents. One of the disadvantages of this method is that, to achieve accuracy and authenticity, it would be necessary not to tell the respondents what I was specifically looking for. This would mean that some of the students would report on their concepts of God and some would not; some would represent their relationship with God, and some would not. It was therefore necessary for me to determine which was more important for this study, complete data or accurate data. Given the phenomenological nature of both the subject and the methodology of this study, I decided that accurate data was more important. I therefore chose the second method described above.

Consequently, the data does not contain the concepts of God, images of God, relationship with God, and ideas about how God is revealed of all of the respondents in the study. It contains only the information each respondent considered important, or the ideas they felt comfortable in imparting. The result is that of the 96 respondents of the study, 67 depictions of concepts of God are present, 44 images of God
are presented, 50 descriptions or intimations of relationship with God are reported, 21 ideas about how God is revealed and encountered in one's life are included, 55 excerpts containing language about God are to be found, and 60 examples of the use of gendered language are present.

In reviewing the data, it became apparent that each response is unique. There is a limited range of language and basic concepts used, but the ways the students used these to express the nature and meaning of God in their lives is as varied as the number of respondents. Consequently, instead of reporting on only some of the data and using these as examples of the range to be found, or of presenting the raw data in an appendix, I decided to present all the examples of each of the three elements of concept, relationship and language. This resulted in a very substantial Results chapter, covering 201 pages.

My task was to present the patterns that emerged from the data, and to express something of the complexity and variety that lay beneath. In order to do this, I firstly separated the data into expressions of concept and image, relationship with God and how God was encountered, and language used concerning God. Next, within each of the three elements listed above, I arranged the data into categories that indicated the range of orientations towards God. Sub-categories that indicated variety within each orientation were then developed. Finally, I presented all the examples of individual expression that belonged to each sub-category. Consequently, all the expressions, whether explicit or implicit, that have been provided by the respondents concerning the three basic elements of the study have been analysed, categorised and represented below.
Five comments about the data need to be made at this point:

1) The examples included are written in the students' own words, including their grammar, spelling, capitalisation, and emphases. When any of their work becomes too obscure to be easily understood, I include my own translation of what is meant, contained within square brackets.

2) Some respondents did not have only one concept of God: they held several, sometimes contradictory, notions. This means that some respondents will have their ideas presented in several different categories or sub-categories.

3) Some respondents experienced difficulty in articulating what the meaning of God was for them. They noted that there was something there, but that they could not name it. This response is different from those students who named God as mystery, unknowable or inexplicable.

4) Some respondents chose not to make any written or oral comments. Consequently, only their artwork is available. Conversely, some students elected not to participate in the artwork or not to submit their artwork to me, but have supplied written comments on the subject.

5) The categories and sub-categories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the range of ideas represented in the data more nearly form a continuum than a series of discrete groups. The categories, therefore, need to be seen as demarcations along a continuum, rather than discrete, exclusive groups.
Data presentation is organised as follows:

1) The data are divided into the three broad elements of
   • concepts/images of God,
   • relationship/encountering God, and
   • language about God.
   Each of these elements is dealt with in a separate section.

2) Each section is organised into categories, sub-categories, and
   individual expressions of content.

3) Within each of the sections can be found;
   (a) an introduction consisting of an overview of the major
       categories,
   (b) within each category, an explanation of the break-down into
       sub-categories,
   (c) presentation of the raw data, along with brief comments and
       analyses,
   (d) a summary of the data, with the inclusion in most cases of
       tabular summaries.

As much as possible, I use the students' own words, ideas and
explanations as the basis of data presentation. However, occasionally I
discern an anomaly in the data, usually an apparent contradiction
between the pictorial and linguistic expressions of a respondent. When
this occurs, I present the student's expressions, followed by my
observations. Also, when I perceive within a student's response ideas
that are hidden or implicit, I articulate and comment on what I
perceive to be present.
CONCEPTS OF GOD

The 96 respondents of this study submitted a total of 102 pictures, 81 written responses, and 11 taped interviews. Contained within these data are 67 concepts of God. These concepts range from assertions that God does not exist, through anthropomorphic ideas, to concepts of the mystery and unknowability of God. These concepts can be seen as forming a continuum. Such a continuum could be represented thus:

| No God | Person | Spirit | Energy | Mystery | Other |

Figure 3. Continuum of Concepts.

Of the 67 concepts of God present in the data, nine of these centre around assertions that God does not exist, or ambiguity or doubt about the existence of God. I have called this category 'Does God Exist?' 30 of the students depicted God in anthropomorphic terms. This category is called 'God as a Person'. Six of the respondents conceived of God mainly in terms of a spirit. This category is called 'God as Spirit'. Eight of the respondents spoke primarily of the energy, force or power of God. These responses have been categorised as 'God as an Energy Force'. 10 students responded in terms of the mystery and unknowability of God. I have called this category 'The Mysterious Unknown'. Four students presented concepts that did not fit into the above categories. I have described these concepts and several other notable patterns of thought about God in the category 'Other'. Finally, all the images of God present within the data are categorised and described in a separate category called 'Images'.
Does God Exist?

9 of the respondents indicated either rejection or questioning of the existence of God. I have classified this range of responses as ‘Does God Exist?’ I see the responses as falling into three sub-categories, which I have named Atheism, Agnosticism, and Doubt. The names of these sub-categories are not meant to imply judgement about the content or the respondents, but are simply labels that name, in a recognisable way, the nature of the orientation towards God contained in the examples.

Atheism

1. The only statement George appended to his artwork was “I don’t believe in God”. During his interview, he elaborated further. He seemed not to be in the habit of articulating his ideas, because he was hesitant about verbalising them. This hesitancy did not arise because of lack of conviction in his own ideas. He was quite adamant about them. It seemed to me rather that the interview was a rare occasion to put into words the thoughts and ideas in his mind. Some of the ideas expressed in the interview are:

I just don’t think there is one [a God]. I think people put too much emphasis on there is a God, when things can be explained without the need of one. I think that because they don’t sort of believe enough in themselves. So if they can say, "Oh it must of been something that God’s done" or "Oh I’ll pray to God 'cause then he'll give it to me" when, if they just went out, did it for themselves, worked hard enough, if it was meant, not if it was meant to be, but if they work hard enough, they'll get it.
George didn’t explain the imagery in his picture. It seems to me to be saying that George doesn’t necessarily discount the existence of God. If the upper power cord is God and the lower power cord is George, then the picture says that although God may exist, George doesn’t need God’s help (the power) because he has all the power he needs within himself. If this is so, George’s stance may be that God is unnecessary and irrelevant, rather than that God does not exist. As I mentioned earlier, George seems to be struggling to articulate ideas which previously have existed only amorphously within his mind. In deference to George’s statements, however, I have placed him in this category.
There is no such thing as "God" and there is no "God and me". I am just me.

I believe in myself and I believe in love. There may indeed be a higher power in the universe but certainly humans don’t know anything about it and I do not believe it is a creator. I really don’t see how people who are educated can believe the concept of God. The bible is obviously just a story. They say don’t take it literally but it was taken literally a long time ago. It's just like any novel, its meaning changed with time.

People believe in religion because they need hope, answers, something to believe in and look up to, guidelines to live by. I think if people can find these things within themselves it will make them stronger and better.

I don’t believe in having idols, people should not try to be like anyone else.

I think being a good person for the sake of being good is far better than being good because you’re afraid of going to Hell.

I don’t have anything against religious people, it has its advantages but I hate it when people try to force religion onto others. I don’t think R.E. should be compulsory in any school, especially primary schools. When you think about it its all just a big cult, no better than any other cult, religion, or scam anywhere else in the world.

Minh has a negative attitude towards religion, and although she concedes the possibility of God, her comments are disdainful towards those who believe in God. Minh declined to create any pictorial record of her ideas of God.
3. **Bobby created two pieces of artwork.** The first was a blank, white page. These are his comments about it:

   It's really simple. I don't believe in God. I don't hate being asked about it, which is why I have left the paper white, rather than black. God is just a concept I can't accept, it doesn't feel right. I'm too scientific, analytical, to believe. Personally, I think God is something that humans thought up. We need something to believe in and some people believe in God, whereas I choose to believe in the world, life, nature, science, rather than a mystic entity.

   Bobby's second picture was of the world globe, beside which stood a test tube containing yellow liquid. He wrote the following comments about it:

   I don't hate people who believe in God.
   I used to think that they were a little naive, a little stupid or blind maybe. . . .

   This may sound a bit silly, but in reading the books from the "Discworld" series by Terry Pratchett; who writes things in such a satirical way, focussing on the mundane, everyday life situations, the way people act, he wrote something about belief, not with anything to do with the God people believe in our world, and somehow thinking about it, extending the idea in all directions, I found that it resonated with something in me.

   Thinking about belief, you can see that it is quite powerful. If you are looking for something, believing it to be well hidden, you can sometimes look right at it without actually acknowledging that it is there. Sometimes, the best place to hide something is in the open, people won't see it because they don't believe that anyone would have hidden it in such an obvious place.

   People need belief, so that they can explain things. You know, like, how did the world start? There is no rational explanation. How did it rain fish? If people don't know that the tornado, water spout, whatever,
picked up fish passing over a lake, a river, a sea, fish falling from the sky would be quite miraculous. The start of the world was quite miraculous. "How did it happen". "I don't know, maybe there is some super being, some awesome power that created it out of its own intelligence. Makes sense to me." "Yeah, me too." People needed the comfort that it was explainable. Maybe it gives them a purpose in life. I find comfort in the fact that even if science doesn't know the answer, it will.

Maybe I am wrong and there is a God. I still believe what I do. Maybe both parties are wrong, and one day the aliens who left us to create something else will come back. People believe in what feels right to them, and for my money, what they believe in is their concern.

Bobby's comments clearly reflect the artwork he produced. He displays a degree of commitment towards these ideas. It seems to me that the ideas he articulates are well thought out and not of recent origin.
Agnosticism

1. Simon showed self-awareness and self-reflection in his response. He not only described how he felt and thought at the time, he explained what he saw as being the chief influences contributing towards his position.

This is Simon’s description of his drawing:

The dark is my unbelief that is growing and overtaking any belief I have had. My Faith in God represented by a (FF) has already been taken over. It was a Forced Faith which was forced upon me by my parents and was not strong anyway. Without the restrictions (Bars) I placed on myself when I believed I feel free (wings) and enjoy life more. The extent of my belief goes about as far as Jesus Christ Superstar the musical of which the first two bars are roughly written. JCS is not a religious play but it has a good story and good music. The white behind the bars (restrictions) is my belief the B representing belief is very scratchy. the (BLAH BLAH BLAH) is my dad who blahs on about religion all the time and even though he thinks he is bringing me closer to God he is really sending me farther away out of boredom.
The colours that Simon chose make a dramatic statement. The main colour is black, reflecting Simon's general attitude towards God, religion, and his father's instruction. These ideas become rolled into one in Simon's mind, and all create a rolling, black mass of negativity. The orange bars of his prison are aggressive, representing the strength and significance in his life of both the ideas and his struggle to overcome them.

Simon equates God with religion. He was asked to draw what came to his mind when he thought of God, and to write anything he wished to about God, and he drew and wrote about religious practices.

Simon found the conventional religion of his parents, which he considers was forced on him, to be too restrictive and inconsistent with his own experiences and beliefs. Simon feels that he has freed himself from religion, but it is his parents' religion that he has escaped. It is possible that eventually he will find an expression of his own faith.

2. Ant admitted that he doesn't know what he believes in. However, since his experience of God is nothingness, he tends towards a somewhat bitter dismissal of the relevance of God, if God exists.

I don't think about God much so I have no image for the nothingness that I don't think about when God doesn't pop into my head. When I do think about God (usually when I am in trouble) I see black. There is nothing to see and nothing to help me, so I don't bother. This all comes down to beliefs and I don't know what I believe in.

Ant coloured his page entirely black. Both his artwork and his reflections have strongly negative connotations.
Doubt

1. Caitlin expressed herself succinctly when she said, "Does God really exist?? Who knows???????" There is a certain degree of insouciance in Caitlin's reply. Its tone seems to imply that Caitlin neither knows nor cares whether God exists. It seems that the question of God's existence doesn't matter much to Caitlin.

2. Bart wasn't sure what he believed in. He admitted that there might be a God, but the overall tone of his response is one of doubt. He said:

Dunno. I'm kinda at the stage where I ask - why should we believe in God? ... He's not all that important - I suppose I think about thinking about Him, and I write His name with a capital letter and all but I don't think I believe in Him at all really. He's probably just some man-made creation to explain stuff we can't, or are too stupid to explain, and to avoid seeming dumb, we create a God to pass the buck. Or something. I don't know - I think a lot, sometimes about Him and stuff and have my own theories and stuff but I don't really believe in Him. I know some people really, really, really believe in him - I went to this Church once, it's a bit different, I went because a friend asked me to go. It's a small centre on the corner at ___ and ___ and everyone inside really got into the clapping and singing and stuff and that's cool y'know, but I'm not like that. I don't really like to commit myself just in case it doesn't work out and it's a waste of time, for me. I don't really like to have faith, rather - confidence instead. They are very different. Faith is a blind grab at what you don't know, confidence is knowing what your grabbing, but you still have to jump at it. Or something.

Bart expressed his questioning of the relevance of God when he said, "Why should we believe in God?" He doesn't seem to have anything against God and religion, but he doesn't see what it has to do with him. He also thinks that if he has faith, he can't have confidence in himself. The two are mutually exclusive.
3. Maverick had doubts about God which seemed to result from the clash between his scientific beliefs and his idea of what the God he is told about is like. It seems that what he is rejecting is certain ideas about God, not the whole notion of God. As he said, he is trying to keep an open mind.

I believe there might be a god. But not a god that is in charge of creating or controlling the universe. Ideas that I believe in is probably a heaven and hell. And that there is after life.

I'm a person that is open minded. For example most christians I know believe God created everything. But I mainly emphasise myself with scientific solutions. And most of them believe that they are the only life in the universe. For myself it is impossible that Earth is the only place for life. Because the Universe is infinity. There is no boundaries.

My strongest belief that deals with religion is a 'soul'. Why a soul, because it is something I believe is the most valuable treasure a human being can have.

Because the soul is so unique that everyone has one. Also the soul is like money. You can sell your soul. In Bible stories/Religion stories people sell their souls to a devil-like person, in return for luxuries which for me people who sell their soul, I believe they have no heart.

Also how there are so many religions in the world if all the sudden there is genuine evidence that religion we now today is just a quick get rich money scheme. [That is, What would happen to the many religions in the world if people suddenly discovered that religion as we know it today is just a 'get-rich-quick' scheme?] I think there would be a major catastrophe in certain parts of the world. I.e. Vatican city, Iran, China etc.

For me, God is not important for me because I don't ask for his/her help. But I experience that people who experience near sudden death, they are more aware of God and don't take life for granted.
Maverick rejects the religious ideas of creationism, preferring scientific explanations for the existence of the universe. He finds he can accept some religious concepts, like the existence of souls.

Maverick seems to be working through the religious ideas that have been presented to him, trying to reconcile them with his own thoughts and beliefs, and rejecting those that seem unacceptable to him.

4. Rosemary seemed to be confused about what she believed in. Is God "always present in the good times and the bad"? Possibly God isn't "really there" at all.

The drawing I drew is hard to explain but I'll try and do my best to explain it. The different colours in the picture represent good times and bad - dark being bad colours and light being good. The mix - coloured hearts represent friends who have started out as good friends and turned out as not so good meaning that they became back stabbers and totally isolated me from our friendship. The light blue border represents god serenity and the yellow, red and orange circle in the middle represents God in my life and how he is always present in the good times and bad. The question marks represent the mystery I have about God and whether he is really there or not. And when things go wrong I often wonder if god really exists and is there to help us.

Rosemary talks of the serenity of God at the edge of her life, and the presence of God in the centre of her life, but then she says she often wonders if God really exists. She seems to be trying to reconcile conflicting thoughts and feelings about God.
Category Comments

Most of the students who wrote the above comments appear to have thought deeply about the question of God. They have reached a conclusion, or are in the process of doing so, based upon a number of facts which are important to them.

One of the most important influences on these students is the scientific knowledge and beliefs which they cannot reconcile with religious belief. It is interesting to note that for them scientific knowledge becomes a belief system. For some of them, the dichotomy between scientific and religious beliefs leads to a questioning, a searching. For others, it causes them to reject belief in God as naive and infantile.

Awareness, and possibly experience, of the emotional and psychological needs of human beings have led the students to suppose (as did Freud) that a God who fulfils the needs of humans is to be suspected of being merely a psychological construct, a crutch for the weak. There is a disdain shown by some of these students towards what they would consider the weaker, more gullible members of humanity who cannot rid themselves of their crutch and stand on their own two feet.

Another important factor in the thinking of these students is the influence of other people. For example, Simon finds the attempts of his father to "bring [him] closer to God" having the opposite effect.
A further influence on these students is their experiences, either real or vicarious. Ant finds that when he thinks about God, nothing comes to mind, and when he is in need, no-one comes to help him. His conclusion, based on his own experiences, is that there is no God. Bobby tells us how a book he read influenced his notions about faith because it "felt right", that is, it resonated with his own experiences.

To most of the students represented in this category, God is a concept which they cannot accept because doing so is unreasonable. Reason and science have a greater place in their lives than God.

Some of these students reject the notion of God. They have a negative relationship with God because they actively distance themselves from the idea of God. The remaining students are unsure, but uninterested in God. They have a null relationship with God.

In none of these students do I find evidence of an experiential relationship with God: That is, none of them seems to have encountered something of God in their lives. These students explain their stance in relation to God in several ways; as being unreasonable, as being unnecessary, as being an imposed idea the acceptance of which weakens them. There appears to be no affective elements in their lives to counteract the negative image that 'God' holds for them.

It is interesting to note gender differences. 81 written and oral responses were collected. Of these, 30 were from boys and 51 were from girls. The ratio is 3 : 5. In the category above, however, there are six boys and three girls represented. The ratio is 2 : 1. Reasons for the over-representation of boys in this category would make an interesting study.
GOD AS A PERSON

30 respondents presented God as a person. The concepts range from the familiar, white-robed, male figure in the heavens, to images of a spiritual entity who possesses anthropomorphic characteristics. These latter quite clearly overlap into the next category. I have put them here because they exhibit in some form the characteristics or attributes of a person.

I have arranged these ideas into four sub-categories, which I have labelled 'God in His Heaven', 'Superman', 'Benevolent Being', and 'Loving Carer'.

It is often difficult to assign a particular response to a category, since the nature of the data is complex and defies easy categorisation. It must be kept in mind that, to a certain extent, the naming and delineation of categories and sub-categories are arbitrary and could be as easily and as accurately arranged in a different way. The following arrangement of data is my attempt to present one possible pattern of meaning through which to make sense of the data.

God in His Heaven

This group consists of 11 students. The students in this group conceive of God as a heavenly being. God is described in terms of a loving, protective being, as a ruler and judge, or as Jesus. God is understood essentially as an anthropomorphic, transcendent being.
1. Mishel opted not to write anything about her image of God. Her picture, however, is fairly self-explanatory.

God is clearly a person, though an invisible one (signified by the fact that God is not coloured in). The heart is the only part of God that is coloured, indicating that love is God's greatest attribute. God is very big, and is standing over the world and the people in it, indicating the protectiveness of God. God is presented here as a kindly, protective, male figure (possibly a father or grandfather). This implies that people are like children in need of the protection and security offered by such a God.
2. Fred said:

My vision of God is above the cloud and in the sky.

Fred's page was coloured blue, with deeper blue clouds imposed on the paler blue background. It is a beautifully simple representation. Fred's concept is also expressed simply. God, the distant and unknown, lives in the sky. There is a sense of tranquillity and acceptance in Fred's expression of his God-concept. It suggests the saying: "God's in his heaven: all's right with the world."

3. Although Jasmin's concept of God was similar to Fred's, her comments go further than Fred's in that she reflects on why she holds the image she does. Her response shows reflection and self-knowledge.

The image that comes to mind when someone mentions God is still the one that was reinforced to me when I was in Primary school. I see him as a young, vibrant man wearing pure white clothing and sitting on cotton ball clouds, smiling at all the people surrounding him. Even though some people may think of it as babish [babyish] I some how can't erase that image of God from my mind. Maybe this is because in my subconscious I don't want to let go of this image.

Jasmin is aware that her image could be seen as a little childish, and perhaps she feels uneasy that she hasn't replaced it with another, more suitable, image. However, she is also aware of the fact that this image serves a purpose in her life, and that is her reason for not rejecting it.
4. Anna's picture is very much in keeping with Fred's and Jasmin's concepts.

Speaking of the picture, Anna said:

This came into my head because I was wondering what happens to loved ones when they die. I would like to believe they are safe in God's arms up high above the moon, stars and the sun and no longer able to be hurt.

For Anna, this is an image of what she would like to believe. For Fred and Jasmin, this is a depiction of what they apparently do believe.

The catalyst for Anna's thinking is life experiences, in particular, wondering about death. Implicit in Anna's response in a sense of God as someone who watches over people and who keeps them safe. There is a sense of security and peace in Anna's response.
5. Teresa thought of God as a person to whom she should pray. She wrote:

God to me is someone who helps me when I pray because I don't want something to happen to me and most of the time it does not happen to me.

And I know I will never see him in my life time but maybe when my time is up I will live with him and my grandparents and my birds in a lush green spring place.

Teresa prays to God as insurance against bad things happening to her. Teresa’s role is to pray to God, and God’s function is to protect her.

Teresa doesn’t seem to know whether God is able to protect her, but she has been led to believe this, and she prays to God in the hope that what she has been told is true. There is a sense of childlike simplicity, awe and trust in Teresa’s response.
6. Chantelli equated God with Jesus.

Chantelli said this about her picture:

This picture is an overview of my ideas and thoughts of God. The colours chosen are bright and positive.

The center focus is the cross - God is at the center of my life and everything revolves around it. The cross with the slight shade of red at the top and bottom symbolize the blood shed for us - to pay for our sins & so one may have eternal life. And because of this, great love, because he first love me - all else just follows on. The colours of peace are the blue & green, the colours of hope are the orange and yellow, the red is love and purple is loyalty and faith.
Chantelli presented the concept of Jesus as the saviour of humankind. When Chantelli thought of God, she thought of Jesus the Saviour.

The colours Chantelli has chosen are bright and colourful, indicating the positive association her concept of God holds for her. She also mentions other feelings and attributes that she has represented in her artwork through the use of colour. She speaks of blur and green representing the sense of peace she associates with God. Orange and yellow symbolise her hope. Red stands for love, though Chantelli does not mention if she is referring to the love of God, or her love for God. Possibly she means both. The colour purple represents Chantelli’s sense of faith and loyalty towards God.

Chantelli’s phrase, “all else follows on” seems to refer to the affective and active elements of faith which she does not describe. It is unknown whether this is because Chantelli’s faith is primarily cognitive, or whether Chantelli did not consider it appropriate to comment on these more intimate elements of her faith life.

The tone of this extract is very devotional. It seems that holding these beliefs provides a strong sense of meaning and comfort for Chantelli.
7. Fras also equated God with Jesus.

I think I saw colours bright colours, not like a rainbow just colours everywhere. I saw 2 important symbols a cross and a heart with gold beaming out this meaning life and death what Jesus gave us. That is what God is to me.

Fras sees the symbols of cross and heart as representing the saving actions of Jesus: thus Fras thinks of God in terms of Jesus the Saviour.

Fras talks about seeing colours. This is saying to me that Fras doesn't image God entirely in anthropomorphic terms: there is an abstract quality to the colours that describe God. Fras also describes these colours as "bright colours", implying the importance and positive nature of God.
Bazza presented an apocalyptic image.

This is what Bazza has to say about his picture:

**ARMAGEDDON THE WAR AGAINST GOOD & EVIL**
When the Forces of darkness rise and Fight against the angels of Heaven. These will be the true days of Judgement.

This image focusses on the concept of God as judge. In the picture, God is represented as the masked crusader, defender of the weak, judge and executioner of the wicked. The impact of popular media images (especially comic characters) is obvious. It is interesting to note the way Bazza has taken the image of a cartoon character which is meaningful to himself, and converted it into what is for him an acceptable God-image to which he can relate.
Pines also wrote of an image of judgement. Hers, however, is more gently worded, more positive in outlook, and less certain than Bazza's.

This artwork says that when you finish the path of life, you get to God and he's the mass of colours at the top he decides whether you go to hell (flames) or heaven (everyone holding hands in God's creation). The question marks say that I'm still not sure if this is right.

Pines presents an image of the judgement of the dead. God is the judge, hell is the flames, and heaven is populated by happy people.

God is represented by "a mass of colours", rather than an anthropomorphic figure. This is saying to me that in some ways Pines thinks of God as a person (the judge), but in other ways she thinks of God in a more abstract fashion (the mass of colours).

Pines says that she isn't sure if this is correct. This is in keeping with her above comments and with her picture. She seems to be holding on to an older concept, and exploring newer, more abstract notions at the same time.
10. Leon’s work is a little difficult to place. However, because of its similarities to the content of the above two concepts, I have placed it here.

Leon offers very little comment on his work: what he has written concerns the colours used, and the process of creating. However, he does mention 'the image of good', which leads me to assume he is visualising the battle between good and evil. The blackness represents evil, the red-orange represents good. Good is like a fire, penetrating the darkness of evil. Leon doesn't mention the significance of the blue or green. They may be other elements of good, or they may represent the creative force of God. If the latter is true, God is equated with good, and is seen as the antithesis of evil.
Drew wrote in terms of God's face and voice.

God to me doesn't have a strong facial image, he is more just a voice than anything else. I do see him sometimes as a face I saw in a dream. He was a swirl of blue's and grey's.

Drew's ideas of God are more amorphous than those of the other students in this group. She doesn't have a particular, clear image of God. Drew speaks of God's face, then describes it as a swirl of blues and greys.

There appears to me to be a dichotomy between what Drew is saying and the words she uses to express herself. She seems to be saying that she doesn't have an image of God's face or person, only an impression of a voice. Her words, however, imply a male person. It is difficult to know whether Drew's concepts outstrip her linguistic ability to accurately describe them, or whether language itself is incapable of accurately describing what Drew wants to say. Possibly, the answer is a combination of the two.

Drew relates more to an auditory idea of God than to a visual image. I would not be surprised to discover that Drew is what is termed an 'auditory learner', meaning that the chief sense she uses in learning is hearing. In my experience, visual learners are most likely to have a visual image of God and to experience God visually, and auditory learners are most likely to 'hear' God's voice, to understand God's qualities through the tone of voice they hear, and to experience God through audition, primarily music, singing, and the sounds of nature.
Superman

Six students spoke of God in super-human terms. In these examples, God is envisioned as being a super-human male; hence the title. Half the examples concentrate on God's power. The remainder focus on God's attributes, qualities, and disposition, presenting God as a special, idealised human.

1. Bart wasn't sure whether he believed in God or not. In his written response, sample 1 in the 'Doubt' sub-category above, Bart questions why we should believe in God. His picture, however, contains the image of God as superman coming to the rescue.

The image of God Bart held as a child was that of a superman. He drew that image for this activity. However, when he came to reflect on his drawing, he realised that it was no longer accurate or relevant. What Bart wrote seems to reflect the next step in his thinking.
2. Nicole noted that there are many things about God she’s not sure of. However, her primary image of God is of power.

To me god is the most powerful "person" in the world. He is a creator and the most wonderful existing thing that I know. Even though I believe this I wonder many thing about him.

Nicole is uncertain. She uses quotation marks for the word 'person', indicating that God is not the same as human beings; however, her use of the word says that she doesn’t have a better substitute. She also uses the word 'thing' which implies that she thinks of God in concrete terms.

Nicole also notes that although she believes these things about God, there are many other things that she still wonders about. To me, this is saying that Nicole is searching for an understanding of God that will satisfactorily address whatever it is that is causing her to wonder, be it the realisation that her former image is childish, or that there are issues in her life that call in question the adequacy of her former beliefs.

Nicole’s statement that she wonders about God implies that God is sufficiently important to her to spend time thinking about. She also uses words like ‘wonderful’ to describe God, which indicates some degree of affect in her concept of God. At the same time, I see no indication that God is very important in Nicole’s life.
3. Antonia wrote in terms of God’s powers.

My poster shows an outline of god and he is looking directly to me. The different coloured circles are the different kind of powers he has.

Antonia’s picture is not as anthropomorphic as her writing. She has made no attempt to draw the picture of a person. Despite this, Antonia speaks in terms of a person who looks and has powers. Possibly, Antonia is in the process of modifying her central image of God into something less concrete. It is interesting to note the ideological differences between Antonia’s writing and her drawing; the drawing seems to represent a more advanced form of thinking, if one accepts the idea that developing more abstract concepts of God is an advancement in thought.
4. Louise saw God as a very special person. She went on to elaborate on God's attributes and role.

God is a very special person whom created the universe and really most importantly he created humans, animals, mammals and even insects. When I think about God everything good comes to mind, for example the ocean, the warmth of the sun, people surfing the waves and everybody enjoying themselves. God is the almighty, our role model, the one we look up to, the one who can and will provide answers to any of our questions whether important or stupid!

Louise relates to a God she finds in nature. She speaks of God as a 'special person', thus separating God from creation, but to her God is chiefly the creator of the beauties of nature.

To Louise, God is an omniscient, powerful super-being who created the world. Implied in her writing is the concept that people are fallible creatures who sometimes ask stupid questions, and whose appropriate relationship with God is that of accepting and obedient petitioners.

5. Like Louise, Taylor thought in terms of God's qualities.

I don't see God as being a person to fear, he is full of wisdom & compassion & he can be seen in everyone.

I relate words like father, spirit, leader, and friend to God: have many views of how I see God.

Taylor has many views of how she sees God. Most of these are anthropomorphic concepts. Essentially, Taylor sees God as a wise and compassionate father and friend. The use of a lower case 'f' in father says to me that Taylor is thinking more of a dad, than of a great Father in Heaven when she speaks of God.
Taylor's concept contains an element of warmth and friendship. She doesn't fear God, or think primarily of God's otherness, but focuses on God's nearness, concern, and love.

6. Maribel wrote about God in terms of a human being, like herself, who can provide the love and hope she needs.

I sometimes also see God as a human being, someone with human feelings, someone who loves without restrictions. In this society we live in where we are constantly pressured to live up to a standard God provides a sense of hope for many. He becomes their driving force his love becomes the reasons why they are alive.

Maribel at first describes a perfect human being, able to relate unconditionally to humanity. She speaks here in the first person singular, implying that she either holds this image, or that she is moving towards holding it. Then there comes a shift in focus, and Maribel passes through the first person plural to the third person plural. This shift signals an unconscious distancing between Maribel and what she is describing, the intimate relationship between God and 'many' people. To me, this says that Maribel doesn't consider that she has this kind of deep loving relationship with God. However, the overall tone and content of the description say that she would very much like to have such a relationship with God.
Benevolent Being

In this sub-category I have put all the descriptions of God that focus on God's attributes, characteristics, and role. This sub-category overlaps with the previous one, which also contained descriptions of God's qualities and attributes. The essential difference between these two groups is that the previous group spoke of God's qualities within the overarching image of God as a person, whereas this group tends to think of God in terms of God's qualities, as if that is all they can say about God. Since 'benevolence' names most of these qualities, I have used it as a label for these examples. 11 students have contributed examples to this sub-category.

1. Anna related mainly to the concept of God as father. She spoke of God in anthropomorphic terms.

I think God is the creator of all life he is of a higher source and looks over us. I think he is male like a father figure, because that is what I have been brought up to believe. . . .

I do believe he has a voice when you go to heaven you speak to this deep masculine voice. (I saw it on a video with John Travolta!!) And I thought yep I believe that!

The main title I relate God to is Father because he is everyones father and we are all brothers and sisters living in his kingdom.

I can relate to "Father" b'coz fathers are supportive strong role models in our life who love their children + wish no harm upon them, this is why I can relate God to my father .... Our father.
Anna's picture, seen in the sub-category 'God in His Heaven', is that of a white-robed male, standing on the clouds in the sky, and with his arms around the shoulders of some children. Both Anna's picture and description of God portray a God who is human, male, distant, strong, wishing well, compassionate but not cuddly, 'father' rather than 'dad', someone for whom the word 'love' means not wishing others harm, rather than a deep, intimate bond.

2. Louise used many terms to speak of God, but 'father' is the predominant one.

When I think about God, I think about him as my father, my friend, God, Lord any of these names because they all have significant meaning and entwine into each other because God is your father in the sense that you can't see him but you can talk to him, he may not talk back but in your heart he is, I think if you can pray comfortably and talk to him comfortably then you have already established a special bond which can't be broken by anyone or anything.

There is a difference between Anna's concept of God as father and Louise's concept of God as father. Anna's 'father' is benevolent and kind, but distant. Louise's 'father' is someone she can speak to, someone with whom she is comfortable, and with whom she has a special bond of love. These are two quite different images.

These examples show why it is inadequate and frequently misleading to ask people to nominate their image of God, and then to assume that if several people nominate 'father' as their prime God-concept they are all talking about the same thing.
3. Jacinta combined the concepts of father and creator.

Jacinta describes her picture like this:

Kaleidoscope, fireworks, explosion. Every colour of God’s world. Each one of the “blobs” is different just as we are. Blended together to form new colours. God blended us to form new colours & races. All live on same page as we all live in same world.

God means our creator and father. He guides, watches and protects us.

This is a unique and poetic way of portraying the concept of God as creator. The overall tone of both the picture and the writing is warm and alive, an ever-changing kaleidoscope of individual beauty merging into an harmonious pattern. This concept seems to provide Jacinta with a sense of her own uniqueness and value, the uniqueness and value of others, and the overall pattern or meaning of life.
Ed related to a creator God.

Ed said this about his picture:

I think God is in everything that I see. Everything that is beautiful. He created the world to support what he loves. He is pure at heart, and he is in and loves everyone. He made us to resemble himself, so everyone looks like God - bad or Good.

Ed's depiction of God has a charming, childlike simplicity to it. To Ed, God is omnipresent creator of the world and of humankind. God's main attributes are love and purity. This image seems to provide for Ed a sense of order and meaning in the universe.

Ed's use of the word 'pure' to describe God seems anomalous. It seems as if he has mentally recorded this word as describing a desirable trait, and then transferred the word to his description of God, not for its linguistic meaning, but for the connotation of desirability he has attached to it.
5. Jasmin also conceived of God as creator and protector. She had this to say about her idea of God:

I don't have a clear picture in my mind of who God is. Although I see him as a creator, and protector of people that love him.

Jasmin's description carries less certainty and conviction than the others so far presented in this group. It seems as if Jasmin has put aside her old images of God, but has not yet replaced them with new images. However, she has kept certain characteristics of God that she finds meaningful, namely, 'creator' and 'protector'. It could be that Jasmin is in the process of reforming her images and concepts of God.


Images of God.
My image was of a sun and blue light coming off the sun. I drew a love heart symbolising the love God has and wrote forgiveness which when I think of God I think that he is a forgiving God.

D.D. is conscious of thinking of God as being loving and forgiving. Her image of the sun indicates to me another quality she unconsciously attributes to God, that of light. Note that the light that comes from the sun is blue. Blue is usually considered to be a peaceful, comforting colour. Given her other comments, I think D.D. associates the light of God with knowledge and guidance, in which she finds comfort and security.
Stefania saw God as a helpful person.

God, to me, is a (person) who is on the look out for people and one who helps them when they need it. I have asked God for help in the past and present but I have never felt like a miracle response. That is I never felt that something was almost impossible but God made it go the right way. God may have helped me but it hasn't been very evident. I probably just didn't notice or recognize his help, but I am sure he did help me.

Stefania's main image of God is that of a kind and helpful person. She clearly wishes to maintain this image, even though her experiences don't confirm it. In her life, Stefania hasn't had the experience of having her prayers answered (at least, not in a way of which she was aware). However, for some reason, she finds it important to hold on to the concept of God she has described, even though her experiences are at odds with this concept. Most of Stefania's description is, in fact, her attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction between her beliefs and her experiences.
Lee's picture shows clearly her ideas of God as friend.

Lee explained her picture this way:

My picture has four figures in it. The middle two show (in blue) people and the figure hugging the person from behind is God.

The colours represent: Blues - loneliness, emptiness and coldness.
Reds - Warmth, love security.
The black figure and the other reddish figure represent God aswell.

The black being the unknowned, doubt and fear that God sometimes shows in my life. And the warm figure represents the warmth, love, and light that god has given me in my life.

The colours around it shows all the emotions that God has raised in my life.
The colours and images in this picture are bright and vibrant. The roiling swirls of emotion and the elongated figures of the unknown and the warm aspects of God denote a dynamic flux of thought and feeling that revolve around a static, core image of God as friend and beloved. The primary image of God, "the figure hugging the person from behind", strongly portrays a sense of a loving friend.

Lee's picture clearly portrays her functional image of God: although there are thoughts, feelings, and experiences in her life that Lee cannot explain and that cause her to question her beliefs, her core image of God as an intimate, loving friend remains stable and keeps the doubts and questions in perspective.

9. Dana had strong and somewhat unique ideas about God. Mostly she thought of God as a friend.
This is Dana's description of her picture:

God to me is displayed through nature and all the wonders in the world. I don't see God as someone who I worship, I see it as someone I can turn to, like an invisible friend. . . . There are a couple of ideas I have of God. I don't see God as being superior to me, I see him/her as an equal, someone that helps me when I'm going through bad and good stages I don't really like calling God God I see him as more of a friend because by calling him/her God makes him/her sound superior to me. . . . In primary school we were taught to worship God and see him/her as superior or a leader but now I don't agree with this. . . . In my picture I drew a sunrise on the ocean. In this picture I can relate to God. The sun rising and filtering out the darkness, the sun being me and God side by side filtering out all the darkness (the down side) When I'm feeling down and miserable I think of the sunrise on the ocean taking away the darkness and bringing light. I can compare God to a dog, someone who will always be there, always willing to listen, even though they don't talk to you, just listening to you is enough. They don't give their opinions or ever argue, just listen which I think is great. When I look out at the ocean when I'm sitting on the beach by myself and there's an inner peace that I feel I think to myself, God is present, he/she is here looking after me, like a friend would. . . . God is like a life long friend someone to guide you on your way.

Dana refers to God as he/she: it seems to be important to her to de-emphasise the masculinity of God. She also repeatedly alludes to the equality between herself and God. Her concept of God as an equal is unique in my experience. It would be interesting to know if the two concepts are related. Perhaps in her quest for sexual equality she feels the need to extend her parameters to include God because of the common association of God with masculinity. I also find her statement "I can compare God to a dog" a unique way to describe her notion that God is a faithful friend.
10. Finally, Marie spoke of her visions of God. These can be encapsulated in the terms 'Ultimate Healer' and 'Light of the World'.

Visions of God . . .

I have various visions of God, these often change as I learn more about God. I see him as the Ultimate healer, always there to look after us, he sees everything we do and is with us everywhere we go. He is there to help us and guide us. The clouds in the picture symbolise the bad, evil and uncertainty in the world, and the sun, represents God, the light through the darkness, breaking the evil down and making way for goodness and life.

Marie's description is more sophisticated and abstract that her picture. The picture does not capture the sense of growth and flux contained in the sentence, "I have various visions of God, these often change as I learn more about God." Marie seems comfortable with this state in her understanding of God. It seems that her chief concept of God as 'Ultimate Healer' and protector forms a reliable core for her beliefs.
Loving Carer

In this last sub-category I have placed three interesting concepts of God. The three students whose work is featured here clearly envision a God who is much more than just a person. Although these students think of God more as a presence than a person, they use anthropomorphic language to describe God’s being and actions, and for this reason I have placed them in this category.

1. Yvette expressed herself simply when she says:

God is the hand that holds the earth.
The tranquil globe of the earth is held protectively in the hand of God. Yvette had wanted to show the hand cupping the earth, but her drawing skills weren't equal to the challenge. Even so, the black, empty infinity of space is well portrayed, along with the smallness of earth and the encompassing, outgoing, loving protectiveness of God.

2. For Allora, God is the 'supreme being'. She said:

God is the supreme being, but is also the closest friend we can have... For me, God is the creator, friend, father, everything. I relate to God in everything I do. but being a human, I have my own weaknesses too, and often do things that displease God that I'm ashamed of as a Christian... The image I have of God is that He is the glorious God, the supreme being, but is at the same time my friend, one who walks with me during the ups and downs of my life.

Allora's concept of God is complex. She presents here two different concepts of God. One is of God as the 'Supreme Being', which emphasises the omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and transcendence of God. This is tempered by the equal weight Allora gives to the concept 'friend', which expresses the intimate presence of a God who is with her in everything she does. Allora seems not only able to hold these two opposite concepts in tension, but to need both concepts to give her a more accurate picture of God. There is a sense of the importance and meaning of God in Allora's life.
To me God represents all aspects and colours of life is God is black, white, red, yellow. God is in the form of a square, circle, person, etc.

God is good, kind, generous and God has a permanant smile on everyone. God is like a shining light looking over everyone, the earth. God’s eyes are big enough to care for everyone.

God is like a “friend” who is always near even if we can’t see him - God although may not be seen physically - God is felt, his/her presence is felt.

God has no gender. God is neither he or she. God is simple GOD.

I feel that God is an educator although God is not present to physically educate. God educates the people of the world via people’s decisions / actions / emotions.
These expressions about God exude a sense of being cared for in a friendly, loving way. Molika sees God as being actively present in all that exists, yet as existing apart from creation (which is implied in her statements, "God is like a shining light looking over everyone, the earth. God's eyes are big enough to care for everyone").

Molika presented a corollary to her above-mentioned concept: It is the concept of God as 'educator'. God is not seen as a wise instructor, but as one who guides people to understanding by being present to them and communicating with them about their lives.

There is an active, vibrant, joyous immediacy to Molika's concept of God than can be very appealing, and seems to underpin her happy approach to life.
Category Comments

The category, God as Person, contains almost as many examples as the remaining four categories put together. Even the students who think of God as spirit, energy or mystery frequently also express notions of the personhood of God. They do this in such a way as to suggest the evolution of more expansive and abstract notions of God from images of personhood, in response to a need to overcome the conceptual limitations imposed by anthropomorphic language.

The use of gendered language also seems to follow the same progression. The students whose ideas are relatively concrete tend to be more specific in their adherence to the concept of a masculine God. For example, Louise says: “I do believe God is male”. Anna echoes this belief when she says: “I think he is a male, like a father figure, because that is what I have been brought up to believe”. Both of these respondents are featured in the ‘God as a Person’ category, ‘Benevolent Being’ sub-category.

In contrast to these, Molika says: “God is felt, his/her presence is felt”. Molika’s ideas are presented in the ‘Loving Carer’ sub-category which, as I mentioned earlier, present ideas of God that are closer to an understanding of ‘presence’ than ‘person’. Brad, whose concept of God is that of a spiritual being (that is, in the following category), says: “What is God? Who is He? - is He a he?”. These two students, whose concepts are more abstract than those of Anna and Louise, question the exclusively male concept of God prevalent in most of the students’ work, and insisted upon by several students.
GOD AS SPIRIT

Six respondents conceive of God primarily as a spirit. The words these students use to speak of God include 'presence', 'spirit', and 'soul'. Some of these names are used reluctantly, as if they were the closest approximation the respondent could find, rather than a precise term. One student didn't use any of these terms, but her description quite clearly draws a picture of a spiritual being.

Even though there are only six students in this category, three sub-categories can be discerned. I have called these 'The Spirit in the World', 'The Spirit Within' and 'The Mysterious Spirit'. Clearly, this last category shares something in common with the following category, the concept of God as mystery.

The Spirit in the World

1. Kard spoke of an ever-present presence.

I feel that God is a spirit, some presence that is ever present.

I sometimes think that god is a reason that people are able to blame all the bad things that happen in the world. When things go bad we ask God for help and yet we rarely thank him...

I tend to associate God with creation and nature. When I look at the marvels of the world I tend to associate them with God but I feel all suffering and pain is caused by humans.

I see God as a guider and protector. God is not terribly important to me but I feel his presence at times. Although I am not a great believer in the ideologies of religion, I feel I am spiritual and able to accept the possibly of some higher being.
Kard sees God as an invisible omnipresence which is of a different nature from herself, and is of little significance to her life. For her, God is primarily a 'higher being' whose presence she acknowledges.

She understands God's function to be that of guide and protector, but doesn't present any awareness of a reciprocal response being required on her part. Kard realises that because God seems so evanescent, it is easy for people to ignore God in their lives until they need help or a scapegoat to blame for all the ills of the world. The tone of her writing implies that Kard disapproves of taking God for granted in this way.

2. Demi wrote of a 'soul', remote and meaningless to her.

The name God does not mean anything to me. It is a word that comes up a soul, an almighty soul with great strengths. I don't know [what God is like], what ever it is or who ever is just their it is what I have been told.

Demi notes that her comments are what she has been taught rather than what she believes. In view of this comment, it would be interesting to know why she chose to portray this particular image, if it is not what she believes. Did she record this image because, although she no longer accepts it, she hasn't yet developed another image? Whatever her reasons, it is clear that Demi considers God to be irrelevant to her life.
3. Brad wrote of God as a spirit, and went on to explain what this belief means to his life.

What is God? Who is He? - is He a he? I think God is very much like Santa Clause. It is not the person that is important, it is the spirit of God. To recieve this spirit and partake in its celebration, then it must be accepted. This DOES NOT mean that to accept this spirit, you need to go to church at least once a week, and live a life dedicated to God. It just means that within oneself, God must be accepted.

I believe that the best prayer and respect to God is done by oneself - in private - within. I don't believe in the necessity to go to church all the time.

For me, God has no particular title. God is just a part of life - like a catalyst for enjoyment and fulfillment.

Brad's concept of God is that of the spirit in the world which must be accepted so that one may become a part of the life of the spirit. Brad has definite and negative ideas about religious practices. He sees these as being unnecessary in the appropriate response to the spirit of God in the world.
Cimba didn’t explicitly use the words ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ to speak of God. However, for me her description of God mostly resembles the concept of a spirit that lives within the self.

I don’t think ‘God’ is a ‘who’, or even a ‘what’. Can’t put him in a name category either. The only thing I connect ‘God’ and the possibility that ‘God’ exists, is with creation; How the world and everything within it has evolved. I think if I was made to say what I thought God was/is, then I’d say, it is within us. When people pray and ask for God’s help. Instead, I would search within ‘myself’ for the answers and for help. God is usually associated with a figure you can turn to for help. I think the strength and faith you seek from God, you should really seek within yourself.”

The fact that Cimba says ‘myself’ (that is, using quotation marks) implies that God is to be found within the self, rather than that the self is God, or that the self is sufficient without God. For Cimba, God is also found in nature. This is apparent in her artwork. God, the yellow rays, light up the darkness, and reveal creation.
Cimba specified that God is beyond our categories of conception. (She said, "I don't think 'God' is a 'who', or even a 'what'.") Although she used the pronouns 'he' and 'it', this is not because these words represent something of the nature of God, but because there are no other words in our language that are appropriate.

2. Edward also spoke of God as being a spirit that exists within people.

There is a god and he is a spiritual being and he's part of me as for what he brought me to live and give happiness to my grandparents and my mum.

[God is found] in my mum and my granddad 'cause like God's right in them 'cause they show me the way - like a guide, to my life.

I reckon God's in every one of us. I know he's in heaven, but I reckon everyone has a piece of God in them. I reckon I have a piece of God 'cause I'm generous, I'm kind and all that.

During the interview, Edward portrayed a God who is full of warmth, intimacy, and protection. Edward believes that God is a part of himself, and that this implies a responsibility on his part. Edward also sees God present in other people, notable his mother and his grandfather, who teach him God's ways.

Life experiences obviously give form and structure to Edward's concepts of God.
The Mysterious Spirit

There is only one example in this sub-category.

Taylor wrote of the mystery of the Spirit that is God. She said:

I feel God is like a mysterious spirit floating & crawling into different areas of the world.

The picture Taylor has drawn and the phrase ‘floating and crawling’ are reminiscent of a mist drifting into all the nooks and crannies of the world. The black in the picture seems to represent the darkness of the world, and the bright colours represent the positive presence of God, pervading the world. Taylor’s overall image is a positive one. God is essentially a spiritual presence, ever-present, but non-intrusive; God brings the light of life and knowledge to the world.
Category Comments

Being able to conceptualise God as spirit is no guarantee that God will be meaningful in one's life. Demi's statement that "the name God does not mean anything to me", and Kard's comment that "God is not terribly important to me" are evidence of that.

Three of the respondents in this group show a similarity in perspective. Brad, Cimba, and Edward all speak with a degree of confidence in their beliefs; they all view the presence of the spirit of God in their lives as requiring commitment and action on their parts; they all speak as if from personal experience rather than from hearsay; and they all display a sense of self-esteem and of self- and God-reliance.

Could it simply be co-incidence that half of the respondents in this group share such similar perspectives?
GOD AS AN ENERGY FORCE

Eight students presented their concept of God as an energy or a force of some kind. These can be assigned to three different categories which I have named 'Life Energy', 'Life Force', and 'Powerful Force'.

Life Energy

The three examples presented here refer to God as a source or energy which is the origin and sustenance of life.

1. Cynthia's primary image of God is of a source of life and love.
Cynthia described her picture thus:

I drew a high mountain, capped with ice. On the mountain the beautiful things of nature grow. At the top of the mountain is god, a source that radiates everlasting love.

I have made the mountain black to show that man can never attain the position of God. The flowers and grasses are brightly coloured to show the beauty of nature. The ice is still a mystery to me. And the ball at the top is god, radiating his love across the entire earth.

I have no solid picture of god, he is just a source, a guide - he is there to help all people through good and bad and to guard over his earth.

The pastel colours of this picture radiate a sense of warmth and security. There is a protective closeness of the sun to the mountain. The sun represents Cynthia's concept of God as the 'source', and also her concept of God as the protector who watches over everything and looks after everyone who asks for help.

The distance and unattainability of God are represented by the height of the mountain, the black line which is the outline of the mountain and which separates God from creation, and the sheet of ice at the top (of which Cynthia says, "The ice is still a mystery to me.") The ice seems to represent the mystery of God, that which makes God more than Cynthia can comprehend.

Cynthia's picture seems to combine both the concept of God as immanent (God creates, loves, protects, cares for), and the concept of God as transcendent (God as distant).
2. Kerryn associated God with life. She wrote of God as an energy flowing through all life.

God means, something looking after me 24 hrs a day making sure I'm happy & healthy. God is with me everywhere in my soul deep inside my body and is also in every other soul of the people I share my life with. I don't think he is any kind of material particle. I feel he is an energy flowing through everything. Maybe he's flowing through my artwork I don't know.

In this example it is possible to see the progression of Kerryn's thoughts. At first Kerryn seems unsure about God when she says that God is "something". Then she defines God negatively when she says that God is "not a material particle". Finally, she finds the expression she is searching for, making an explicit, positive statement of her beliefs, saying that God is "an energy flowing through everything".

Kerryn states where God is to be found (inside herself and others), and the actions of God (to look after her). She accepts that God may be acting in a more mysterious way in her, flowing through her art.

3. Robert saw God as a life energy.

I do not see "God" as a person but a force - no a force is out of Physics - a life force - energy. It is this energy that I obtain when in a scenario such as this picture. I surf. "God" is energy.

Notice the implied relationship between Robert and God. Robert says that God is the energy he obtains when he surfs. To Robert, God is the sustaining energy in his life. The fact that Robert drew a picture of himself surfing, an activity that is very enjoyable for him, indicates that he associates God with positive things in his life.
Life Force

The two examples in this section focus on an external energy that helps sustain life.

My poster reflects what I see as God. I believe that God is everywhere, not just one image. I drew a yellow sun, for I think God is power and light.

Vesna’s picture contains several images. There is the sun, the source of light and power in this world. This is the main image of God Vesna uses. Coloured rays of energy emanate from, and rise up to, the sun, perhaps representing the flow of the spirit/energy to and from God. The words at the bottom are: power, creator, master, enforcer.
2. Jordana's picture and written notes present her world view which consists not only of her image of God, but of God's relationship with the world, and the appropriate response from us.

God is like a fire raging intensely - he is always there and will never burn out. His love is burning in our hearts. The world is round and never ending - that is how the world should be - its people united no matter what colour, creed or racial background. The blue is the main colour in the picture and it represents harmony that covers the world and its people.

The red, yellow and orange represent a fire which is burning intensely over the world and its people.

This fire represents how our love for the world and its people should be - a love burning intensely and forever and will never die out. The blue is on the outside of the fire and this represents the harmony that occurs when love is in the world.

I feel God does things in the world for a purpose and he does them for the right reasons.
To Jordana, God is the fire of love, raging intensely, burning in our hearts forever. It is clear from the first half of her description that Jordana considers love to be the empowering force of life, thus the raging fire of love is also the raging fire of life.

To Jordana, the response God expects of us is that we will give full rein to God's fire within us and love others as God loves us.

**Powerful Force**

The three examples of work presented here emphasise the power of God. This power is controlled, but frightening.

1. Elizabeth said that she didn't really know what God is, or is like, but the image that captured for her something of God is that of power.

   God to me is a powerful force, like a spirit that is able to do many incredible things such as storms, earthquakes, make snow etc. I don't believe he is one of us or she is one of us. God is It. It's too hard to know what God is.

   The progression of Elizabeth's thoughts is quite clear. She begins by enumerating her ideas of God (God is spirit, God is powerful, God can be seen in nature). She continues to expand on this by adding negative qualifiers (God is not 'he', God is not 'she', God is not 'one of us'). Eventually, Elizabeth realises that all she has done so far is talk around the question, and has said nothing about what God really is. At the same time, she realises that God cannot be encapsulated in words, so she says, "It's too hard to know what God is."
2. Maribel saw God as a powerful force that makes the world go around. Her picture captures this image well.

I don't have a complete clear image of God. I see God as a strong force. A very strong force that makes the world go around. A force too powerful to be fully understood. This is what sometimes I find fascinating and frustrating, not being able to fully understand what God means, what God means in my life.

Maribel is frustrated at not being able to visualise God more clearly, and at not being able to say what role God plays in her life. I see these as potentially positive things. The fact that she is frustrated indicates that the 'God-question' is important to her, otherwise she would just dismiss the whole notion. The fact that she cannot see a clear image of God indicates that her conceptions of God have grown beyond what can be contained by concrete images and language: Her concept has expanded.
3. Filbert likened God to a powerful tornado.

God is like a powerful tornado. No-one really knows how powerful he is until they come across him and his path. Some people fear him, like they do tornados, some people blame it/him for the destruction caused.

This image was expressed at a time when the movie 'Twister' was in the cinemas, and a number of documentaries about tornados were being shown on television. It seems quite possible that Filbert took the images presented by the media and refashioned them into a powerful, up-to-date image of God to which he could relate.
Category Comments

The first two sub-categories speak of a God which is intimately associated with life, and found within living things. There is a quiet, pervasive 'thereness' to this image of God. For these students, God is bound up with life; God is a co-requisite of life; God is found within themselves, others and nature; God is worshipped by being accepted and imitated in its life-giving love.

The third sub-category presents images of God as a potentially destructive, inexplicable, uncontrollable, fascinating force which can inspire fear and end life. Despite these characteristics, the force is presented as controlled and not to be feared.
THE MYSTERIOUS UNKNOWN

The final category of God concepts that has emerged from the data contains the work of those students who approach, and attempt to go beyond, the boundaries of language in speaking of the essence of God.

The work of ten students is presented here. I have separated them into two categories which I have named 'The Unknowable' and 'Mystery'. Although these two sub-categories share much in common, there is a difference in tone between them.

The Unknowable

The seven students whose work is presented here approach the task of talking about God in an essentially cognitive way. They attempt to describe God, and eventually realise that it can't be done.

1. Angela skipped the preliminaries and went right to the heart of the matter. She said: "GOD IS UNKNOWN". The use of capitals indicate that Angela is emphatic about this attribute of God, seeing it perhaps as the quintessential nature of God.

2. Allora was also emphatic about the unknowability of God.

God: Not you nor me nor anyone else can define with words. If we are able to fully define God, then it means we are greater than God. Many people don't believe in God because they can't see Him. If God is limited by a physical body then he can't be everywhere at the same time.
To Allora the unknowability of God is a natural requisite for God to be God. For example, God could not be omnipresent if God were confined to one place and time in a physical body. God could not be omniscient if we, who do not know everything, are able to fully know God.

3. Mary used a questioning approach to the issue. She said:

What is God? Only he shall know. Is he just a figment of the imagination. Someone to blame when something goes wrong. If you think about it most people don’t talk or think about God when things are good but as soon as things go wrong they change. There is no such thing as God in a human form and he doesn’t really have the power because he wouldn’t allow the world being destroyed as it has.

Mary begins by stating that only God knows what God is. She then reflects on what she can know about God. She believes that God is not omnipotent; her reason for believing this is the presence of evil in the world. She believes that God is not present in a physical way, otherwise people would find it difficult to ignore God. Then Mary goes on to discuss other people’s beliefs and practices in relation to God.

4. Anthony also had questions about God. In this passage he both asked questions and attempted to answer them.

My picture is about not the uncertainty of God [that I am uncertain about the existence of God], but about the not knowing and the mystery that surrounds God.

My personal opinion is that yes there is a god . . . . but even so I believe that no-one can say what god is or even what he is like because simply nobody knows except those who have died.

How do we know that God created the world and human life?
How do we know that this is true, we are told so in the bible, but again how do we know it is true, how do we know that someone didn’t write it in to sound good. This is all part of the mystery that is God and makes religion religion.

Anthony seems to be trying to deal with his doubts and questions surrounding what he was taught about God. He maintains his belief that God exists: This is the only emphatic statement Anthony makes. As for the rest, he is content to say, "I don't know, and I don't believe anyone really knows". Anthony has arrived at his own notion of the essentials of faith - belief in God is essential, all the other things he mentions are not.

5. Jimmy presented something of the mystery of God in his reflections on the unknowability of God.

I don't believe that God is a figure as such but we refer to him as one so that we can visualise him much easier. I think that sometimes when I see things not just in nature that that is God. When I see the beach or the sun or star and the sky I think that there really is a God because science can't explain everything because it has to come from somewhere. It is too hard to comprehend that God was always there.

God is important but I think that people should relate to God in their own way, by forcing people to go to church and read books then in a sense you are forcing them away from it. Some may relate to God in a better way than through formal ceremonies etc.
Jimmy recognises the significance of the personification of God - it is not that God is a person, but that this way of thinking helps us understand God better.

Jimmy uses the example of science to maintain belief in God: God is the answer that science cannot provide.

Jimmy also recognises that people relate to God in different ways. He believes that there should be the freedom to approach God in whatever way suits each person.

6. An unnamed student said this about God:

God is mysterious and no-one really knows who or what he is. God is neverending and he is present in everything on Earth.

To this student God is essentially an eternal, omnipresent, mysterious force that permeates the lives of every creature on Earth.
7. Clea also related to the mysterious unknowability of God, and attempted to portray this.

This is how Clea described her picture:

My picture sort of resembles a jigsaw puzzle of ideas about God and they all interlink with each other, and come together to form My image of God (which is the purple, because it is linked with all the other colours [images of God]).

The black in the far end of the page represents the real God. It’s black because no one knows who or what he is (he is blacked out). The gold colour around The black represents his holyness and the 1st step to actually finding out who he is.

The colours have no real meaning only that they represent different idea’s and images of God.

It is interesting to note that Clea differentiates between the reality of God and her images of God. This shows a depth of awareness, as many people identify God with their images of God.
Mystery

The work of the following three students reflects a more metaphorical approach than that of the students in the preceding subcategory.

1. Leanne’s picture is totally unlike any of the others created by the students in this study. She used only a blue pen, and created a comparatively small, complex pattern. For Leanne, God is the simple within the complex: God is the simple essence of goodness within us, but is as complex and “numerous” as the beliefs of humankind.
This is what Leanne said about her graphics:

This image represents my idea of God. I have used only a blue pen as I think that God is simple. I think that the idea of God has been made to be complex (ie, the pattern I've used), but when looked at closely, there are only simple patterns ie circles and lines.

To me, God represents what we deem to be right in life, and his "kingdom" represents what we, as humans see as our ultimate goal to achieve. I feel that "God" is a part of us, that is, what is right and good, and pure.

I feel that God has always been a natural part of human life and worship is normal. I do not believe in those who say they fight for God and kill innocent people as this contradicts what I believe God is.

I think that "God" is only a name, but what it represents is important.

I believe God is universal and is as numerous as each person believes in their own personal "God," though they may belong to the same religion.

Leanne has gone on to extend what I have called her concept of 'the simple within the complex' not only to describe God, but to encompass her notion of God-with-us. God is a natural part of life, that which is within us motivating us toward good. Worship is not an artificial or ancillary activity, but a natural consequence of acknowledging the mystery that is God-with-us. Appropriate living naturally flows from correct orientation to God.

There is a simple naturalness about this concept of God.
2. Patricia’s picture is an attempt to record the essence of the vision and the feelings that came to her when she meditated on God.

This is her description of her drawing:

I saw God in all his colours like a whirl sweeping over the earth.

There is a simple, natural, delightedly awed tone to Patricia’s description. It seems the most wonderful, mysterious, yet natural phenomenon that she is description.
3. Faith didn’t attempt to say what God is. She speaks of God in terms of colours.

My picture says to me that God is sort of always at the back of my mind when I need him. I suppose He is probably one of the only brightest colours I can see in my mind besides dreams.

The red in the middle means the heart/or soul of a feeling, then slowly moving always the colours become duller less vibrant into a black hemisphere. The white swirls and spots means that we don’t have total blackness when we close our eyes therefore we don’t have total blackness in our lives.

The blackness in Faith’s picture is the blackness (of ignorance? of meaninglessness? of despair? of evil?) that she sees in people’s lives. God is the colours of light, of meaning, that penetrate the darkness and give meaning to life. The ideas Faith writes down are all she can articulate so far about what she saw during her meditation. Her conscious thoughts haven’t yet caught up with her intuition about God. On some level, God is very important to Faith.
Category Comments

This category contains the concepts that are the most abstract and difficult to describe. It is at this point that the break down of the ability of language to describe thoughts and feelings occurs. Some of the students in this sample have attempted to overcome the problem by describing what they can of their beliefs and concepts; they then acknowledge their inability to go any further by speaking of the ultimate unknowability of God. Other students abandon all attempts to use language in a descriptive way. They make metaphorical statements that capture something of the feelings and images that arise when they contemplate God.

Most of the students in the 'The Unknowable' sub-category maintain a detached perspective about God. Although all of them accept the existence of God, only Jimmy notes that God is important, and implies the need for developing a relationship with God. The remaining six students do not mention either the prospect of entering a relationship with God, or the impossibility or irrelevance of attempting to do so.

The three concepts presented in the 'Mystery' sub-category seem different from the other concepts in this category. In Leanne's representations there is a natural sense of reciprocity with God, contained in her beliefs that God is a natural part of us and worship is a natural response on our part. While Patricia does not elaborate on the meaning in her life of the concept of God which she holds, the general tone of her expression is exuberant, and implies a sense of attraction toward this concept.
OTHER PATTERNS

The preceding categories put into a framework most of the concepts of God presented by the respondents. There are four concepts of God, however, that do not fit the framework. One is what I have called 'God as reward', and the remaining three relate to the notion of God in nature. They will be reviewed in the two sub-categories below.

The concept 'God as reward' is unlike any other concept contained in the data. I have therefore placed it in a sub-category of its own.

Of the three concepts that connect God with nature, one is pantheistic, one is panentheistic, and the third uses nature as the primary God-image around which the concept is built. Apart from these three students, many students mentioned the importance of nature in the construction of their concepts of God. I have placed all of these ideas together in a sub-category named 'God and Nature'.

Another pattern of thought that is very noticeable in the data is the frequently expressed notion, 'I don't know what God is'. Sometimes, this 'not-knowing' is accompanied by questioning or searching. I have called this way of thinking 'Not Knowing'. This notion differs from the ideas presented in the category 'God as Mystery', and those from the sub-category 'Doubt'. One way of understanding these differences is to think of them in terms of a defining sentence: the 'Doubt' students would say, "Sometimes, I don't even know if God exists"; the 'Not Knowing' students would say, "I know that God exists, but I don't know what God is"; the 'Mystery' students would say, "I know that God exists and I know what God is: God is the Unknowable".
God as Reward

Spiro drew and wrote about his concept of God which is unique in this sample.

When I did this picture I saw god at the end of the rainbow when I go to heaven and also a pot of gold for the future.

Spiro clearly thinks of God as his reward when he dies. To him, God is like a pot of gold. There are elements of a fairy story in this. The idea of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow has been taken from a story by Spiro and adapted to suit his purposes here.

For Spiro, God is like an object for him to win rather than a being with whom to relate.
God and Nature

I have further divided this sub-category into smaller groups, which I have called ‘Pantheism’, ‘Panentheism’, ‘God -Image’, ‘Encountering God in Nature’, and ‘Nature as an Aid to Belief’.

PANTHEISM

1. Marissa conceived of God as being the universe.

I drew the world, and a big black sky with stars (universe) because that is what I think God is, God is every living thing in the universe, he exists in anything that has a heart, a soul, that is alive.

Marissa sees God as existing in every living thing in the universe. She does not imply any understanding of God apart from the universe: her concept of God is pantheistic. Marissa sees God as existing only in the living things in the universe, not in inanimate matter. This implies that inanimate matter is separate from God and is, therefore, created substance. Marissa seems not to have noticed this, or to have developed an idea of God as the creator of inanimate matter.
PANENTHEISM

Four students thought of God as existing in nature, while also existing apart from nature. This is a panentheistic notion.

1. Sharne's concept of God is that of the immanent transcendent.

Personally I believe god not to be a person but every little thing around us... I believe god to be present in the trees, the sky, grass basically nature's presence. God is the creator of all things and apart of him lives in each and everything.

Sharne begins by saying that God is “every little thing around us”. She then modifies this statement by saying that God is present in nature, that God is “nature’s presence”. Sharne then distances God even further from nature by noting that God is the creator of all things. Sharne appears to be saying both that God is the creator of all things (that is, God exists apart from nature), and that God is nature.
2. An unnamed respondent said this about God:

God is neverending and he is present in everything on Earth.

The girl who wrote this statement understood God as mystery and unknowable. She also saw the mysterious, unknowable God as being present in everything on Earth. For her, nature is the visible presence of the invisible God.

3. Elizabeth understood God as being present in nature. Nature provides Elizabeth with powerful God-images.

The images/pictures about God that relate to me are . . . the ocean (and everything living inside the ocean), the forest and trees, and everything which is living on earth. These are images of God because God created the universe. God is within his creations eg If I see a tree I see a part of God.

The presence of God both within nature and as the creator of nature is one of Elizabeth's main concepts of God. (Her other main concept is presented in the 'Powerful Force' sub-category.) Nature reminds Elizabeth of God because, for her, God is in nature.

God is not present in all of nature, but only in living things. Elizabeth seems to be saying that God is creator of all things, but is present only in living things.
4. Ann also understood God as both present in a limited part of nature, and other than nature. Nature has a strong impact on her God-imaging.

GOD is like...the sea, the Moon, the Sun he is in all livings things he created.

Ann sees God as existing in all living created things.

However, Ann does not seem to notice the apparent contradiction in her statement. She says that God is like the sea, the moon, and the sun: then she says that God is present in all living things. Does Ann not notice an apparent contradiction here, or does she consider the sea, moon, and sun to be living things? Perhaps Ann is saying that God is like the sea, moon, and sun in some unspecified way, but that God exists in living creation.
God-Image

Seven students described their image of God as being intimately related to nature. They do not think of God as being nature, but when they think of God, they think of nature: nature reflects God to them.

1. Lockie made a strong association between God and nature.

My vision of God is integrated with nature. Vast expanses of open country, and beautiful sunsets. The red earth is from the North West of W.A., because it is a very beautiful place. The purples and blues in the sky symbolise peace and tranquility. The spiritual side of nature.

For Lockie, the vastness, beauty, and tranquility of the open country calls God to mind. It seems that God’s attributes include those of vastness, beauty, and tranquility, the essence of Lockie’s experiences of nature.
2. Tommy had trouble articulating both what God is for him, and what his picture is expressing.

This artwork reflects God's beauty, also it shows my feelings both good and bad. Dark is bad and light is good. Half of the feelings I don't even know.

Tommy is grappling with ideas and feelings with which he is not accustomed to dealing. His brief comment contains two separate sections. The first is the notion of the beauty of God being reflected in nature. It appears that Tommy is unwilling or unable to say anything about his ideas of God, other than that God possesses great beauty which Tommy sees reflected in nature. The second comment is that Tommy's feelings, both good and bad, are connected to his ideas about God: Tommy relates God to affectivity.
3. Carmela thought of the beauty that surrounds us when she thought of God.

Many take for granted or don’t even recognise the beauty that surrounds them, that can’t be put into words.

This short quote is the sum of what Carmela wrote about her concept of God. It seems that, to Carmela, the essence of the beauty that surrounds us is God. Carmela states that this “can’t be put into words”, implying that she does not equate God with the beauty of nature, but rather that she senses something of the presence of God in nature. She also recognises that many people don’t see the beauty that surrounds them, and that they don’t make the same connections that she does.

There is a reverent tone to Carmela’s statement, and an intimation of a sense of mystery.
4. Kard’s primary concept of God was of a presence that is ever present. (This concept is discussed in ‘The Spirit in the World’ subcategory.) However, Kard also associated God with nature.

I tend to associate God with creation and nature. When I look at the marvels of the world I tend to associate them with God but I feel all suffering and pain is caused by humans.

The concept of a presence is difficult to visualise. It seems that Kard uses the image of nature as a way of focussing on, and visualising the presence of God.

Kard associates God with the positive things of the world; the negative things, like pain and suffering are attributed to humanity. There is a sense of the separation of reality into good and evil, with God associated with good and humanity with evil. This dualism carries overtones of the concept of original sin.

5. Cousy understood that God is mystery (symbolised by the ‘swirls’) and that God is everywhere. Nevertheless, she visualised God in nature.

Images of God.
I saw God as being all around me - being the swirls.
The sun as bright and big.
The land, sky, earth, ocean represent what God has created and how he/she is with us. The colours all combined mean God is everywhere.
The love heart represents that God loves us. And the purple star shaped figure means that God is neverending.
To Cousy, God is symbolically present in nature because nature is both the product of creation and the reflection of the creator. God is essentially mystery, evoked by the use of swirls in the picture, and the disinclination to assign gender to God in the written comments.

The tone of Cousy’s writing is positive. God is all around (the tone implies that this is experienced in a protective way). God is neverending, which implies a sense of eternity and cohesiveness that seems to give meaning to Cousy’s existence; God loves us, a belief that supports a personal sense of worth. God seems to be a source of security and meaning for Cousy.

6. Bogu used an element of nature, the tree, as a symbol of God.
My image of God: I set out to draw an enormous tree. I tried to draw a huge old trunk with moss at the base. The tree had so many leaves that only a few branches were visible. The sun can be seen through the leaves on the right hand side. The sky below the sun and the leaves on the left are darker because they contrast with the sun’s intense brightness. That was what I set out to do. I guess I see God in nature. I was later told that my picture was very symbolic. The tree was large, filled up a large proportion of the picture but there was more which could not be seen. God is a large part of my life but there is a lot more to come. The leaves were speckled with black on one side, speckled with yellow on the other side. Evil and Good? The sky does the same thing and the sun being half hidden could symbolise that I am half enlightened.

Nature is clearly used symbolically in this excerpt. The tree symbolises a number of God’s qualities, including vastness, great age, fecundity, and the light of life and knowledge.

Bogu has thought about the meaning of his picture. He understands that he knows something of God, but that God is also much more. He recognises that God is an important part of this life, and he thinks that this will continue to expand in the future.

Bogu thinks that drawing a picture of a tree as his image of God means that he sees God in nature. I don’t think it is as simple as this. The tree symbolises something deeper and more meaningful in Bogu’s life than that he sees God in nature. The tree is a symbol of life, and the way Bogu describes his picture, his tree symbolises immensity and greatness, age and wisdom, light and knowledge, protection, and vitality. These are qualities that Bogu seems to attribute to God. Note that although the tree symbolises God, it also symbolises something of Bogu (that he is half-enlightened). God appears to be of great importance in Bogu’s life, but in a subtle way.
Mary's concept of God was also tied up in nature:

I see God as nature helpless and endangered, but beautiful and peaceful.

Mary doesn't know what God is. In the sub-category 'Unknowable', she says that God is not a person, and that God could not be powerful because of the presence of evil in the world. The closest Mary can come to imaging God is to say that God is like nature.

Mary is saying here that God and nature have certain qualities in common, namely, that they are both beautiful and peaceful, but helpless and endangered. This portrayal of God is unique in this sample. In no other response is God presented as being powerless, or endangered. Mary seems to think that God is not powerful as people say (for if God were, God would prevent the evil that is in the world). She also thinks that people today no longer need God ("God is endangered"). Helpless powerlessness seems to be the core of Mary's concept of God.
ENCOUNTERING GOD IN NATURE

The student in this ‘group’ differs from the above group in a subtle way. The students whose ideas are presented above mostly see the presence of God in nature: the student in this group encounters God through nature.

Dana said this about God:

God to me is displayed through nature and all the wonders in the world. . . . In my picture I drew a sunrise on the ocean. In this picture I can relate to God. . . . When I look out at the ocean when I’m sitting on the beach by myself and there’s an inner peace that I feel I think to myself, God is present, he/she is here looking after me, like a friend would.

Dana’s main concept of God is that of friend, and is presented in the sub-category ‘Benevolent Being’. Dana does not visualise God as a person, or as a spirit, which means she must look elsewhere for her God-image. For Dana, nature provides a visual image through which the presence of God is manifested.

In the segment quoted above, Dana describes an experience of God-the-friend, mediated through an element of nature. Note that Dana does not imply that God is present in nature, but that nature is a medium of expression for God. The affective essence of Dana’s experience is that of peace, serenity, security, and intimacy.

Dana does not imply any reciprocal responsibility on her part: she accepts God’s friendship as a given, without considering whether God wants her friendship. The relationship is one way; God is the provider, Dana the recipient.
AID TO BELIEF

Jimmy found that pondering on nature helped to foster his belief in God.

When I see the beach or the sun or stars and the sky I think that there really is a God because science can’t explain everything because it has to come from somewhere. . . . I can relate to God more in nature because of the beauty in the surrounding.

Unlike the students who find that the claims of science mitigate against belief in God, Jimmy grapples with the existential questions of the universe, finds scientific answers lacking, and turns to belief in God as a more satisfying answer. The above quote contains two main ideas. The first deals with Jimmy’s ideas about God. The second is about Jimmy’s feelings and experiences of God, which for Jimmy are closely linked to nature. Jimmy finds the unadulterated beauty of nature a reflection of the essence of God. It seems that not only Jimmy’s belief in God, but his experience of God is heightened by his contact with nature.
Not Knowing

In this sub-category are the comments of the 13 students who do not know what God is, who wonder about the essence and nature of God, or who question the supposed actions of God as a result of life experiences.

I have divided these responses into three groups which I have named 'Unknown', 'Wondering', and 'Why?'

UNKNOWN

I have named this group 'Unknown' because the essence of the comments contained within it are the mystery surrounding God, the uncertainty regarding ideas about God, and the respondents' feelings of lack of knowledge and puzzlement concerning God.

1. The first respondent in this group is Taylor. She said:

My picture I feel represents the uncertainty and mystery I feel when I think of God. The pale colours are compassionate colours & the bits of yellow are the areas of light where I feel I understand something about God and religion.

The black represents the world, an area of different opinions that influence my feelings toward religion & God.

The word 'God' stirs up many feelings some of my feelings are very uncertain.
Taylor's picture is displayed in the 'Mysterious Spirit' subcategory. Her main concept of God is that of a spirit that gently pervades all life. However, as the above quote states, Taylor is not at all sure about her ideas. There is as much mystery and uncertainty in her mind as there is understanding.

It seems that the particular concept of God that Taylor describes is still in its developmental stage. It is still being formed; it is not yet sufficiently clear in Taylor's mind. There is a strong sense of tentativeness about Taylor's assertions.

I find two of Taylor's comments of particular interest. Taylor nominates the world as being the chief source of the different opinions that influence her feelings toward religion and God. It may be that Taylor includes school in her definition of 'the world', but I doubt it. It is the various opinions presented by the world at large that pull Taylor in different directions, and cause her to be so unsure about what she believes.

The second comment that I find interesting is Taylor's last statement that the word 'God' stirs up many feelings within her. God, or the idea of God, has a strong, affective influence on Taylor. To her, God is not just an idea, but some kind of being beyond her comprehension which she considers is important enough to struggle to understand.
2. Antonella’s picture and notes express something of her sense of uncertainty.

I don’t know who is god or what but god is something that is there.

I think of god when something bad has happened or when something good has happened. God is a name to me a name without a face or body just a name God.

I know I’m not a religion person and I do believe in god but at the same time I think that it something to believe in because I was grow up with the idea of God and it will always stick with me. I do ask myself is God important. I don’t know why in some way he is.

Antonella believes in the existence of God ("god is something that is there"). However, Antonella doesn’t know what God is, or what God is
a name without a face or body just a name God.") This is the main idea expressed in Antonella's picture. God is represented by an explosion of bright colours in the centre of the picture. This image captures the amorphous, indescribable nature of God. Ideas that Antonella associates with God are written in the blue rays that radiate from God. They include 'life', 'water', 'me', 'hate', 'love', 'who', 'you', and 'always'. (For an explanation of the significance of the word 'always', see Chloe's work below.) These could be saying something like "Who are you? You are a part of my life, but I don't know whether I love you or hate you for the evil you permit in the world". (This last idea is reflected in another segment of Antonella's writing which is presented below in the section called 'Why?') The rest of Antonella's picture consists of ideas she was taught about God, but which seem to be peripheral to her main concerns about God. These ideas include the association of God with heaven and hell ('above' and 'below' in the picture), and with the presence of God in nature and people.

Antonella admits that God is not a particularly important aspect of her life; after all, she only thinks of God when something good or something bad has happened. She realises that she probably believes in God because she was taught to do so, rather than her belief being a result of her own reflections. She seems to have asked herself whether God is sufficiently important to continue believing in. Almost to her surprise, and for some unknown reason, Antonella came to the conclusion that God is.
3. Demi also was uncertain about God.

The name God does not mean anything to me. It is a word that comes up a soul, an almighty soul with great strengths. . . . I don't know what God is like, how does anyone know what God is like. . . . what ever it is or who ever is just their it is what I have been told.

Demi makes three assertions:

1. that God means nothing to her;
2. that she has no idea who or what God is;
3. that her belief in God stems entirely from what she has been taught.

Demi’s idea of God is of a mighty but distant being, who is far removed from her, and uninvolved in her life. The transcendence of God is clear in this description.

The superiority and distance of God has a corollary: God is too far away and too important to be interested in Demi. God is also too distant from her, both in place and in nature, to be knowable to her, or to be important to her.

It seems that the transcendence of God is something that Demi was taught. It also appears that Demi has not had any experience of God to contradict this notion. There is no affect present in Demi’s description. She seems not to have experienced anything in her life that would cause her to feel anything, either positive or negative, about God. God is almost an abstract idea, removed from life.
WONDERING

In this group I have placed the responses of students who feel they don’t understand God, and who wonder about God. They differ from the students in the above group in that these students are not content to say they don’t know God: they want to know something of God and they sometimes feel frustration and annoyance at their lack of knowledge. This implies that God, and knowledge of God, are important to them in some way.

1. This first person in this group is Pines. Pines’ work is also presented in the ‘God in His Heaven’ sub-category. I have included it here because of the uncertainty that Pines expresses.

   This artwork says that when you finish the path of life, you get to God and he’s the mass of colours at the top he decides whether you go to hell (flames) or heaven (everyone holding hands in God’s creation). The question marks say that I’m still not sure if this is right.

   Pines’ picture (presented earlier) and the first section of her comments contain a sense of certainty, as if what she mentions are ideas about which she was formerly certain. The last sentence is almost anomalous in its degree of uncertainty.

   It seems that Pines is re-thinking her former ideas about God, and is at the stage of wondering how much of them are true.
2. Nicole also wondered many things about God.

To me, god is the most powerful “person” in the world. He is a creator and the most wonderful existing thing that I know. Even though I believe this, I wonder many things about him.

Nicole’s wondering is different from Pines’. For Pines, the wondering is about the validity of her previous ideas; that is, her wondering calls into question her former ideas. Nicole, however, accepts her former concept of God: what she is wondering about is whether her ideas go far enough; whether, in fact, God is not much more than she had imagined. Nicole’s wondering has the effect of adding to, and building upon, her former concepts. Pines’ wondering has the effect of questioning, and possible eventually demolishing, her former concepts.
3. Reflections on the events in Ann's life led her to wonder about the actions of God.

The light blue, brown and black Scribbles represent the troubled times in my life when I want to believe in god but wonder why he has let this happen.

Ann has expectations of God which it appears God has not fulfilled. Ann expected that when she was troubled, God would somehow comfort her, or explain the situation so that she could understand.

God's refusal to fulfil Ann's expectations has lead her to call in question all of her other beliefs. It is as if all Ann's beliefs were interwoven, and when one is undermined, all are undermined.

4. Stefania also questioned God because of events around her.

I do believe in God but then I think if there really was a God would there be war, world hunger and sickness, therefore a lot of belief questions arise within me.

Stefania equates the evil in the world with the will of the creator of the world. With this as her basic assumption, it is easy to understand that Stefania finds the presence of war, hunger, and sickness mediates against belief in a kind, concerned, loving creator. These reflections lead Stefania to question her belief in a loving God.
5. Fortunato’s reflections led him to see a dichotomy between his beliefs, thoughts and feelings. This caused conflict and soul-searching for him.

To understand Fortunato’s picture it is necessary to synthesise his written notes and his interview comments. I will combine the two and edit slightly to make his ideas coherent.

When I see God, there’s a strong feeling I have, a positive feeling for God. This is symbolised by the purple circle. But then there’s another feeling that I have and sometimes I don’t believe in God or find it hard to believe in God when I see certain things in the world like suffering and injustice and things like that. That is symbolised by the red circle.

The strong colours like the purple and the red are strong beliefs and feelings I have about God, but as I expand those ideas and thoughts it leads to nothing. When my thoughts come together, they come to a
blank, and I don't know what happens. This is the symbol of the white blank bit of my work.

I feel that as I grow older and mature more my ideas and thoughts of God will expand more as I go through experiences in my life.

Fortunato has strong, positive feelings towards God. These result from his perceptions of his life experiences which are coloured by his faith. However, sometimes Fortunato's reflections on life in the world around him cause him to experience strong negative thoughts and feelings about God. These negative thoughts sometimes eclipse his positive thoughts, but when he pursues them, they peter out into nothingness. When Fortunato pursues his positive thoughts about God, and tries to apply them to the negatives in his life, they also peter out. This leaves him with a blank space of unknowingness and wondering in his life.

Fortunato can accept this blank space in his life because he knows that it is only temporary, and that one day ("when I grow older and mature more") he will come to understand. In the meantime, he lives with the dichotomy and the paradox of God, believing that God is very important in his life and worth the struggle he experiences.
6. The last person in this group is Brad.

Brad explained his picture this way:

The picture is my image of God. On the outside, he seems simple and basic. On a deeper look, however, more confusion arises. What is He? What is his purpose? These unanswered questions lead to the confusion of God, and the red of anger and frustration through struggling to better understanding.

The centre of Brad’s image is the red core of anger and frustration that he feels. When the picture was drawn, this was the main feeling that arose within Brad’s mind as he thought about God. This feeling arises as a result of Brad trying to struggle with the paradox that is God, the paradox that Brad sees as being the seeming simplicity of God that masks something deeper and, Brad suspects, infinitely complex. Brad struggles to acquire a better understanding of the nature and purpose of God. It is of importance to him. The presence of Brad’s anger implies that Brad’s desire to know God’s purpose is more in the nature of an existential question for him than it is mere curiosity.
The four students whose ideas appear in this group go beyond wondering about God. Problems and crises in their lives, or reflections on the tragic or evil events that occur in the world, cause them anguish that leads them to ask God "WHY?"

1. Antonella didn't understand God's actions.

God is something that I would never understand for example if God do make the world and people why would he make people go against each other, killing each other, wars etc. Why do people hurt not on the outside but also in the inside, why do people use each other, why!

Like Stefania in the above group, Antonella seeks to know how a loving creator could make such unloving creatures as humans, and then permit them to commit their atrocities upon the innocent. This is something that goes beyond her comprehension.

Antonella seems to be experiencing the sorrow of the helpless faced with overwhelming distress.
2. Edward questioned God on several levels.

My Artwork is based on what I feel.

Question mark represents the wonder of what I'm here for, on this planet.

The light blue, brown and black Scribbles represent the troubled times in my life when I want to believe in god but wonder why he has let this happen.

The red symbols the anger of what I'm doing, why can't he help the crisis that I'm facing.

Unlike Antonella, whose doubt is in response to more global and less personal problems, Edward's questions arise in response to troubling personal problems.

Edward speaks of three inter-related feelings: he feels wonder at his own unique existence; he feels unease and a questioning when God does not appear to help him in troubled times; he feels anger at God for abandoning him in his times of crisis.

Edward's main problem is in reconciling his belief in a loving, caring God with the evidence in his life that speaks to him of a distant, uncaring God.
3. Jasmin’s grief is caused by the suffering of someone she cares about.

God also brings about questions when he is mention. People say that God does everything for a reason but I still am unable to cope with the idea of death.

That’s probably why my second picture has WHY with endless circles in it. Because no matter how much I ponder I can’t understand the reason he does some things. The colourful swirls suggest the good things he does and the black ones suggest death and the reasons for it. It’s not only death because over the years I’ve accepted the reasons for it but I don’t understand why innocent people have to get diseases that can ruin or end their lives. My friend has recently got cancer and is undergoing treatment but it really hurts me to see her like that. She’s only 17 and has hardly had enough time to live her life. It seems that all of the innocent people in life get all of the bad things happen to them.
If God has to bring disease on to his world can’t he give it to the drugdealers or people who do bad things to others in the hope of saving themselves. I feel sorry for her and feel so guilty, sometimes I wonder how I would cope if it was me!! After bad nights of thinking and praying for I sometimes feel very angry at God for what he’s done. When I first heard about her & her not getting better I stopped praying to God because I blamed him for the trouble she has been going through. I’ve only now started to continue believing. I don’t think that I ever stopped loving him or believing in him because he’s always been in my life but some things confuse me and make me wonder why-just like my picture has said.

Jasmin’s faith in God is being severely tested by the existence of the suffering of her friend. She is experiencing the stages of grief, not only for her friend, but for the fragility of all life, including her own. She blames God for her friend’s suffering, saying that this is something God has done. (It is not surprising that Jasmin reacts this way: society tends to call all inexplicable, natural phenomena ‘acts of God’.)

Jasmin’s sorrow has not outweighed her reflections on the good times in her life, and her certainty in the loving participation of God in her life. Eventually, this reality led to the re-assertion of her former, loving relationship with God. However, her questions and doubts still exist, and she still struggles with the perennial problem of the existence of pain and suffering.
4. Like Jasmin, Chloe was strongly influenced by tragedy in her life.

What I don't understand in life is why people must die? When I was young I thought well if we never died the earth would become overpopulated. OK but why does God take the innocent, the best in our eyes, which relates to my picture. “Always” is the song my cousin had played at his funeral. It has almost been two years (not quite) but I still haven't got over his death. (the purple, black, blue show this uncertain thought). The red shows anger. Anger because I think why him?? It was a car accident so I think there was another eight people in the van who remained unhurt/uninjured. Why did his friend have to pull the handbrake to cause the accident in the beginning? Why do I feel so much pain? Since the death I pray so many times a day to God to bless my cousin - when little things remind me of him or I see his friends laughing together, etc... I have turned to him like a God. At times I pray to him and not to God. I'm forever wondering if he can see us & wonder what he's doing. There's so much to talk about but I would go on forever!!
Chloe's anguish is plain. To her, the concept of God is interwoven with her thoughts, questions, doubts, fears, and the pain associated with her cousin's death. It is not the existence of death per se that troubles Chloe, but the apparently random, unthinking, almost brutal selection of the innocent as victims.

To Chloe, it was God's decision that her cousin should die. (This may have been influenced by society's expression that when someone dies, God has taken that person.) However, this does not lead Chloe to reject God. Instead, Chloe grieves, and questions, and prays to God, in the hope that one day she will come to understand.
Introduction

Within the concepts of the respondents can be found many different images of God.

Images differ from concepts. An image is a mental picture, like a photograph, that captures one aspect of God. A concept is an overall idea or vision about God that includes ideas of God’s nature, activities, relationality, etcetera. An image may be a part of a concept, or it may exist apart from a concept. Take the following excerpt, for example.

I feel God is like a mysterious spirit floating and crawling into different areas of the world.

I relate to words like father, leader, and friend to God: I have many views of how I see God.

Taylor’s central concept of God is of a mysterious spirit. This is supplemented by images of God as father, spirit, leader, and friend. Taylor notes that she has many images of God. These in no way detract from her core concept of God.

I have identified 44 separate images of God within the data. I do not count in this number the extended images that form the basis of all the concepts discussed above. What I have counted in this section are all the ideas of God that are complementary or ancillary to the core concept of the respondent.
Some of the respondents (eight girls) used several images of God together in an attempt to indicate that God was more than could be encapsulated in one or two images, or that God was of importance in their lives, or both of the above.

For example, Allora said: "For me, God is creator, friend, father, everything".

Taylor said: "I relate words like father, spirit, leader, and friend to God: have many views of how I see God."

Louise said: "When I think about God, I think about him as my father, my friend, God, Lord any of these names because they all have significant meaning. . . . God is very special and very important to me because he's everything to me."

God as Creator

Looking at the images of God in isolation, it can be seen that the most frequently mentioned image of God is that of God as creator. This is not surprising, given the number of students who spoke of God in relation to nature. The existence of God as nature or in nature itself is a popular concept among the respondents, leading them to think of God as the creator. Ten girls and two boys mentioned the image of God as creator.

This image can be seen clearly in Louise's comments:
God is a very special person whom created the universe and really most importantly he created humans, animals, mammals and even insects. When I think about God everything good comes to mind, for example the ocean, the warmth of the sun, people surfing the waves and everybody enjoying themselves.

Cynthia wrote: "He [God] has created things more beautiful than man can ever create. Man cannot make anything as complex as the chemical structure of an element or the human heart." Cynthia mentions both nature and humanity as examples of God's creative genius.

I present Jacinta’s comments as a final, though unusual, example of the image of God the creator:

Kaleidoscope, fireworks, explosion. Every colour (most anyway!) of God's world.

Each one of the "blobs" is different just as we are.

Blended together to form new colours. God blended us to form new colours & races. All live on same page as we all live in same world.

God means our creator and father. He guides, watches and protects us.

Jacinta presents the image of an artist God who creates an explosion of beauty, and is concerned and involved in the product of the creative impulse.

As can be seen from the above comments, even when three people share the same image of God, they can visualise and mean very different things.
God as Friend

The image of friend, mentioned by nine girls, is the second most frequently mentioned image of God.

Dana’s comments contain this image:

I see it [God] as someone I can turn to, like an invisible friend. . . . God is like a life long friend, someone to guide you on your way, someone who will always be there, always willing to listen, even though they don’t talk to you, just listening to you is enough. They don’t give there opinions or ever argue, just listen which I think is great.

Dana is thinking of the ideal friend for her, and finds this in God.

Molika thinks of the friendship of God as something that is available to everyone. Her image is less personal than Dana’s image. Molika said: “God is like a ‘friend’ who is always near even if we can’t see him - God although may not be seen physically - God is felt, his/her presence is felt.” To Molika, God is the universal friend.

In most of the examples when God is called ‘friend’ (all of which were written by girls), a degree of intimacy, of support, and of loving care characterise the image. It seems that these girls see God as the patient, undemanding, trustworthy companion that they want, but perhaps cannot find in their relationships with others.
God as Father

Eight girls used the image of God as father. These ranged from the formal ‘God, our Father in Heaven’, to ‘Dad, my best friend and confidante’. Two examples that capture something of this range are presented below.

In writing about her ideas of God, Anna wrote:

The main title I relate God to is Father because he is everyone’s father and we are all brothers and sisters living in his kingdom.

I can relate to ‘Father’ b’coz fathers are supportive strong role models in our life who love their children + wish no harm upon them, this is why I can relate God to my father ... Our father.

Anna thinks in terms of a beneficent universal Father.

An example of a more personal type of father image can be found in Louise’s comments. Although Louise uses many terms to speak of God, ‘father’ is the predominant one.

When I think about God, I think about him as my father, my friend, God, Lord any of these names because they all have significant meaning and entwine into each other because God is your father in the sense that you can’t see him but you can talk to him, he may not talk back but in your heart he is, I think if you can pray comfortably and talk to him comfortably then you have already established a special bond which can’t be broken by anyone or anything.

In this description, God is ‘dad’, my best friend.
God as Colours and Feelings

Four girls and one boy wrote of God as colours and feelings within their minds. This may in part be due to the nature of the drawing and meditation activity. The students were asked to meditate on the word ‘God’ and to try to express what came to mind. A number of students found that they did not think of God in terms of a concrete image: it then became difficult for these students to draw something. Several of these students saw colours in their minds, and drew that; others felt feelings that they associated with God, and translated these into colours. I found no evidence that any students thought of God as colours or feelings: I think that these images are the closest these respondents could come to translating the otherness of God into human terms.

Cousy spoke of God as colours. She wrote: “I saw God as being all around me - being the swirls [of colour in her picture]. . . . The colours all combined mean God is everywhere.” In this description, the colours represent some aspect of God that she cannot name.

Fras also wrote of colours. He said: “I think I saw colours, bright colours, not like a rainbow, just colours everywhere.” The word ‘everywhere’ in Fras’ notes may be an indication that the colours represent the omnipresence of God.

Of her image, Faith said: “My picture says to me that God is sort of always at the back of my mind when I need him. I suppose He is probably one of the only brightest colours I can see in my mind besides dreams.” Faith’s description contains the sense that what is being described is a normal image in her mind, and not something that arose only as part of the meditation/drawing activity.
**God as Helper**

Five respondents (four girls and one boy) wrote of God as help in need. The following excerpt exemplifies these five images.

Of God, Stefania wrote: “God, to me, is a (person) who is on the look out for people and one who helps them when they need it.” God not only helps people, God goes looking for people to help. God is dedicated to helping.

**Other Images**

The remainder of the images present in the data each appear in fewer than five responses.

Four students thought of God as a guide, and three spoke of God as a protector. Kard expressed both of these ideas when she wrote: “I see God as a guider and protector.”

Cynthia presented the idea of the watcher and guardian. She said: “God watches over everything and can look after anyone who asks for his help.” This image appeared in the writing of four respondents.

Four students wrote of God as either ‘love’ or as ‘lover’. Maribel’s comments contain this image. She said: “I sometimes also see God as a humanbeing, someone with human feelings, someone who loves without restrictions.” Maribel is describing the ultimate form of love.
The image of God as light appeared in the comments of four students.

Stefania expressed a typical view when she wrote: "The yellow light is God. I use that light instead of a clear Image because I don’t see God as anything, I see him as a light."

Vesna combined the image of light with that of power. She said: "I drew a yellow sun, for I think God is power and light." This image is similar to the use of colour in describing God, and the comments made about the image of colour also apply to this image.

Marie wrote of God as being the light of the world and also the Ultimate Healer. She said:

I have various visions of God, these often change as I learn more about God. I see him as the Ultimate healer, always there to look after us, he sees everything we do and is with us everywhere we go. He is there to help us and guide us. The clouds in the picture symbolise the bad, evil and uncertainty in the world, and the sun, represents god, the light through the darkness, breaking the evil down and making way for goodness and life.

Many students wrote and spoke of God in terms of a human male: two girls specifically stated that their image of God was of a male. Louise said: "I do believe God is male", and Anna said: "I think he is male like a father figure, because that is what I have been brought up to believe." It seems that Louise’s image depends on the maleness of God, whereas Anna admits that her image of the maleness of God is mainly a result of her religious upbringing.
Two students wrote of God as a judge. Pines wrote: "He [God] decides whether you go to hell (flames) or heaven (everyone holding hands in God's creation)."

Cynthia wrote of God in terms of a source of love. She said: "I drew a high mountain, capped with ice. On the mountain the beautiful things of nature grow. At the top of the mountain is god, a source that radiates everlasting love."

Jordana combines the love of God with the image of a fire. "God is like a fire raging intensely - he is always there and will never burn out. His love is burning in our hearts forever and will never die."

Molika likened God to an educator. She wrote: "I feel that God is an educator although God is not present to physically educate. God educates the people of the world via people's decisions/actions/emotions."

Leanne presented an unusual image of God. "To me, God represents what we deem to be right in life, and his 'kingdom' represents what we, as humans see as our ultimate goal to achieve. I feel that 'God' is a part of us, that is, what is right and good, and pure."

Leanne also wrote of the images of God as universal and 'numerous'. "I believe god is universal and is as numerous, as each person believes in their own personal 'God', though they may belong to the same religion."

Other images of God present in the data are: Jesus; creation; role model; supreme being; spirit; leader; lord; trinity; saviour; believer; beauty; soccer team owner; almighty; eternal; pure; over-powering; wise; compassionate; good; kind; generous; important; unattainable; forgiving.
Comments

44 separate images were present in the data. Altogether, these images were mentioned 106 times in the data. Of these, 96 were mentioned by girls, and 10 were mentioned by boys. There is a curious under-representation of boys in these data.

It is difficult to say precisely to what this under-representation can be attributed. It seems that the cause may be partly in the differing patterns of thinking and talking about God evinced by boys and girls. Boys tended to focus on themselves when they spoke of God. In their thinking, speaking, and writing, they were the subjects, and God was the object. This led to many of the boys writing about God in terms of how God affected them. For example, below is the full text of Peter’s response:

The colours are mostly Bright which means I want and Need a Positive outlook on Life. I signifies what I need from God and the ways in which I want him to help me.

This is the most clearly expressed example of the objectification of God by boys. The other examples are somewhat more subtly expressed. Take, for example, Alexandros’ comments:

I saw Gods country and Gods soccer team as I walked out of those gates, I felt my skin crawl as I walked into that stadium. It brought back excellent memories for me and the other 40,000 people around me.

Alexandros writes about himself. God is a background presence.
Anthony's comments are also quite self-centred:

My picture is about not the uncertainty of God, but about the not knowing and the mystery that surrounds God.
My personal opinion is that yes there is a god and I think that my opinion has also been influenced by my parents, upbringing and to a degree my school, as I was brought up to believe in god and was sent to a catholic school, but even so I believe that no-one can say what god is or even what he is like because simply nobody knows except those who have died.
How do we know that God created the world and human life? How do we know that this is true, we are told so in the bible, but again how do we know it is true, how do we know that someone didn't write it in to sound good. This is all part of the mystery that is God and makes religion religion.

The subjects of Anthony’s writing are Anthony’s opinions, background, and philosophical speculations. God is secondary in Anthony’s thoughts.

Many boys expressed themselves in similar ways. Only two of the girls wrote in this fashion.

Girls tended to focus on God when they spoke of God. They seemed to efface themselves from their writing, so that God became much more the subject of discussion. For example, following is the full text of Ann’s comments:

GOD TO ME MEANS The saviour, The Believer, the Creater.

GOD is like...the sea, the Moon, the Sun he is in all livings things he created.

Names for god I can relate to is Father, Creater, friend.

How do I feel about God? I feel that god created me and this world.
The Picture to me it represents...the 2 love hearts represent the love I have for god and the love god has for me.

The light blue, brown and black Scribbles represent the troubled times in my life when I want to believe in god but wonder why he has let this happen.

The cross coloured in red signifies how jesus - God’s son died on the cross for us. The colours around the cross represents the rainbow - a creation of god.

The Orange & yellow represents that God is always present in our lives. The Green Grass is another of God’s creation.

The yellow & orange on top of the grass represents fire which represents anger & rejection and persecution towards God’s son “JESUS” and how he suffered for us.

In this excerpt from the data, God is the subject of discussion. Even when Ann talks about what God means to her, the word ‘God’ comes first, and ‘me’ comes later. (See the first line.) When she writes about her feelings about God, she writes more about God than about herself.

Marie’s comments exhibit a similar pattern:

I have various visions of God, these often change as I learn more about God. I see him as the Ultimate healer, always there to look after us, he sees everything we do and is with us everywhere we go. He is there to help us and guide us. The clouds in the picture symbolise the bad, evil and uncertainty in the world, and the sun, represents god, the light through the darkness, breaking the evil down and making way for goodness and life.

Marie’s first sentence is about herself. The remainder of her notes focuses on God.
The above two excerpts from the data are typical of much of the girls' writing.

The observation that there are differences between the boys' and the girls' ways of thinking and talking about God is consistent with the findings of a group of psychologists. Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O'Connell and Whalen (1989) speak of men's deep-seated notions of the male as subject and all else as object. This need within men to see themselves as active agents, and as separate from others, leads them to think and talk of other people and of God as objects. Since images of God primarily depict God as either an agent or in relational terms, it may be that the male respondents if this study experienced difficulty in thinking of God in these terms. Their comments, therefore, would reflect their perceptions of God as an external object.
SUMMARY OF CONCEPTS AND IMAGES

It is necessary at this stage for me to reiterate one salient fact that is apparent in the data. These data do not fit neatly into categories, and categorisation of the ideas present in the data is a tool to aid in the understanding of patterns within the data, rather than an accurate depiction of the data. In one sense, the work of each student is unlike that of any other student. There are, however, sufficient similarities of thought, imaging, and language to group certain data together. As I mentioned in the introduction, these groups are not to be seen as clear and exclusive categories, but as demarcations along a continuum. It is with this understanding in mind that I present, in summary form, the patterns of conceptualisation and imaging that I perceive in the data.

Concepts

The broad categories of concept and thought presented above are:

| 'Does God Exist?'                        | questions about the existence of God |
| 'God as a Person'                        | anthropomorphic concepts of God      |
| 'God as a Spirit'                        | concepts of God as a spiritual being |
| 'God as an Energy Force'                 | concepts of God as energy, force or power |
| 'The Mysterious Unknown'                 | concepts of God as mystery, the unknown, and the unknowable |
| 'Other Patterns'                         | thoughts and ideas about God that discuss God in nature, and the students' sense of not knowing God or of searching for God |
The breakdown of the categories into sub-categories and gender is as follows:

Table 1

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<th>Boys</th>
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DOES GOD EXIST?

This category contains the work of nine students. Of these, three stated that they did not believe in God. (This statement was amended in each case, either by an admission that there may be a God, or by a picture which implied an amended concept.) Two students expressed a degree of agnosticism, one talking about his growing unbelief in God, and the other saying that God is a black nothingness to him. Four students expressed doubt in the existence of God, saying that no one knows what God is, that science mitigates against belief in God, and that we have no reason to believe in God.
GOD AS A PERSON

30 students wrote of concepts which I have placed in this category. This amounts to almost half of the concepts expressed in the data. Although these 30 excerpts contain ideas of God as a person, there is a great variety in the ways the personhood of God is imagined and expressed.

- Four students thought of God as a man living in the clouds, looking protectively out over the world. One student thought of God as a person to whom she should pray. Two students equated God with Jesus, his loving kindness, and his salvific death. Three students thought of God in terms of a judge. One student wrote of God's face and voice.

- Six students wrote of God as a superman, either in terms of God's power, or in terms of God's superhuman qualities.

- 10 students expressed their ideas of God as being like a father, a creator, a friend, a healer, or as a forgiving, helpful, loving person.

- Three students spoke metaphorically of God as 'the hand that holds the earth', as 'the supreme being', and as a kind, generous, beautiful friend.

GOD AS SPIRIT

Six students spoke predominantly of the spiritual nature of God. They talked of 'an ever-present presence', a soul, a spirit that exists within the world, a spirit that exists within people, and of a mysterious spirit that pervades the world.
GOD AS AN ENERGY FORCE

The concept of God as an energy or a force of some kind appears in the written and pictorial work of eight respondents. These respondents spoke of God as the energy source of life and love, as an energy flowing through all of life, as an intensely raging fire, as a frightening but controlled power, and as the power that makes the world go around.

THE MYSTERIOUS UNKNOWN

10 students spoke of the mystery and of God. Some of them simply stated their belief and left it at that. Others seemed frustrated at the unknown nature of God, and spoke of wanting to know more.

OTHER PATTERNS

The four remaining concepts, plus other patterns of thought about God are presented in this category.

• One student likened God to a reward to be obtained in the afterlife.

• One student equated God with nature. Four students spoke of God as both present in nature and separate from nature. Seven students described their images of God as being intimately linked with nature, and associated with the beauty, peace, and serenity of nature. One student described the way she encountered God in nature, and one student found that nature is an aid to his belief in God.

• The final group of 13 students did not know what God is: they wondered about the nature and actions of God, and found that their reflections on the existence of war, poverty, and disease, and their experiences of suffering and death led them sometimes to doubt God, and often to ask God "why?"
Images of God

All of the images of God present within the verbal data are listed below. Some of these images are expressed as nouns, that is, as certain aspects of God's personhood. Others are expressed as adjectives, that is, as descriptors of God's attributes. I have separated the two groups.

The breakdown of images of God is as follows:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMAGES OF GOD</th>
<th>GIRLS</th>
<th>BOYS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colours/Feelings within</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helper</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guide</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watcher/Guardian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/Lover</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protector</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation/Nature</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Model</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Being</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate Healer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of Love, Life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raging Fire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saviour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is right in life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer Team Owner</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almighty</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-powering</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generous</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattainable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerous (i.e. different for each person)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Totals**: 96 10 106
44 separate images are listed here. Altogether, these images were mentioned 106 times in the data. Of these, 96 were mentioned by girls, and 10 were mentioned by boys.

One possible reason for the under-representation of boys as users of God-images is the apparent objectification of God by boys. This is consistent with the findings of psychologists who note the difficulty of males in thinking and speaking of others as agents or in relationship with themselves.
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Having examined the concepts and images of God contained within the data, I will now turn to the data on relationship with God. A variety of reported relationships with God is to be found in the data. In the following section, reports and comments about these relationships are presented. I have attempted to present these data in order from negative relationship, through most distant and uninvolved relationship, to the most intimate forms of relationship. To aid understanding, I have divided this continuum into five categories:

| Negative | Null | Background | Needs-Based | Reciprocal |

Figure 4. Continuum of Relationships.

'Negative Relationship' contain comments that display an actively hostile stance towards God; 'Null Relationship' contains those comments that indicate that God is not important in the lives of these respondents; 'God in the Background' contain comments that seem to indicate that God is an idea that is on the periphery of the students lives; 'Needs-Based Relationship' contain the comments of students who relate to God primarily as the giver of what they need; 'Reciprocal Relationship' contain descriptions of a mutual or reciprocal relationship with God.

UNREPORTED

In the sample there were 31 students who mentioned God only as an abstract idea, or who did not mention God at all. Of these students, 18 were girls and 13 were boys. These students, who appear to believe in
God, either did not think to include comments about their relationship with God, or did not think that they had a relationship with God. It may be that some of these students should be placed in one of the following groups, but because they omit to mention anything about the role God plays in their lives, I am unable to assign them to any group.

**NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIP**

The five students whose work appears in the concept categories ‘Does God Exist?’ and ‘Agnosticism’ exhibit what I have called a negative relationship with God. These students do not believe in God: in addition, they look for reasons to continue in this disbelief, and they derogate people who do believe in God. These students maintain a negating, sometimes hostile, stance regarding God.

1. George (whose work appears on page 55) implies that people only believe in God because they don’t believe enough in themselves. He says that if people believed in themselves, and worked hard at acquiring what they wanted, they would obtain it. To George, there is an inverse relationship between belief in self and belief in God: the more one believes in God, the less one could believe in oneself, and vice-versa.

George’s picture provides something of a differing, though complementary, view from his written and spoken comments about God. The verbal comments imply an adamantly held, strongly negatively view of God: the picture presents an image that can be interpreted as the attempt of a young man to acquire a positive sense of self, which includes the power to make decisions, the power to act, and a sense of self-confidence that will lead eventually to self-sufficiency. George finds that reliance on God undermines self-reliance. In short,
George's picture says to me that George sees a need to distance himself from God in order to discover and claim his own sense of power. If this is so, George's apparent atheism may be a stage that he needs to experience in order to come to adulthood and the possibility of developing an adult relationship of mutuality with God.

2. Minh's comments are similar to George's statements. (Minh's work appears on page 56). Essentially, the basis of Minh's antipathy towards God is her belief that turning towards God for hope and guidance is disempowering for the individual.

Like George, Minh thinks that belief in self and belief in God are mutually exclusive. Minh has chosen not to take a submissive and dependent stance in relationship with God: to her way of thinking this leaves her with only one alternative - dissociation from God.

Having adopted this stance, Minh looks for confirmation of her decision. She finds it in the bible, which she believes is a collection of stories, but which appears to have been presented to her as fact. She also finds confirmation in her observations that people who believe in God worship idols (which she considers to be wrong), and that people do the right thing through fear of hell (which to Minh's way of thinking is much worse than doing the right thing because one wishes to be good).

Minh concedes that perhaps there is a higher power in the universe. However, she then dismisses this possible entity by implying that, if it exists, it is unknowable and so alien to humankind that its existence is an irrelevancy. In essence, Minh believes in herself (which stance cannot support a complementary belief in God), and she
disapproves of the disempowering subservience that, to her, is a condition of belief in God.

3. Bobby (whose work appears on page 57) doesn't display the hostility, derogation and dismissiveness of George and Minh. He simply finds that his scientific, analytical mind cannot cope with the metaphorical and metacognitive nature of religion. To Bobby, belief in the rationality of the human mind, and belief in the "mystic entity" called God are contradictory and mutually exclusive beliefs.

Consequently, Bobby finds it easy to explain away the religious beliefs of others. Noting that humans seem to need someone or something to believe in, he concludes that people invented God to fulfill this need. Essentially, God is wishful thinking. Bobby thinks himself too rational and honest to indulge in this form of self-deception.

4. Simon (whose work is on page 59) is on the way to developing an antipathy towards God. However, it is not belief in himself or in the rationality of the human mind that led to Simon's position: it is his negative reaction to his father's religious convictions and attempts to keep Simon on the straight and narrow. Unfortunately, God is equated with Simon's father's beliefs and verbal behaviour, and is rejected along with these. When Simon breaks free from his father's beliefs, he experiences a sense of freedom. Because God is equated with his father's beliefs, Simon feels that freedom is the result of breaking free from God. This leads to God acquiring the stigma of undesirability in Simon's eyes.
Although Ant says that he doesn’t know whether or not he believes in God, the remainder of his comments and his artwork indicate an actively negative relationship with God. (Ant’s work can be seen on page 60.) Ant finds that when he thinks about God, usually when he is in trouble and needs God’s help, he sees nothing and feels nothing: in fact, it seems to Ant that God either does not listen to him or, even worse, God rejects him. To Ant’s mind, the most appropriate response to this supposed reaction of God’s is an equal reaction of dismissal.

In essence, Ant feels that God can’t be bothered with him, so he decides that he can’t be bothered with God. It is Ant’s negative experiences of God that chiefly cause Ant’s antagonistic stance.

The five students mentioned above seem to have a negative relationship with God. They all say that they do not believe in God, or question God’s existence. It would appear that one of the reasons for these beliefs is the apparently negative effects of relationship with God, to their minds, or in their experiences.

The reasons put forward for rejection of God are varied. George and Minh reject God and any possibility of relationship with God because such an idea is offensive to their rationality, and their belief in themselves; with Bobby, it is competing scientific beliefs that mitigate against belief in, or relationship with, God; Simon’s rejection of his father’s religious practices cause him to reject God; Ant finds that life experiences, specifically the apparently negative reaction of God towards him (but, actually, the fact that God does not fulfil Ant’s expectations), cause Ant’s negative stance.
NULL RELATIONSHIP

In this category I have placed the comments of all the students who note that God is unimportant to them, and those who imply in their work that God is mainly an abstract concept that does not touch their lives. Seven respondents fall into this group. The first six of these appear never to have developed any sense of God’s place in their lives, or of any need to relate to God. The last example is different: the picture and comments speak of a former relationship with God that cannot be maintained any longer.

Caitlin said, “Does God really exist?? Who knows??????”
It seems to me that Caitlin neither knows nor cares. It is clear that God is irrelevant to her.

Bart’s response to God can be summed up in his statement, “Why should we believe in God? . . . He’s not all that important.” Bart doesn’t have anything against religion, he just doesn’t see what it has to do with him. (See page 61 for Bart’s concept.)

Maverick believes there may be a God, but he prefers scientific notions and answers. He also comments, “God is not important for me because I don’t ask for his/her help.” (His concept is on page 62.)

Demi states, “the name God does not mean anything to me. It is a word that comes up”. (See page 99 for Demi’s concept.)

Antonella says, “I don’t know who is god or what but god is something that is there . . . God is a name to me . . . just a name, God”. (See page 141.) God is only an idea to Antonella, not a part of her life.
Anthony says that he believes in God, but this is due to a certain extent to his parents, his upbringing, and his school. He does not believe that anyone knows what God is, or what God is like. Basically, Anthony is saying that he believes God exists, but God is not a part of his life. (This concept can be seen on page 115.)

Brad, whose work has not been mentioned yet, drew a picture of a brick wall, broad at the base, but narrowing to the top (shaped like a wedge). On one side of the wall is a red circle with a blue halo, which I presume represents God. On the other side of the wall is a purple circle with smaller circles of red, blue and green within it, which seem to represent Brad.

Brad made only a brief comment, devoted to describing the present state of his relationship with God. He said, "The wall of separation between me and God has seemed only to get thicker and stronger. It has become too difficult to climb higher, to where it is much thinner - too much has happened to allow that."

This statement implies that once there was a relationship between Brad and God, but that something or some things occurred in Brad's life to jeopardise the relationship. These occurrences now provide too much of a barrier for Brad to overcome without difficulty. There is a tone of weariness to Brad's comments, as if he has tried to maintain his relationship, but finds that he cannot do so any more.

The above seven students comment either explicitly or implicitly on the lack of importance God has in their lives. In the minds of most of these respondents, God is an idea that does not impinge on their lives.
Continuing on from the above group of students who seem to have a null relationship with God, are those students for whom God is on the periphery of their lives.

Rosemary’s picture and comments (on page 63) indirectly convey her idea about the place of God in her life. In the picture, God is represented by a yellow, orange, and red circle in the middle which says that God “is always present in the good times and the bad”. However, Rosemary then goes on to say that she “wonders if God really exists”. It seems that if God is “present in the good times and the bad”, it really has little impact on Rosemary. In the picture, God is also represented by a blue border, about which Rosemary does not elaborate. Rosemary seems to be saying that, if God exists, God is a presence that lives on the borders of her life.

Taylor feels that “God is like a mysterious spirit floating and crawling into different areas of the world”. (See page 103.) However, she doesn’t mention any sort of relationship or contact with this spirit. To Taylor, God is a spirit that permeates the world, but does not touch her conscious life. God is in the background of her life.

Clea’s picture is like a jigsaw, with each piece representing a different image of God. However, Godself is represented by a black section at the far end of the page. (See page 118). This represents Clea’s notion of the unknowability of God. To my mind, it also represents the peripheral nature of God’s place in Clea’s life.
Faith (whose work can be seen on page 122) says that "God is sort of always at the back of my mind when I need him." Faith seems to become aware of God only when she is in need.

Ed thinks of God as "creating the world to support what he loves". He also says "God is in everything I see". (See page 86.) However, there is no sense of contact or relationship between Ed and God. To Ed, God is the ever-present, pure creator who is there but not involved.

Beppe's picture is of himself kicking a soccer ball on a field with a sun shining overhead. God is the sun; it is bigger than Beppe because "God is overpowering". This picture and these comments represent Beppe's idea of the transcendence of God. God is powerful and present, but distant.

Another soccer player in the group is Alexandros. He "saw God's country and God's soccer team". This is the only mention of God. God is not the coach or the captain, which would imply a direct connection to Alexandros: God is the owner of the team, a proprietary, but distant figure.

Pines drew and wrote about God in heaven, judging the dead. (See page 74.) It is implied that one must live one's life according to God's decrees if one wishes to go to heaven. God is seen as a transcendent being, uninvolved in the daily lives of people.
Bazza's idea of Armageddon is very similar to Pines' concept. (See page 73.) For Bazza, life is a war between good and evil, with God as arbiter and bestower of the reward of the good - heaven.

Jimmy's ideas can be found on page 116. To Jimmy, God is a mysterious entity, present in nature, and found there when looked for. However, there is no implication in Jimmy's work that God is a part of his life, other than a presence he observes at times.

Kard thinks of God as an ever-present presence she associates with nature. She says "God is not terribly important to me". (Page 98.)

Spiro says that God is at the end of the rainbow, and is a pot of gold for the future. It seems that God is not a part of Spiro's present existence, but is a distant reward for the future.

The above 12 students believe in God and represent God as somehow present or significant in their lives. They also imply that God is essentially a distant or background figure in their lives.

This may be due in part to the nature of the respondent's particular concept of God. Those students who think of God primarily as a presence in the world, might perceive God as essentially other, and therefore not sufficiently of the same nature with which to have a meaningful relationship. Those students who think of God as a powerful person would also tend to see the otherness of God (for example, the judge versus the judged; the owner of the team versus the team player). This sense of a higher authority who should be treated with deference, would tend to mitigate against the development of a relationship that was meaningful in the lives of the respondents.
NEEDS-BASED RELATIONSHIP

The following 16 students state or imply that God is significant in their lives to some degree. However, God's significance seems to centre on God providing something needed by the recipients. Some of these needs are physical needs and some are of an emotional nature; some are purely personal and some are expressed in universal terms. Regardless of these differences, all of the following examples speak of God's role primarily in terms of need: these students have a needs-based relationship with God.

Filbert and Mary don't speak of the significance of God in their lives, but they do mention a function of God which they have observed operating in the lives of others. They have observed that, for many people, God is "someone to blame when something goes wrong".

Fras equates God with Jesus, the saviour. He says, "the life and death what Jesus gave us. That is what God is to me". Jesus is thought of as the provider of salvation. Fras thinks of God in terms of the life and death of a man who lived 2000 years ago. There is no indication in Fras' writing that he thinks of Jesus as being present today.

Chantelli expands on Fras' idea. She says, "God is at the centre of my life. . . The cross with the slight shade of red at the top and bottom symbolise the blood shed for us - to pay for our sins and so one may have eternal life". To Chantelli, God is equated with Jesus who is the one who gave his life for the eternal salvation of humankind. Like Fras, there is no sense of the immediacy of Jesus or God in Chantelli's life.
To Teresa, God “is someone who helps me when I pray”. It is as if Teresa thinks of God and turns to God only when she needs something from God. Teresa seems to have received a favourable response to her prayers for her to continue in her belief in this particular function of God.

Stefania sees God as a person “who is on the lookout for people and helps them when they need it”. This is the only comment she makes that says anything about relating to God. To Stefania, God provides help when one is in need. There is a difference between Teresa’s and Stefania’s ideas of God as helper. Teresa sees God as the provider of help to her personally, and only if she takes the initiative: Stefania sees God as taking the initiative and actively seeking out anyone who is in need.

Kerryn speaks of God as “something looking after me 24 hrs a day making sure I’m happy and healthy”. She doesn’t mention God as having any other significance in her life than this. God seems to take on the role of guardian angel in this description.

For Cynthia, God “is just a source, a guide - he is there to help all people through good and bad and to guard over his earth”. Cynthia speaks of God’s role as if it were God’s responsibility or duty to help and guard the earth and its people. There is no sense of any responsibility on Cynthia’s part.

To Jacinta, God is “our creator and father. He guides, watches and protects us.” Jacinta’s concept of God is similar to Cynthia’s. However, Jacinta’s comments contain a sense of a familial warmth, which is not so apparent in Cynthia’s notes.
Marie sees God as the "Ultimate healer, always there to look after us . . . . He is there to help us and guide us". Childlike dependence on God is a feature of this description, as is a sense of awe at the power of God.

Lee drew a picture of God as a figure hugging her from behind. (See page 89.) "The warm figure represents the warmth, love, and light that god has given me in my life." Lee doesn’t mention what her reaction to God is. She obviously accepts God’s love with gratitude, but doesn’t say what the implications are for her.

Sharne says:

"God plays an important role in my life for although I’m not a really churchey person I have a really strong belief in god. God is there for me and looks after in his way my friends myself and family. God relates to each and everyone of us in his own way.

Sharne believes in God because she has experienced God in her life. She speaks of God’s role in her life as looking after her and her family and friends. Although Sharne mentions the importance of God in her life, this importance seems to revolve around God providing a service to her.

Maribel says that she sees God "as a humanbeing, someone with human feelings, someone who loves without restrictions . . . . God provides a sense of hope for many." It can be seen that here God is primarily the provider of unlimited love and hope. Maribel seems to be speaking of what she thinks God is like, rather than of her experiences of God.
Ann acknowledges the importance of God in her life. She says, "The 2 love hearts represent the love I have for god and the love god has for me. . . . God is always present in our lives." Ann also speaks of God as 'Father', 'creator' and 'friend'. Ann's gratitude and love towards God permeate her description. However, she speaks of the things God does for her without any implication that this requires a response on her part, other than to love in return.

Robert (whose work appears on page 107), spoke of God as "energy". This energy is something that surrounds us and infuses all of life. Robert's comments, however, revolve around God providing the energy that Robert obtains and uses whenever necessary. In essence, God is a source of free energy.

Peter drew an 'I' which he says "signifies what I need from god and the ways in which I want him to help me". Peter has identified God as the provider of his needs. The tone of the comments implies almost a servile responsibility of God to fulfil Peter's needs.

The 16 students represented in this group primarily relate to God as the provider of what they need. Some of these needs are clearly expressed in an almost material fashion, implying that it is God's primary function to fulfil these needs. Other comments speak of God as a guard and helper, implying that God's role is mainly supervisory. Some of the respondents in this group express a sense of the importance of God in their lives, and of their gratitude and love towards God. Other respondents seem only to see God in a more mercenary fashion, without the implication of any response on their part being necessary.
This group of 10 students continues on from the previous group in that each respondent speaks of what God does for them. However, these students' responses differ from the above group in that there is an awareness of what they owe God, and of their responsibility to put God's help to good use. The later examples in this group express a sense of an intimate, reciprocal relationship with God.

1. Molika speaks of God as "a 'friend' who is always near, even if we can't see him... his presence is felt." She goes on to say that "God is an educator although God is not present to physically educate. God educates the people of the world via people's dreams/actions/emotions." Although Molika primarily speaks of God's role, it seems to me that her image of God as an educator implies more than one way action: for people to learn from the educator, they must act out and live the lessons with which they are presented.

2. Elizabeth says this about her relationship with God:

God, in some way, is very important to me. He/she keeps me thinking about what is right and what is wrong. This keeps me mentally, physically and spiritually healthy. Also thinking about God or talking to God gives me faith and the power to achieve what ever I want. If I know that there is a force or spirit looking over me I know I will be heading in the right path to a happy life.

Elizabeth implies that she follows God's lead as far as right and wrong are concerned, even when this goes against her own wishes. There is a sense of mutuality to Elizabeth's comments.
3. Dana thinks of God as "a lifelong friend, someone to guide you on your way." She believes this friendship requires something of her.

"What Jesus did (if Jesus did actually live - was real) should be along the lines that we should live but not to that extent. We should look after and care for others as well as ourselves but not to the point where we think we can perform miracles or anything like that.

Dana’s belief in God involves the idea that she has responsibilities towards God.

4. Brad speaks of “the spirit of God” and says that “to receive this spirit and partake in its celebration, then it must be accepted... within oneself, God must be accepted.” It seems to me that what Brad calls ‘acceptance’ is, in fact, more than this. To partake of the spirit it is necessary not only to accept it, but to live in harmony with it, to conform one’s life to a certain degree to the urgings of the spirit. It seems to me that this is what Brad is talking about.

5. Speaking of her connection to God, Allora says:

I relate to God in everything I do, but being human, I have my own weaknesses too, and often do things that displease God that I'm ashamed of as a Christian. ... He gives us suffering and problems so that we can learn from them and grow up. Being nice to us all the time is not necessarily a good thing.

Allora dearly experiences a reciprocal relationship with God. God is “creator, friend, father, everything” to her, and she tries to live her life in accordance with what she perceives as God’s wishes. She knows that some of the things she must go through will be unpleasant, but she accepts these as a positive part of God’s plan.
6. Anna reflected on her relationship with God and saw the changes that had occurred over a period of time. She said:

   Its hard to say how close I am at this point I'd say I'm in touch but at this difficult age it is easy to be mislead a stray and travel on the wrong path. There was a time I was smoking & drinking doing things I shouldn't and I pushed him away. So I think a persons life & the circumstances which occur throughout their life affect whether they believe/disbelieve or are close or distant to God.

   I think God relates to people as people. He knows our faults, or joys, our sorrows. He knows what our human nature is like and he is the most understanding of us all.

   Anna's former rejection of God in her life has made her wary of claiming too much at this stage. She will admit to being "in touch", but implies that she might be deluding herself. Anna seems to make a positive connection between being "in touch" with God and returning to the right path in life. The portrait of God that appears in the latter paragraph presents an image of God as an understanding and forgiving person.

7. Jasmin sees God as "a creator, and protector of people that love him. ... my protector and friend who I pray to when I need guidance in my life." She then goes on to describe her anger and questioning when she discovered that her friend had cancer. (See page 152 for the full context.) She says that she felt very angry with God because she blamed God for what had happened. Despite this, she says, "I don't think that I ever stopped loving him or believing in him because he's always been in my life". What Jasmin is describing is a mutual, loving relationship.
8. Chloe spoke of her pain at the memory of her cousin's death. (See page 154.) Despite her anger at God, she accepts what she sees as God's will. She says, "I relate to God as Father and also a friend. . . . God to me is extremely important - what would life be like without him?" I see here a deep, loving friendship between Chloe and God.

9. Jordana spoke of God as "a fire raging intensely . . . . His love is burning in our hearts forever". Jordana included in her picture "a fire which is burning intensely over the world and its people. This fire represents how our love for the world and its people should be - a love burning intensely and forever." Note the similarities between the two fires. Jordana is describing the burning love of God which infects us and calls forth a corresponding love.

10. Leanne wrote:

God is universal and is as numerous as each person. . . .
God represents what we deem to be right in life, and his 'kingdom' represents what we, as humans see as our ultimate goal to achieve. I feel that God is a part of us, that is, what is right and good, and pure.

This description portrays a mutual relationship with God. God is so in tune with each person that God is indistinguishable from a person's sense of rightness and good. When this God-impulse is accepted as the guiding force in one's life, one lives in God's kingdom, which Leanne sees as being the ultimate goal of human life.

The 10 students in this group expressed their perceptions of their relationships with God in terms of mutuality, that is, in terms of what God does and is for them, and what they consider to be the appropriate reaction to God's self-giving. In most cases, it is a deep and reciprocal relationship that is described.
WHERE GOD IS ENCOUNTERED OR REVEALED

Among the data are comments from 21 respondents about how God is revealed to them, where God is to be found, or where they encounter God. Because the students were not specifically asked to provide comments on these ideas, most of the responses that relate to these notions are implicit in the students’ general comments.

In order to obtain a reasonably accurate idea of the students’ concepts of this aspect of relationship with God, I have separated out the comments that refer in some way to the concept of encountering God from the remainder of each student’s comments.

I have put the comments about where God is encountered into three groups, which I have named ‘Nature’ (containing comments about finding or encountering God in nature); ‘People’ (containing comments which mainly speak of finding God within oneself or other people); and ‘Everything’ (containing comments which speak of God being found everywhere or in everything).

This information can be represented as follows:

| Nature | People | Everything |

**Figure 5.** Continuum of Places Where God is Encountered.

These groups are presented in order of the number of comments to be found within them, the group to which the most comments have been assigned is presented first. Nine comments comprise the group ‘Nature’, six are to be found in ‘People’ and six are in ‘Everything’.
9 of the 21 comments collected from the data speak of finding or encountering God in nature. The comments in this section range from those students who experience God’s presence through nature or an element of nature, to those for whom God is associated with nature.

1. Dana thinks that God is seen in all of nature. She experiences the presence of God in particular when she is by the ocean. She said:

God to me is displayed through nature and all the wonders in the world. . . . When I look out at the ocean when I’m sitting on the beach by myself and there’s an inner peace then I feel I think to myself, God is present, he/she is here looking after me, like a friend would.

Dana’s concept of God is of a friend. When she is sitting on the beach, looking out at the ocean, she experiences her friend’s nearness.

2. Caye also finds a particular element of nature conducive to her experiencing something of God.

I don’t see god as a definite figure, rather I see god as something peaceful. What I think is peaceful is the sky. I receive many answers to my problems when I sit and look at the sky. Even during stormy weather it is calming to me.

Although Caye does not actually say that she experiences God in nature, it seems to me that when she speaks of receiving answers to her questions, she is referring to conversing with God.

3. Lockie’s notions and experiences of God are closely linked with nature. He says:
My vision of God is integrated with nature. Vast expanses of open country, and beautiful sunsets. The red earth is from the North West of W.A., because it is a very beautiful place. The purples and blues in the sky symbolise peace and tranquility. The spiritual side of nature.

Lockie is describing his experiences of nature. Although he doesn’t actually say that he encounters God here, there is an ethereal quality to Lockie’s description that implies an encounter with something beyond the merely visible. Lockie relates this experience to the presence of God.

4. Jimmy says this about nature:

I think that sometimes when I see things in nature that is God. When I see the beach or the sun or the stars and the sky I think that there really is a God. . . . I can relate to God more in nature because of the beauty in the surrounding.

Jimmy finds that looking at certain elements of nature and pondering on these cause him to experience a greater certainty about the existence of God than he would otherwise feel. Jimmy notes that he relates to God more in nature, which implies that he does experience some kind of connection to God.

5. Bogu drew a tree to represent God.

I set out to draw an enormous tree. I tried to draw a huge old trunk with moss at the base. The tree had so many leaves that only a few branches were visible. The sun can be seen through the leaves on the right hand side. The sky below the sun and the leaves on the left are darker because they contrast with the sun’s intense brightness. That was what I set out to do. I guess I see God in nature.

The tree that Bogu has drawn captures something of the essence of God for him. Nature is a reflection of God for Bogu, and is one place where he can go to experience something of the presence of God.
6. In speaking about where God can be found, Ann says, "God is always present in our lives... (and) is in all living things he created."

Ann believes that God is to be found in all living things. Her statement, however, sounds more like a statement of belief than a description of an experience.

7. Marissa believes that God "exists in anything that has a heart, a soul, that is alive." She is saying that God is to be found in all living creation. Her statement does not imply that Marissa actually encounters God here, but that she believes that this is where God is to be found.

8. Louise associates God with "everything good", but her examples centre around nature. She says, "When I think about God everything good comes to mind, for example the ocean, the warmth of the sun, people surfing the waves and everybody enjoying themselves." Louise does not say that she encounters God in 'everything good' that comes to mind, but her association of God with these things implies that, in some sense, she feels that God is present here.

9. In speaking about where she encounters God, Drew said, "God's image is also present to me in the untouched and innocence of the world. Like babies and sunsets and those sorts of things."

Drew's comment differs from the others in this group in that she does not speak of seeing God in nature, but uses examples from nature to illustrate her point.
People

The six students whose comments appear in this section speak of finding or encountering God within people. Sometimes this is within other people, sometimes it is within oneself, and sometimes it is both within self and others.

1. Kerryn speaks of God as an energy flowing through herself and, by extension, through others. She says:

   God is with me everywhere in my soul deep inside my body and is also in every other soul of the people I share my life with. I don’t think he is any kind of material particle. I feel he is an energy flowing through everything. Maybe he’s flowing through my artwork I don’t know.

   The tone of Kerryn’s writing and the certainty with which she writes implies that her description of God within her is something that she personally experiences. She also extends this notion of the presence of God within to encompass her loved ones. She does not, however, mention the presence of God within strangers or other people she does not love. Perhaps the obvious presence of evil in the world makes her hesitant to associate God with anyone who could be seen as evil.

2. Stefania also thinks that God as present within herself and others. She says:

   Some people say God is in everything you do. This I don’t totally agree with. It makes someone sound like they are not capable of doing things without God being with them. I do believe though God is in a few of one’s actions and decision making but not all the time. Just when they ask for God’s help is when he is seen in the outcomes.
Stefania thinks of God in terms of a latent presence within each person that becomes active when an individual accepts this presence and asks for its help. In this way, Stefania can maintain her belief in the autonomy and responsibility of the individual, and still believe in an immanent God who loves and helps people. It is also Stefania's way of overcoming the question of evil in the world which seemed to vex Kerryn.

3. Leanne's opinion differs from both of the above comments. In speaking about the presence of God within people, she says, ‘I feel that ‘God’ is a part of us, that is, what is right and good, and pure.’

Leanne doesn't speak of God as being a separate presence within the self, but as being part of the self, the part that is 'right and good and pure'. That is, Leanne sees God as being an inextricable part of the essence of each person; God is the goodness within and the impulse to goodness that exists within each person. This presents an idea of the magnitude of the self-giving of God.

4. Dana also speaks of the way God can be found in one's life. She says, “I believe that if we live a life which is fulfilling and the way we want to live it I think that God comes through in this.”

My impression is not that Dana is speaking of giving full rein to her impulse to ‘live the good life’ of self-indulgence: rather, it seems that she is talking of living life in accordance with her true inner self. She believes that if this is done, one is living in accordance with God, and that God will be present in and through such a person.
5. Faith presents a picture of a God in the background.

My picture says to me that God is sort of always at the back of my mind when I need him. I suppose He is probably one of the only brightest colours I can see in my mind besides dreams.

Faith finds God within herself, but not as an essential, active participant. For Faith, God is a shadowy presence of which she is aware, and to which she turns when she is in need.

6. Edward doesn’t personally experience the presence of God within himself: his mother and grandparents tell him of his importance in their lives, and that they see God within him. Edward translates their ideas like this: “This tells me that their is a god and he is a spiritual being and he is part of me because he brought me to live and give happiness to my grandparents and my mum.”

Edward sees the conviction with which his loved ones hold their belief that he is God’s gift to them. This enables him to accept their belief and to conform to their perceptions.

Everything

Six students spoke of God being in everything. When they came to explain this more fully, most of them gave examples of God being present either in nature or in people.

The ideas presented in this group tend to be more abstract and more difficult to categorise than the preceding ideas. I have attempted to be as true as possible to what I perceive as the essence of the comments.
1. In speaking about her ideas of God, and particularly about what she saw during her meditation, Cousy said:

I saw God as being all around me . . . . The sun as bright and big . . . . The land, sky, earth, ocean represent what God has created and how he/she is with us. The colours all combined mean God is everywhere.

Nature is a reflection of the presence of God for Cousy. However, God is mystery, and is symbolised in Cousy's picture as swirls of colour surrounding her . . . . The essence of God is that of an unseen, mysterious presence, existing everywhere, and surrounding everyone with colour and light.

There is a sense of wonder in Cousy's comments that leads me to assume she has actually experienced something of the mysterious presence of which she speaks.

2. Maribel believes that God is present in everyone, and she strives to see this aspect of people. She said:

God is in everything, in everyone. We have been created in the image of God we are all a part of God. Even though I know that I should see God in everyone sometimes I fail to do so. Societies values and influence have affected us in this way.

The fact that Maribel says that she sometimes fails to see God in people implies that often she does see God in people. It seems that this is something Maribel believes, rather than experiences, and sometimes she has difficulty keeping her feelings and reactions to others in line with her beliefs. Maribel also implies the essentially unchristian nature of society by blaming society's values and influence for her lapses.
3. Fortunato sees God in everyday things. He said, "I sometimes see God in things that I see everyday. I sometimes see God in my friends, the sun, the moon and just ordinary everyday things." Fortunato does not seek God in the extraordinary things of life: rather he finds God appearing in the ordinary things of his life. He is able to see beyond the obvious, to the presence of God within all creation.

4. Anna said, "I don't believe I have to go to church to be close to God. He is everywhere, in every living thing." Anna's comment is mainly about her belief that God is not confined to a church, but is to be found in all living things. Her comment has the tone of a statement of belief, rather than that of an experience.

5. Ed commented on his ideas about God's relationship with, and presence among, people.

I think God is in everything that I see. Everything that is beautiful. He created the world to support what he loves. He is pure at heart, and he is in and loves everyone. He made us to resemble himself, so everyone looks like God - bad or Good.

Ed believes that God created everyone and everything. This means that everyone carries the image of God within them, and is capable of expressing God in their lives. Ed seems to imply that it is up to the individual to make this potential active. At the same time, Ed dissociates God from anything that is not good or beautiful.

6. An unnamed girl expressed her notion of the presence of God by saying, "God is neverending and he is present in everything on Earth". For this girl, God is the eternal omnipresence that exists within all created things. This conviction seems to be held quite strongly.
SUMMARY OF RELATIONSHIPS RESULTS

The data contain many ideas about God. Among these are descriptions of feelings about God, comments about relationship with God, ideas about where God can be encountered, and notions about how God is revealed. The following is a tabular summary of the above-mentioned data, along with accompanying comments.

The breakdown of the data pertaining to the respondents' reported ideas of their relationship with God, is presented below according to group, number, and gender.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs-Based</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The type of relationship most frequently found in the work of the sample group of students is what has been termed a 'needs-based' relationship. 32% of students who reported some kind of relationship with God expressed this type of relationship. Students in this group become aware of God mainly at times of need. They tend to think of God as the provider of their needs, and they most often turn to God when they feel in need.

Negative and null relationships together make up 24% of reported relationships with God. Students in this group have usually thought deeply about God, and have come to the conclusion that God is something they cannot or will not believe in for various reasons.

Another type of relationship commonly found within the sample group is that of 'background' relationship. This phrase refers to the relationships of those students for whom God is a force or entity that remains in the background of their minds or on the periphery of their lives. These students think of God when something unusual occurs, but tend not to see God as a part of their everyday lives. 24% of the students alluded to this kind of relationship.

20% of the students who reported relationships with God, wrote of relating to God in such a way that two characteristics are evident: firstly, these students perceive God as present in their everyday lives, not just in extraordinary events; secondly, they feel that their friendship with God makes demands of them, usually expectations of certain types of behaviour or attitude. This group is said to have a reciprocal relationship with God.
Of the 50 students who mentioned their relationship with God in some form, 31 (62%) were girls and 19 (38%) were boys, a ratio of approximately 3:2. However, the numbers of boys and girls in each of the categories does not reflect this ratio.

In the category of 'Negative Relationship' there are one girl and three boys, a ratio of 1:4. In the category of 'Null Relationship' there are three girls and four boys, a ratio of 3:4. In the category 'Background Relationship' there are six girls and six boys, a ratio of 1:1. In the category 'Needs-based Relationship' there are twelve girls and four boys, a ratio of 3:1. In the category 'Reciprocal Relationship' there are nine girls and one boy, a ratio of 9:1.

Boys are over-represented in the categories of Null, Negative, and Background Relationships, whereas girls are over-represented in the categories of Needs-based and Reciprocal Relationships. Reasons for these preferences are not readily apparent in the data. However, this finding is consistent with the findings of Deborah Tannen (1986, 1990). Dr Tannen is a linguist who has written several books that focus on the differences in communicative style between men and women. She notes that after puberty men focus on independence as their goal, and also as the framework within which they view their relationships with people and things. Women, on the other hand, focus on their relationships and interdependence with others. If this is the case, it is not difficult to understand why boys, who perceive themselves as independent from others, would have difficulty perceiving and expressing a sense of relationship with God and a sense of self as needy. The girls, who are more focussed on relationships, would have little difficulty in perceiving and expressing these things.
The breakdown of the data pertaining to the respondents' reported ideas of where they encounter God or where and how God is revealed in their lives, is presented below according to group, number, and gender.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where God Is Encountered/Revealed</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everywhere</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 21 students who mentioned or alluded to encountering God in their response, 15 were girls and 6 were boys, a ratio of 5:2.

Boys referred to finding God in nature more often than in either of the other locations suggested, and they mentioned finding God in people least of all. In fact, the only boy to mention anything about finding God in people was Edward, who was reporting his acceptance of his family's perceptions rather than reporting his own perceptions and ideas.

It appears that boys have more difficulty thinking of God as being present within people than within nature or the more abstract 'everywhere'. However, the number of students in this subset of the sample is too small, and there is insufficient information within the data to make any inferences or extrapolations about this finding. It would make an interesting subject for further research.
LANGUAGE

Concepts of God and relationship with God have been examined. It is now time to turn to the examination of the language about God that appears in the data. Of the three elements of this study, language was the hardest to adequately describe and discuss. This is because most of the students did not explicitly write or talk about the language they used. Consequently, unlike the two preceding sections where many of the students' comments were self-explanatory, this section often relies on inferences made from what is implicit within the data.

In the section about religious language in the Literature Review, a continuum of types of language about God was presented. The continuum, Figure 1, is as follows:

Literalistic  Cultural-Linguistic  Analogical  Metaphorical

A continuum of language types is also observable in the comments of the respondents of this study. In an attempt to capture something of the nature of the students' language, and the patterns of usage I observed within the students' comments, I have renamed the points along the continuum. The language continuum for the students' use of language about God looks like this:

Factual  Personal/Contextual  Symbolic  Metaphorical  Apophatic

Figure 6. Continuum of Language (a)
There is a close correlation between the two continua.

a) The point that I have labelled ‘Factual’ is very similar to the ‘Literalistic’ use of language. Both use language in a definitive manner, and both imply that they are describing God in a factual way.

b) The ‘Personal/Contextual’ point marks the place on the continuum where students are moving away from a factual use of language, but do not yet use language primarily in a symbolic way. They tend to write of God as a person who is responsive to them in their particular context. This point shares some similarities with the ‘Cultural/Linguistic’ use of language, though on a more personal, individual level.

c) ‘Symbolic’ language is very similar to ‘Analogical’ language. Both communicate primarily through symbols, and both focus on the similarity between God and the symbol or cluster of symbols used as a comparison.

d) ‘Metaphoric’ is the word used in both continua to name language that describes God through metaphor or extended imagery, but at the same time either negates the image, or includes other, conflicting images to ameliorate the impact of the metaphor.

e) The point ‘Apophatic’ occurs on the continuum of student language because some of the students’ responses are primarily apophatic in nature. However, this point does not correlate to any point on the continuum presented in the Literature Review. This is because the Literature Review described language used by theologians and other scholars, whereas apophatic language tends to be found mainly within the writings of the mystics.
Included in the data were 79 written responses. Of these, 24 did not include enough comment about God to determine the student's use of language in regard to God. These comments came from those students who said they did not believe in God, those students who focussed their writing on themselves rather than God, and those students who wrote only about their picture.

Of the remaining 55 responses, five were found to belong to the 'Factual' category. One further response belonged at a point on the continuum somewhere between the points labelled 'Factual' and 'Personal/Contextual'. This response was placed within the 'Factual' category, and its transitional nature was noted.

The category of 'Personal/Contextual' contains five responses, with a further one transitional response being assigned here.

25 comments can be found in the 'Symbolic' category, with one transitional response assigned to this category.

The 'Metaphoric' category contains four responses with two transitional comments also included.

The final category, 'Apophatic', contains 11 responses.

The above information can be graphically represented thus:

```
5  1  5  1  25  2  3  2  11
```

Factual  Personal/Contextual  Symbolic  Metaphorical  Apophatic

**Figure 7.** Continuum of Language (b)
Several students wrote about God in such a way that elements of literalistic thinking and talking are evident. The tone of their writing is mainly definitive, implying that they are actually describing God in a factual manner, hence the name of this category.

1. In her comments, Louise made several definitive statements about God. She wrote that:

   God is a very special person whom created the universe. I do believe God is male ... God is your father ... I think about him as my father, my friend, God, Lord ... God is the almighty, our role model, the one we look up to, the one who can and will provide answers to any of our questions. ... God is for us if we choose to turn to him ... God is present for our benefit ... 

   Louise's concept of God is of a male person who is our father, who is the almighty creator, who acts as friend, and who is constantly available. There is no indication in Louise's writing that God could be anything but what she has described. As far as Louise is concerned, she is describing the reality, the factuality, of God.

2. Anna had this to say about her idea of God:

   The main title I relate God to is Father because he is everyones father and we are all brothers and sisters living in his kingdom. ... I think God is the creator of all life. He is of a higher source and looks over us. I think he is male like a father figure.

   Anna has fairly definite ideas about God which she expresses in a factual manner.
3. Jacinta commented very little about God. She said, "God means (is) our creator and father. He guides, watches and protects us."

Without any other comments about God, it is difficult to know precisely where to assign Jacinta's linguistic response. What little she has written indicates a factual use of language.

4. Ed made the following comments about God:

   I think God is in everything that I see. Everything that is beautiful. He created the world to support what he loves. He is pure at heart, and he is in and loves everyone. He made us to resemble himself, so everyone looks like God - bad or Good.

   Although this statement lacks the concrete, anthropomorphic nature of the preceding three comments, its tone is of a definitive comment.

5. Marissa said, "God is every living thing in the universe, he exists in anything that has a heart, a soul, that is alive." Like Ed’s comments, Marissa’s statement sets parameters about the nature of God. Her statement precludes, for example, the metaphorical understanding of the world as the body of God. It is also difficult to support an understanding of the separate and individual personhood of God if one holds Marissa’s beliefs. This is because the definitive nature of the comment denies the possibility of the existence of other, competing understandings.

   Antonia’s response is a little unusual. The full text of her comment is, "My poster shows an outline of god and he is looking directly to me. The different coloured circles are the different kind of powers he has."
By itself the language is factual in nature. However, the picture to which it refers seems quite symbolic. (The picture is printed on page 80.) In the picture, God is represented by a mountain, and God's powers are depicted by coloured circles. It may be that Antonia feels her artistic skills are inadequate to represent God, and so she draws a simple shape and assigns it meaning. It may also be that Antonia thinks of God in a more abstract way than her writing suggests, but cannot find the language to adequately express her thoughts. Because of this ambiguity, I consider Antonia's response to be further along the continuum than the other responses in the 'Factual' category.

Category Comments

Because of the lack of metalanguage in the above six comments, it is difficult to judge the degree of factuality intended by the respondents. The written responses seem to be describing God as a powerful, male creator and father. There is no indication that this is one possible way of writing of God, but rather that this is a description of the reality of God.
PERSONAL/CONTEXTUAL

The five responses in this category do not seek to describe the nature of Godself. Rather, they tend to focus on the meaning of God in the lives of the respondents. Most of these comments indicate an awareness of other ways of thinking of God. In this way they differ from the preceding category. However, the accuracy of their own ideas, or of other possibilities, is not the issue for these students. They are concerned only with the personal relevance and meaning of God in their lives.

1. Jasmin wrote this about God:

I don't have a clear picture in my mind of who God is. Although I see him as a creator, and protector of people that love him. . . . I wouldn't call God my father because he hasn't taught me things as my Dad has. I would refer to him as my protector and friend who I pray to when I need guidance in my life. The image that comes to mind when someone mentions God is still the one that was reinforced to me when I was in Primary school. I see him as a young, vibrant man wearing pure white clothing and sitting on cotton ball clouds, smiling at all the people surrounding him. Even though some people may think of it as babish I some how can't erase that image of God from my mind. Maybe this is because in my subconscious I don't want to let go of this image.

Jasmin's metacognitive comments about the formation and retention of her image of God indicate an understanding of thought and language about God as being a fluid thing, capable of changing with the changing needs of the individual. Jasmin does not speak of Godself, but of what God means to her in her particular life-context. In this way, Jasmin uses God-language to describe the personal, contextual meaning of God for her, rather than attempting a description of Godself.
2. Teresa wrote this about God:

God to me is someone who helps me when I pray because I don't want something to happen to me and most of the time it does not happen to me.

And I know I will never see him in my life time but maybe when my time is up I will live with him and my grandparents and my birds in a lush green spring place.

Teresa's God-language revolves around the function of God in her life now, and her expectations for her eternal life. She presents no clear idea of God, and does not attempt to use language to elucidate her idea of the nature of God, if she has one.

3. Edward's oral comments about God focussed on the nature of the presence and meaning of God in his life. Edward spoke of God as a spirit that is present within people. He saw the goodness within others and the goodness of which he is capable. These, combined with the beliefs of his family, led him to conclude that God is present and works within people, including himself. Edward was trying to explain the personal meaning he attached to the perceived presence of God in his life.

4. Kard is unsure exactly how to describe God. She wrote this:

I feel that God is a spirit, some presence that is ever present. . . . I feel his presence at times. . . .

I sometimes think that god is a reason that people are able to blame all the bad things that happen in the world. When things go bad we ask God for help and yet we rarely thank him. . . .
Kard's description falls into two parts. The first part consists of her personal explanation for what she has experienced of God in her life. The second part consists of Kard’s explanation of the way people around her respond to God.

5. Nicole's comments focussed on the meaning of God for her. She said, "To me god is the most powerful 'person' in the world. He is a creator and the most wonderful existing thing that I know."

The comments of the following student are further along the continuum that those of the above quoted students. Pines’ work incorporates elements of the personal/contextual and of the symbolic. In this sense she is in transition between the two points. Pines wrote this about God:

This artwork says that when you finish the path of life, you get to God and he's the mass of colours at the top. He decides whether you go to hell (flames) or heaven (everyone holding hands in God's creation).

Pines focussed on the function of God (that of judge) and, presumably, on the effect this function will have on her life in the hereafter. These are elements of the 'Personal/Contextual' category. However, Pines also used symbols and symbolic language to represent God. For example, she said that God is "the mass of colours at the top". In this sense Pines used language symbolically.
Category Comments

The responses included in this category primarily describe the meaning or function of God, and the effect of these on the lives of the respondents. Because of these characteristics, the comments in this category are seen to be personal and contextual. This means that each respondent recognises their ideas as being particular to themselves and not necessarily relevant to anyone else. It also means that God is not referred to as being-in-itself, but as a contributor within the context of the respondent’s life.

SYMBOLIC

The ‘Symbolic’ category contains 25 responses. There is a range of language use within this category, but all the responses use symbolism in some form or another as their main form of communication.

Instead of reporting in full on the comments of the respondents in this category, I will provide excerpts from each response, sufficient to illustrate the use of language employed by each student.

The first group of seven students used simile to communicate their ideas of God.

1. Dana said, “I can compare God to a dog, someone who will always be there, always willing to listen, even though they don’t talk to you, just listening to you is enough.” Dana uses an unusual and personal symbol, and explains the significance this symbol holds for her.
2. Brad also used an unusual symbol for God. He commented, “I think God is very much like Santa Clause. It is not the person that is important, it is the spirit of God.”

3. Patricia’s description of God also contains an unusual symbol. She said, “I saw God in all his colours like a whirl sweeping over the earth.”

4. Stefania compared God to light when she said, “The yellow light [in the picture] is God. I use that light instead of a clear Image because I don’t see God as anything, I see him as a light.”

5. Ann likened God to elements of creation. She wrote, “God is like ... the sea, the Moon, the Sun he is in everything he created.”

6. Filbert used a different element of nature with which to compare God. He noted that “God is like a powerful tornadoe. No-one really knows how powerful he is until they come across him and his path.”

7. Jordana also used a natural substance with which she compared God. She stated that “God is like a fire raging intensely - he is always there and will never burn out.”

Four students used metaphor, a more direct form of comparison.

1. Dean said “God is the hand that holds the earth.”

2. Robert made this statement about God: “I do not see ‘God’ as a person but a ... force. ... ‘God’ is energy.”
3. Cynthia stated that "God is a source that radiates everlasting love."

4. Marie said, "I see him (God) as the Ultimate healer, always there to look after us."

Nine students are primarily describing their pictures, so their language about God is not as clear or as direct as that of the preceding students. However, symbolic elements are present in their descriptions.

1. Beppe said, "God is represented by the sun. ... The sun is much bigger than me because god is over-powering."

2. Spiro noted that during his meditation on God, "I saw god at the end of the rainbow when I go to heaven and also a pot of gold for the future."

3. Chantelli, in describing the meaning of her picture, said:

   The center focus is the cross - God is the center of my life and everything evolves around it. The cross with the slight shade of red at the top and bottom symbolizing the blood shed for us - to pay for our sins and so one may have eternal life.

4. Bogu also drew comparisons between his pictorial image and God. He noted that "My image of God is an enormous tree. The tree was large, filled up a large proportion of the picture but there was more that could not be seen. God is a large part of my life but there is a lot more to come."
5. Lockie was another student who used a scene from nature and linked this to God. He said:

My vision of God is integrated with nature. Vast expanses of open country, and beautiful sunsets. The red earth is from the North West of W.A., because it is a very beautiful place. The purples and blues in the sky symbolise peace and tranquillity. The spiritual side of nature.

6. D.D. commented that “I drew a love heart symbolising the love God has and wrote forgiveness which when I think of God I think that he is a forgiving God.”

7. Lee wrote that in her picture, “the warm figure represents the warmth, love, and light that god has given in my life.”

8. Fras integrated his symbols with his concept of God thus: “I saw 2 important symbols, a cross and a heart with gold beaming out this meaning life and death what Jesus gave us. That is what God is to me.”

9. Chloe commented that “The cross is a symbol which I relate to God, also the sky.”

Five students prefaced their analogies for God with statements of what they think God is not.

1. Jimmy said, “I don’t believe that God is a figure as such but we refer to him as one so that we can visualise him much easier. . . . I can relate to God more in nature. . . . I think that people should relate to God in their own way.”
2. Caye echoed this when she said, "I don't see god as a definite figure, rather I see god as something peaceful. What I think is peaceful is the sky."

3. Kerryn also qualified her statement about God. She said, "I don't think he is any kind of material particle. I feel he is an energy flowing through everything."

4. Sharne Jardine made the following statement about God:

   Personally I believe god not to be a person but every little thing around us. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I believe god to be present in the tree's, the sky, grass basically nature's presence.

5. Leanne, in commenting on the significance of her picture, negated what she considers to be a common misapprehension about God. She said:

   I think that God is simple. I think the idea of God has been made to be complex ... but when looked at closely, there are only simple patterns. ... To me, God represents what we deem to be right in life, and his 'kingdom' represents what we as humans see as our ultimate goal to achieve.

   The final two comments included in this category come from Vesna and Cousy. These two comments have been placed in the transition group between the 'Symbolic' and 'Metaphorical' categories.
1. Although Vesna prefers one of her symbols over the others as the main carrier of meaning, she acknowledges the limitations of this symbol. She wrote:

My poster reflects what I see as God. I believe that God is everywhere, not just one image. I drew a yellow sun, for I think God is power and light.

2. Cousy presented a range of different symbols. She wrote:

I saw God as being all around me - being the swirls. The sun as bright and big. The land, sky, earth, ocean represent what God has created and how he/she is with us. The colours all combined mean God is everywhere. The love heart represents that God loves us. And the purple star shaped figure means that God is never ending.

Cousy uses a variety of symbols that communicate something of her understanding of God. In this sense, her comments belong to the 'Symbolic' group. However, several of the symbols appear to be mutually exclusive, for example, God as the swirls, and God as the sun. This apparent contradiction causes no problems for Cousy because she uses each symbol in a limited way. In this sense, her response belongs to the 'Metaphorical' category. Thus, Cousy also is placed in transition.
Category Comments

The comments in this category use a high degree of symbolism in their communication about God. Some of this symbolism is conventional; that is, respondents appropriate symbols already in use within their culture, both religious and secular. An example of this usage is found in the work of Chloe (on page 154) who used the symbols of the cross and the sky to carry meaning about God. Other students used conventional symbols, but added elements to them to personalise them. An example of this can be found in Filbert’s work (page 112) where the symbol of power is transformed into the symbol of a tornado. Another form of symbolism evident in the work of several students in this category is that which can be termed the personal symbol. Dana (on page 90), for example, compared God to a dog. She did this in such a way that the dog became a symbol of God for her. Not only is this symbol not found anywhere else, it probably would be denounced as sacrilegiously degrading by most religious people. Dana, however, has explained her use of this symbol in a way that clarifies that only certain attributes of God are to be contained within this symbol. Clearly, the types and degree of abstraction of the symbols used by the respondents vary considerably.

Many of the comments in this category also use some form of analogy with which to communicate notions of God. Simile, metaphor, and other forms of comparison are apparent.

The common thread running through all these excerpts is the use of some form of symbolism to carry meaning and to be a vehicle of communication about God for the students.
Metaphorical.

Like the 'Symbolic' category, the 'Metaphorical' category contains comments that use symbols as the primary carrier of meaning. Unlike the 'Symbolic' category, the comments in the 'Metaphorical' category contain more than one main symbol, and often several of the symbols used are mutually exclusive. This is not considered to be a problem, as each symbol is seen as being capable of transmitting only a fragment of the nature and meaning of God. The use of a variety of conflicting symbols implies that God is both like, and unlike, the essence of the symbol.

There are three comments in this category. The first comment illustrates well the nature of metaphorical language. The remaining two do not use as many symbols as the first, but do use conflicting symbols. In addition to these, there are two comments that combine characteristics of both the 'Metaphorical' and 'Apophatic' categories. These comments are classed as transitional.

1. The first excerpt comes from Molika, who said:

To me God represents all aspects and colours of life. God is black, white, red, yellow. God is in the form of a square, circle, person, etc.

God is good, kind, generous and God has a permeant smile on everyone. God is like a shining light looking over everyone, the earth. God's eyes are big enough to care for everyone.

God is like a "friend" who is always near even if we cant see him - God although may not be seen physically - God is felt, his/her presence is felt.

God has no gender. God is neither he or she. God is simple GOD.
2. Maribel presented two distinct images of God. She wrote:

I don't have a complete clear image of God. I see God as a strong force. A very strong force that makes the world go around. A force to powerful to be fully understood.

I sometimes also see God as a human being, someone with human feelings, someone who loves without restrictions. In this society we live in were we are constantly pressured to live up to a standard God provides a sense of hope for many. He becomes their driving force his love becomes the reasons why they are alive.

God is in everything, in everyone. We have been created in the image of God we are all a part of God.

3. Drew also wrote about God in terms of two different types of images, which contain a variety of symbols. She said:

I do see him sometimes as a face I saw in a dream. He was a swirl of blue's and grey's.
Gods image is also present to me in the untouched and innocence of the world. Like babies and sunsets and those sorts of things.

The following two comments, from Taylor and Clea, combine elements of the language usage of both the 'Metaphorical' and the 'Apophatic' groups.

1. Taylor wrote this about her picture:

My picture I feel represents the uncertainty and mystery I feel when I think of God. The pale colours are compassionate colours & the bits of yellow are the areas of light where I feel I understand something about God and religion.

I relate words like father, spirit, leader, and friend to God: have many views of how I see God.
Taylor notes that she has many views of how she sees God, and she lists several of them. At the same time, she speaks of the uncertainty and mystery of God, and she implies how little she feels she knows about God.

2. Clea, whose picture can be seen on page 118, also combines images and symbols of God with images of the unknowability of God. She wrote:

What my picture means to me!!

My picture sort of resembles a jigsaw puzzle of ideas about God and they all interlink with each other, and come to-gether to form My image of God (which is the purple, because it is linked with all the other colours [images of God]).

The black in the far end of the page represents the real God. It's black because no one knows who or what he is (he is blacked out). The gold colour around The black represents his holyness and the 1st step to actually finding out who he is.

Clea's symbols are irregularly shaped, different coloured jigsaw pieces which symbolise Clea's different ideas about God. At the same time, the symbol that represents the real God is black because God is essentially unknown. Clea combines the use of a variety of different ideas about God with the concept of the unknowability of God. In this sense she is in transition between the last two categories.

The comments in this category display two of the main characteristics of metaphorical religious language. They include several, conflicting symbols or metaphors for God. They also speak of these symbols in a way that clearly indicates that any symbol, image or metaphor for God is limited and able only to convey a fragment of the essence or meaning of God.
**APOPHATIC**

Apophatic language is found mostly in the writings of the mystics. 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 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.

1. The first statement in this category comes from Angela. All that Angela would write about God was, "GOD IS UNKNOWN". The use of all capitals together with the absence of any other comment, indicates the emphasis Angela places on this understanding.

2. The second comment comes from an unnamed female student who wrote, "God is mysterious and no-one really knows who or what he is." This statement is typical of the comments in this category.

3. Elizabeth said, "I don't believe he is one of us or she is one of us. God is It. It's too hard to know what God is." Elizabeth has difficulty finding an appropriate pronoun with which to describe God. At this point she accepts that the easiest thing to do is to admit that not only can language not appropriately describe God, but God cannot be known.
4. Mary asked some philosophical questions about God. She said, "What is God? Only he shall know. Is he just a figment of the imagination. Someone to blame when something goes wrong?" The unknowability of God is contained in the statement that only God knows what God is. Mary asked, "What is God?" not who is God, indicating that she does not accept the concept that God is like a person. However, she uses the pronoun 'he', perhaps primarily because that is the convention.

5. Anthony's comments elaborate on the question and mystery of God to him. He wrote:

My picture is about not the uncertainty of God, but about the not knowing and the mystery that surrounds God.

No-one can say what god is or even what he is like because simply nobody knows except those who have died.

How do we know that God created the world and human life?

How do we know that this is true, we are told so in the bible, but again how do we know it is true, how do we know that someone didn't write it in to sound good. This is all part of the mystery that is God and makes religion religion.

6. Allora wrote:

God: Not you nor me nor anyone else can define with words. God is the supreme being, but is also the closest friend we can have. If we are able to fully define God, then it means we are greater than God. Many people don't believe in God because they can't see Him. If God is limited by a physical body then he can't be everywhere at the same time. People who open their hearts to God can feel Him.
7. Cimba had this to write about God:

I don't think 'God' is a 'who', or even a 'what'. Can't put him in a name category either. The only thing I connect 'God' and the possibility that 'God' exists, is with creation; How the world and everything within it has evolved. I think if I was made to say what I thought God was/is, then I'd say, it is within us.

Cimba comments on the inadequacy of language in describing the nature of God.

8. Antonella wrote:

I don't know who is god or what but god is something that is there. I think of god when something bad has happened or when something good has happened. God is a name to me a name without a face or body just a name God.

9. Demi's comment is similar. She said:

The name God does not mean anything to me. It is a word that comes up a soul, an almighty soul with great strengths. ... I don't know what God is like, how does anyone know what God is like or if there is a god?

10. Faith noted:

My picture says to me that God is sort of always at the back of my mind when I need him. ... Something has to be out there but what I don't quite know. It's only just colours to me.

11. Fortunato, in noting what came to mind when he thought of God, wrote, "When I think of God I think of an image that can not be explained in words." Fortunato has also discovered the inability of language to communicate effectively about God.
Category Comments

The 11 students whose comments appear above, assert the unknowability of God and the difficulty in attempting to use language to communicate ideas about something beyond the scope of language. Three students, Elizabeth, Allora and Cimba, also add comments about what God is not, or could not be. Elizabeth said that God could not be one of us. Allora said that God cannot be limited to a physical body. Cimba said that God cannot be named, and is not a ‘who’ or a ‘what’. These comments use apophatic language with which to communicate ideas about God.

Gendered Language

One element of interest in the language used by the students was the use of gendered language. One frequently hears God spoken and written of in terms of the masculine, but rarely in the feminine or the neuter. I was interested to find to what degree the students of this study followed the pattern of gendered language common among religious people.

The responses of the students frequently contain pronouns, the most predominant one being ‘he’. However, students use this pronoun in different ways. Some students clearly intend to imply a masculine person, whereas others appear to use the pronoun because it is the conventional thing. Some students attempt to de-emphasise the masculine by including the feminine and the neuter in their language. Others prefer the option of not using pronouns at all, always referring
to God as 'God'. These uses of language by the students have led me to arrange the responses of the students into four groups, which I have called 'Definite Masculine', 'Conventional Masculine', 'Combination', and 'Neutral'. On a continuum, the groups look like this:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
4 & 27 & 8 & 21 \\
\end{array}
\]

Definite Masculine  Conventional Masculine  Combination  Neutral

**Figure 8.** Continuum of Gendered Language.

Within the comments of the students, 60 responses contain language about God that uses some form of gender reference, either by calling God he, she or it, or by not using pronouns at all. Because of the similarity between responses within each group, I will not report on each response, but present several from each group as examples.

**Definite Masculine**

Four students use 'he' in a definite manner when referring to God.

1. Anna wrote this about God. "I think he is male like a father figure. . . . I do believe he has a voice. When you go to heaven you speak to this deep masculine voice." It seems that for Anna the masculinity of God is essential to the nature of God.

2. Antonia wrote, "My poster shows an outline of god and he is looking directly to me. The different coloured circles are the different kind of powers he has." The combination of the pronoun 'he' and the mention of God's powers form a distinct impression of a masculine God.
3. Jasmin wrote this about God:

I see him as a creator, and protector of people that love him. . . . I wouldn't call God my father because he hasn't taught me things as my Dad has. I would refer to him as my protector and friend who I pray to when I need guidance in my life.

The primary images of God as protector and guide indicate that for Jasmin God is masculine.

**Conventional Masculine**

27 students exclusively use the pronoun 'he' in writing about God. As few of these responses contain metalanguage, comments by the students about the language they are using, it is difficult to know whether the use of the word 'he' signals a belief in the masculinity of God, or whether it is the unexamined use of conventional forms. In the absence of any intimation of the importance of the masculine form, I have assumed that convention language usage is the reason for the use of the male pronoun.

1. Shamne Jardine's comments indicate that her use of the word 'he' doesn't indicate that she thinks of God as a male person. She wrote:

Personally I believe god not to be a person but every little thing around us. . . . God is there for me and looks after in his way my friends myself and family. God relates to each and everyone of us in his own way.

Shamne Jardine states that she does not believe that God is a person. She also speaks of the way God relates to everyone, a comment inconsistent with the concept of a distant, masculine figure.
2. Jimmy said:

I don't believe that God is a figure as such but we refer to him as one so that we can visualise him much easier. ... I can relate to God more in nature because of the beauty in the surrounding.

3. Patricia wrote, "I saw God in all his colours like a whirl sweeping over the earth." The concept of the whirl is non-gendered, and Patricia's use of the word 'his' seems to me to be merely conventional usage.

Combination

Eight students were conscious of not implying that God is male. They did this by saying 'he/she', 'it', 'he/she/it'.

1. Elizabeth wrote this about God: "I don't believe he is one of us or she is one of us. God is It. It's too hard to know what God is."

2. Dana made the following comments about God:

I don't see God as someone who I worship, I see it as someone I can turn to, like an invisible friend. ... I see him/her as an equal, someone that helps me when I'm going through bad and good stages.

3. Molika commented that:

Although God may not be seen physically - God is felt, his/her presence is felt. ... God has no gender, God is neither he or she. God is simply GOD.
Neutral

21 students adopted the practice of always referring to God as 'God'. It seems to me that the reason why some students made this choice was the desire to avoid the gender issue regarding God by using neutral language about God.

1. In his comments about God, Robert used the word 'god' five times. He didn't use any pronouns.

2. Caye repeated the word 'god' rather than use a pronoun. She said, "I don't see god as a definite figure, rather I see god as something peaceful."

3. Maribel used the word 'God' 11 times. She used the word 'him' only once, and that was when she was talking about how other people think of God.

Category Comments

The 12 examples listed above reflect the ways that 60 of the students used language in relation to the gender of God. The ways fall into four groups; the use of language to imply the essential masculinity of God; the conventional use of masculine pronouns; the use of a variety of gendered pronouns; and the avoidance of the use of pronouns.
SUMMARY OF LANGUAGE RESULTS

Contained within the data is a variety of approaches to the use of language in communicating ideas about God. These range from concrete, literalistic, factual statements about God, through the use of symbols to express something of God, to apophatic statements that place God and any communication about God beyond the sphere of language.

The breakdown of the data pertaining to the respondents' use of language in relation to God, is presented below according to group, number, and gender.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Language</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/Contextual</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphorical</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apophatic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Symbolic language is the type of language most frequently found in the data, with almost 50% of the language data falling within this category. The students who use symbolic language communicate about God through the use of symbols. In this way they say something about their ideas of God and still maintain their understanding of God as something/someone greater than words can describe. Many of these students use only one symbol or a cluster of related symbols to convey their predominant concept of God. Others use a number of different symbols which express different attributes of God, but which also complement each other.

The next most frequently occurring type of language used by the students is apophatic language. The 20% of students who used this form of communication discovered that language of any type was inadequate to describe what they understood of God. Instead of trying to find a linguistic approximation, these students simply stated that God is unknowable mystery. Several of these students were willing to make some statements about God - all of which indicated what God is not.

The remaining three categories, 'Factual', 'Personal/Contextual', and 'Metaphorical' contained approximately the same number of excerpts, each representing approximately 10% of the language data sample.

- The students in the 'Factual' group used language in a concrete way to express facts about God.
- The students in the 'Personal/Contextual' group wrote about God from within the context of the impact God had on their personal
lives. These students were not trying to describe God: they were trying to describe the effect or meaning of God for them.

- The students in the 'Metaphorical' group used symbols to convey something of the nature and meaning of God for them, but at the same time ameliorated the impact of the expression by juxtaposing it with a conflicting symbol.

Also contained within the data are comments that reveal the writers' notions of the gender of God. These range from emphatic statements of the masculinity of God, to statements that are worded in such a way as to avoid the use of gendered language. The breakdown of the data pertaining to the respondents' use of gendered language in relation to God, is presented below according to group, number, and gender of respondent.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of Gendered Language</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definite Masculine</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>39</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
45% of the students who contributed to the language data used masculine pronouns when speaking of God. They seemed to do this in an unconscious way, as if they were using this form of language because it reflects conventional usage rather than because it made a statement about the nature of God.

35% of students did not use pronouns, but simply repeated the noun 'God' when making comments about God. With some students this may have been so because they did not write sufficient comments about God to require the use of pronouns. With other students, however, it seems that the repeated use of the noun 'God' indicates a desire to avoid the sexual bias of masculine language about God.

13% of students chose to avoid any hint of sexual bias by consciously choosing to use masculine, feminine and neuter pronouns in relation to God.

The remaining 7% of students used masculine language in relation to God in such a way as to imply that the masculinity of God was an essential element of Godself.

The approximate ratio of girls to boys in this subset of the data is 2:1. The use of conventional masculine language reflects this ratio fairly accurately. The ratio of girls to boys in the use of definitely masculine language is 3:1. This is slightly higher for the girls, but the very low numbers of respondents in this group make the ratio insignificant. In the use of neutral language the ratio is approximately 1:1. This is significantly higher for the boys. The use of combination pronouns has a ratio of 7:1, which is higher for the girls.
REVIEW OF RESULTS

What, then, is the meaning of God for this group of students? The answer, not surprisingly, is that the meaning of God is different for each student. To understand sufficiently the role God plays in the lives of these students, it is necessary to examine the response of each student and to treat each response on an individual basis.

Nonetheless, it is possible to observe similarities between certain responses, and to name these patterns of similarities. The following groupings of the students' responses is an attempt to name the basic approaches to the meaning of God in the lives of the respondents.

Science versus Myth

Some students approached the God-issue basically as a contest between myth and science. They viewed the invitation to belief in God as a request to suspend rational judgment and to accept the inexplicable on faith. These students did not speak of relationship with God because to them God was a proposition which they could not accept. These students used factual language when commenting on God. They tended not to use gendered language, preferring to use the repeated noun 'God' rather than use a pronoun. Among the students who responded in this way are Minh, George, Maverick and Ant.

Minh's response was academic, rational, non-emotive, and strongly-held. She was puzzled that anyone with any degree of intelligence could subscribe to belief in God. She believed in herself only, and adopted a supercilious attitude towards those who had succumbed to faith in God.
George wrote that he did not believe in God. His picture, however, implied that perhaps he did accept the possibility of a powerful entity that existed beyond the perception of humankind. His response to this possibility was that he didn't need it. He and his rational, scientific mind were sufficient for anything that life could throw at him. Underlying this response there seemed to be an emotive reaction against the idea of humanity needing God. George seemed to be rebelling more against the concept of human neediness in relation to God than against Godself.

Maverick noted that he was open-minded on the subject of God. He recognised that God was important in the lives of some other people, and that people who have had a near-death experience have an increased awareness of God, but as far as he was concerned scientific solutions satisfied him. He saw no need to believe in God.

Ant wrote that he did not know what he believed in. The reason behind Ant's rejection of God was that every time he had called on God for help, he received no answer. He felt rebuffed. For Ant, rationality was not the issue. Doubt in the existence of God arose from his emotional experience of being apparently snubbed by God. Life experience and his perception of that experience are the chief determinants of Ant's stance in relation to God.

These four students rejected the notion of God or the need for a God. At first glance, these students seem to have much in common in relation to their concepts and relationship with God. However, a closer look indicates that the responses are essentially different. These kinds of differences are apparent in the work of all the respondents to this study.
One group of students thought of God as a theory. For them God was an idea, neither proven nor disproven, that at times held curiosity value, but little else. God was not a part of the real world and had no impact on their lives. These students did not speak of relationship with God because one does not normally think of having a relationship with an idea. Language about God tends to be factual.

Bobby did not know what he believed in. He seemed to be keeping an open mind, something which he stated and on which he prided himself. Bobby's main objection to God was that God wasn't necessary. Both Bobby's thinking and his life experience pointed to the fact that, if God existed, God was not a necessary or relevant part of human life. This response shares similarities with Maverick's (in the above category), but is placed in this category because Maverick stated that scientific solutions answered his questions, whereas Bobby simply rejected the necessity of belief in God.

Caitlin did not know or care if God existed. Clearly, for Caitlin God is an irrelevant idea.

Bart stated that he didn't know whether God exists. The question was not important to him, however, because he believed that God is not important to us, and is probably a human invention anyway.

Demi noted that God is a name that doesn't mean anything to her. It is a word that represents an idea, the idea of a great soul. She has been taught about this idea, but it means nothing to her.
Two-Way Bet

Three students expressed an awareness of the meaning of God in their lives in a way that can be described as the 'two-way bet'. For these students, God has little meaning and is essentially an idea that was taught to them. (In this respect, these students are like the respondents in the category above.) However, these students recognise that there might be something to the idea of God, and, not wanting to miss out if there really is something there, continue to profess some belief in God. There is little or no relationship with God for these students, and any demands made on them in the name of God would find them unwilling to respond. The language these students use when commenting about God tends to be either factual or personal/contextual.

Teresa prayed to God as insurance against bad things happening to her. Because bad things usually do not happen to her, she thinks that maybe God is responsible, and so she continues to pray, just in case.

Antonella thought about God when something good or bad happens. Because she has been taught about God, she accepts that God exists. However, it is clear that God is not significant to Antonella.

Rosemary vacillated between the idea that God is present in her life and the doubt that God really exists at all. It seems that Rosemary maintains a belief in God, not because she really believes in God, but because God might be real.
Transcendent Power

For a large group of students, God is transcendent power. There are different ways of imagining this idea of God. For some, God is a distant, anthropomorphic figure. For others, God is an inexplicable force. Most of the students in this group did not perceive a relationship between themselves and God since God is thought of as different, distant and uninvolved.

Fred, Mishel, Jasmin and Anna drew and wrote about a distant, male figure which existed in the clouds, looked over the earth and its people, and was protective. This figure was clearly powerful and self-sufficient. The creatureliness and neediness of humans is apparent and represents these students' notion of relationship with God.

Chantelli and Fras equated God with Jesus. The aspects of Jesus on which they focussed were the salvific power of the cross and the love of Jesus. Both these responses contained overtones of the power and transcendence of high Christology. The unstated nature of relationship with God is of humble acceptance of creaturely sin and need of redemption.

Bazza, Pines and Leon presented different versions of God as heavenly judge, the one who arbitrates between good and evil. The power, transcendence and immutability of God are apparent in these students' descriptions. God is distant to these students and there is little notion of relationship with God, except the need to beware of the consequences of evil.
Nicole and Antonia wrote primarily about God's powers. They conceived of God as other, powerful, transcendent and immutable. Acceptance of, and obedience to, this God seem to be the core of these students' understanding of their relationship with God.

Jacinta, Yvette, Cynthia, Jimmy and Marie thought of God as the transcendent and powerful creator of all things. God is clearly portrayed as apart from the world, yet as intimately concerned with it and about it. There is an awareness of the loving concern of God for humankind, and a reciprocal love and gratitude for God's involvement.

Elizabeth, Maribel and Filbert conceived of God as a powerful force that somehow was necessary for life on earth. The unstoppable and potentially destructive power of God feature prominently in the responses of these students. God is understood to be different, other, transcendent. There is no comment about relationship with this God, and the language used about God is symbolic in nature.

Special Person

One group of students thought of and related to God primarily as a special person. Although the word 'person' is used, it is not intended in an anthropomorphic sense, but rather as a substitute for the word 'being'.

For Louise and Taylor, God is a special person with special qualities and attributes. These include wisdom, compassion, goodness and patience.
Maribel and Stefania conceived of God as a special, human-like person. By this they mean that they think in terms of the similarities between the qualities and attributes of God and the ideal human, not that they think God looks like a human being.

Lee and Dana conceived of and related to God as a special friend. This friend is always there for them, is understanding, patient, tactful, loving and involved. There is an intimacy and involvement in these responses. The relationship with God is warm and reciprocal.

**Spiritual Presence**

Many students thought of God as spirit. The majority of these respondents related to a spiritual being present in their lives.

Ed, Kard, Cimba and Marissa thought of God as present in everything and everyone. For them, God is a nurturing presence that fosters goodness in the world.

Brad, Edward and Bogu thought of God as a presence within themselves, prompting them towards good.

Taylor, Patricia and Cousy wrote about God in terms of a mysterious spirit, a whirl, and swirls that cover and permeate everything. There is a sense of peace and harmony in these ideas, not of an intrusive force. Acceptance and co-operation seem to be the response to God these students see as being appropriate.

Kerryn, Robert, Vesna and Jordana thought of God as an energy that flows through them and others, sustaining them and all the world.
Spirit Within Creation

Several students, who also thought of God as a spirit, tended to locate this spirit within creation. It is nature that, for them, holds the spiritual presence of God. Shane, Ann, Lockie, Tommy and Carmela are the students who primarily related to God in this way.

Supreme Being

Allora and Molika used metaphoric language to speak of God. They thought of God as many things. The term ‘supreme being’ captures something of their ideas which include the notions of spiritual presence, loving creator and sustainer of life.

Unknowable Mystery

Many students spoke of God as unknown and as mystery, and many students related their awareness of their limited understanding of the meaning and role of God in their lives. However, only five students considered unknowable mystery as the essence of God. Angela, Mary, Anthony, Clea and an unnamed girl all wrote about God in apophatic terms as that which is beyond knowing.

Paradox

Fortunato, Jasmin and Chloe were grappling with existential issues such as the meaning of one’s existence and the presence of suffering and death. For them, God was a part of these issues. The essence or meaning of God for them at that point of their lives can be summed up in the word ‘paradox’. How could God be kind and loving, and yet permit uncertainty, evil, sin, the suffering of innocents, and
death? The three respondents had tried to reconcile these opposites, but could not do so. Instead of simplifying the problem by opting for one aspect of the paradox and ignoring the other, they held the two options in tension, believing in the goodness of God, yet acknowledging the reality of evil in the world.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understandings of the Meaning of God</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science v Myth</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Way Bet</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendent Power</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Person</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Presence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit within Creation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Being</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknowable Mystery</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradox</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>65</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The meaning of God in the lives of these students is a complex phenomenon. The ten categories listed above presented something of the students' basic orientation towards God, and their ideas about the meaning of God in their lives.
CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented all the data that relates to concepts of God, relationship with God, and language about God. It has attempted to present patterns of ideas by grouping and naming like comments, and contrasting these with unlike comments. It has arranged these groups into continua in an attempt to give an overview of one possible way of schematising the data.

Observations, analyses and discussions of the individual components of the data have been interspersed with the data itself. This has seemed to be the most productive way of treating the data. In summary, this chapter has been about presenting and describing the data, and highlighting certain aspects of them.

The following chapter, ‘Discussion of Results’, moves away from the predominantly descriptive nature of this chapter. It adopts analysis of the main points arising from the data and comparison with the results of other research in an endeavour to locate this study within the broader framework of current research into the meaning of God for children, which itself is an element of children’s spirituality.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to explore, analyse and describe something of the meaning of God for a group of teenagers. This was done by examining three essential, interrelated elements of the meaning of God - concept of God, relationship with God, and language about God.

In order to obtain responses that were as accurate and meaningful as possible, it was necessary not to ask specifically about the information required for the study, as this may have led to expected responses (that is, what the students thought was expected of them) rather than personally meaningful responses. Instead, the respondents were led through a meditation, where they relaxed and got in touch with inner feelings, images and ideas. Then they were asked to represent pictorially what came to mind when they heard the word 'God'; next they were asked to write about their pictures and ideas of God; finally, they were given the opportunity to attend an interview for the purpose of elaborating on their pictorial and written work.

Several students produced two pictures. Some students did not hand in their written work. Only 11 students accepted the invitation for an interview. This resulted in a discrepancy between the number of respondents, the number of pictures collected, the number of written responses received, and the number of interviews recorded.
The data were arranged into the three elements of concept (including images of God), relationship (including ideas about where God is encountered) and language (including the use of gendered language). Then each of these elements was divided into categories, which were further divided into sub-categories. This was done in order to construct a framework that would provide patterns of meaning through which to view the variety of responses.

The element for which the students provided the most information was concepts of God. This is not surprising, given that the students were instructed to record whatever came into their minds when they heard the word ‘God’. It was to be expected that the bulk of their responses would focus on who or what God is to them and on their perceptions of God’s attributes, qualities and characteristics. Some students did not go beyond drawing and writing about their concepts of God. Other students wrote and spoke about their relationship with God, either explicitly or implicitly. A few students wrote explicitly about their use of God-language. (Most of the information about the students’ use of language was gleaned directly from the students’ comments about God rather than from metalinguistic comments.)

Finally, a more holistic view of the students’ responses was presented. The overall orientation of the students towards God and the meaning of God in their lives was inferred from the data and presented as a series of 10 categories, entitled “Understandings of the Meanings of God”.
DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The observations and analyses that accompany many of the data entries highlight some of the interesting and notable points that have arisen within the data. These points will be presented and discussed in the following section.

VARIETY

The most striking point about the data is the variety and diversity that exist within them. Given that all but one of the respondents to this study were seventeen years of age (or within three months of their seventeenth birthday) and that they were all from the same Catholic secondary school, it was to be expected that there would be some degree of homogeneity within the cohort. However, each response is unique. Some responses share similarities with others, but the differences between responses are greater than the similarities.

The similarities that exist seem to arise from shared basic beliefs about the nature of God. Thus some students questioned the existence of God, others thought of God in anthropomorphic terms, others envisioned God as spirit or energy, and some commented on the ultimate unknowability of God. However, it would be simplistic to allocate the students' responses to categories and assume that such an implication of similarity was an indication that the students within each category shared a similar concept of God. As the data reveal, concepts of God go well beyond holding a particular image or idea of God. The concepts of the students contained images of God, feelings about God, notions about the where and how of the existence of God,
speculations about the proximity of God to humankind in general and
themselves in particular, ideas about what God expected of them and
what they expected of God, beliefs about how the presence of God in
one's life changes one's life, and observations about the lack of
meaning and relevance God has in the lives of some individuals. The
presence of these elements allows for an infinite variety of concepts.
When they are included, it becomes apparent that the similarities are
essentially superficial and mask a much greater diversity.

The range of concepts, relationships, and language was
unexpectedly large. Concepts ranged from concrete, anthropomorphic
notions often observed in primary school children, to the sense of God
as being essentially mystery, a notion more frequently found among
the writings of the mystics than of young laity. The use of language
reflected this range. There was factual, literalistic language used at one
end of the continuum, and there was apophatic language used at the
other end of the continuum. Reported relationships with God ranged
from the negative, where the respondent actively maintained a hostile
and negating orientation towards God, through to the personal sense of
harmonious co-existence with God.

Religious education teachers could be led by stage
developmental theories like those of Piaget, Goldman and Fowler, to
believe that students of 17 years of age would be at the stage of
conceptualising God in abstract terms, but also would be too young and
lacking in life experiences to be able to understand and accept the
paradox and mystery that intimate relationship with God brings. Such
a belief is undermined by the results to this study.
PICTORIAL/VERBAL DIFFERENCES

Another point of interest within the data is the existence of substantial differences between the pictorial and verbal data of a number of respondents. The work of most students displays a degree of congruence, with the written and spoken comments verbalising the meanings contained in the artwork. However, in the work of a number of students there is a noticeable disparity between the written and pictorial data.

George (pp. 54, 55) stated that he did not believe in God. George's picture, however, implies otherwise. It seems to express the notion that God is a powerful being who is not a necessary component of George's life. George obviously had spent some time thinking about the question of God in his life and had well-developed ideas on the subject. However, the requirement to draw his response to God seems to have been something new to George, and the fact that this activity came first meant that George recorded his affective response before his cognitive one. The picture seems to represent George's meaningful response to God (that is, the core meaning of God in his life upon which cognitive notions, rationalisations and decisions are based). What George thinks of as his non-belief in God (a cognitive aspect of the issue) seems upon closer examination to be his need for the appearance of self-sufficiency, something which requires freedom from needing God (an affective aspect of the issue). In George's case, the picture seems to capture the real meaning of God in his life, and is the foundation upon which all else concerning God is based.
Antonia (p. 80) wrote of God looking directly at her, yet her picture contains no traces of anthropomorphism. It is possible that Antonia felt unequal to the task of drawing God, so drew a simple, geometric shape instead. However, other students faced this difficulty and came up with solutions to the problem, usually in the form of stylised human figures. Another explanation is that Antonia’s picture represents the more abstract notions of God that Antonia holds, but that her verbalisations have not yet caught up with her more intuitive perceptions.

Vesna (p. 108) wrote that God was everywhere, not just one image, and that she thought of God as power and light. Vesna’s picture, however, is much more sophisticated than her comments. The picture implies the idea of God as both a source of energy and as an active energy flowing from, and returning to, the source. It would seem that Vesna’s picture expresses a depth of perception that she is not able to verbalise.

Faith’s picture (p. 122) depicts God and God’s influence on her life in terms of colours within her mind. The image is of a fire which radiates light and meaning outward into the darkness of ignorance and despair. Faith’s comments, however, are tentative, and lack perception of the deeper meaning of the picture she has drawn. Her language is not as descriptive as her picture, nor does it represent the same depth of meaning. It appears that Faith’s thinking about God and the meaning of God in her life has not been applied to her intuitive perceptions, and that when Faith does think more deeply about what she has drawn, she will come to a deeper perception which is consciously held.
The four examples cited above contain instances where the pictorial data seem to represent more advanced expressions of the meaning of God in the lives of the respondents than do the verbal data. The following three examples seem to reverse this pattern.

Bart (pp. 61, 78) produced written and pictorial work so different from each other that they are presented in two different categories. The picture is of a superman flying to the rescue. It seems to imply the notion of God as a childhood hero, a personal superhero who will rescue Bart in times of need. The underlying feelings are of security and dependence. Bart’s comments, however, express doubt about the existence and relevance of God. The way the comments are written (beginning with “Dunno” and slowly developing a coherent explanation for adopting a questioning stance in relation to God), give the impression that they have not been thought out or expressed before. It seems that Bart drew his picture of superman, which appears to be an image of God he has held since he was much younger. He then reflected on the meaning of his picture and discovered that it no longer represented what God meant to him. Bart’s written comments represent his attempt to think through and articulate the current meaning of God for him.

Marie’s picture (p. 92) depicts God as the sun, the source of light penetrating the black clouds of evil enveloping the world. Her comments, however, are more sophisticated and abstract than this. They speak of God as the Ultimate healer, and of this concept as being only one of many. Marie’s picture presents the simpler images of God which she possess. Her written work contains ideas about God that she seems unable to represent pictorially.
Mary's artwork (p. 136) is of a nature scene. Taken by itself the picture seems to imply that the artist sees God's presence in nature. However, Mary's comments (p. 115), represent Mary's perception of the unknowability of God. Mary discusses the question of the nature of God using apophatic language. Her questions and speculations are perceptive and philosophical. When Mary finally explains the meaning of her picture, she highlights its symbolic function. The nature scene expresses Mary's idea that, like nature, the notion of the relevance of God is an endangered idea in the lives of many people.

In the work of most of the students, there is a complementarity between the artwork and the written comments. The artwork often represents the intuitive, affective aspect of the students' experience of God. This is then reflected on and translated into verbal statements of belief. In the work of some students, however, either pictorial or linguistic expression is dominant. Some of these students drew pictures that express well the inner notions and feelings they perceived during the initial reflection activity, but then found that they had difficulty translating this expression into linguistic form. Other students found that language could more clearly express their perceptions. It would appear that a more developed facility with either linguistic or pictorial expression led these students into representing their ideas using mainly their dominant form of expression.

Using both language and pictures to express one's ideas about God appears to be a better option than using either form by itself. Students with a dominant form of expression were able to communicate their ideas, and both affective and cognitive aspects were communicated.
GENDER DIFFERENCES

Some patterns of conceptualisation and expression present within the data appear to be gender related. The most noticeable difference between girls' and boys' responses lie in differing patterns of thinking and talking about God. These patterns are apparent in the data on God-image (p. 165).

The boys tended to exhibit patterns of egocentricity and objectification of the other. When the boys were ostensibly writing about God, they were actually writing about themselves. Comments about God focussed on their expectations of God, or on how God made them feel. The boys themselves were the subjects of their thoughts and comments, and God was the object. God's role was seen as one who reacts to the needs of the boys, rather than as an agent who initiates action.

Conversely, the girls tended toward sublimation of the self, and theocentricity. When the girls wrote about God, God was the focus of their thoughts and comments. In some cases, this was carried to the extreme of the respondent becoming invisible, even when the subject of her comment was the thoughts and feelings of the respondent herself. With the girls, God was spoken of as an active agent. The girls themselves were either invisible, or the passive receiver and reactor to God's initiative.

This finding can be summarised by saying that the boys tended towards egocentricity and personal agency, and the girls tended towards theocentricity and reactivity.
Another difference between girls’ and boys’ responses lies in their differing patterns of conceptualisation of God. This difference reflects the difference discussed above.

67 students provided concepts of God. 48 of these students were girls and 19 were boys, giving a ratio of approximately 5:2. The ratios for the categories ‘God as a Spirit’, ‘God as an Energy Force’, ‘The Mysterious Unknown’, and ‘God as a Person’ are 2:1, 3:1, 4:1, and 4:1 respectively. However, the ratio for the category ‘Does God Exist?’ is 1:2, reflecting a much higher proportion of male respondents than in the other categories.

Reading through the comments of the boys in this category, it becomes apparent that one of the boys’ main concerns is the need for independence. For example:

- George, who claimed he didn’t believe in God, seems primarily to be concerned with the issue of independence from God, or the need to not need God (pp. 54/55, 255).
- Bart’s comments (p. 61) revolve around his core contention that he doesn’t need God.
- Bobby (p. 57) stated that people invented God because they need something to believe in. He finds that he does not have the same need.
- Simon rejects God because Simon’s father “blahs on about religion all the time”. In his need for independence from his father and his father’s ideas, Simon rejects one of his father’s greatest values, God (p. 59).
- Maverick stated that “God is not important for me because I don’t ask for his/her help”. In other words, Maverick feels that he doesn’t need God (p. 62).
Another conceptual category, 'God as a Person', has four sub-categories. The representation of girls and boys in each of these groups in not of equal distribution. Boys preferred the sub-category 'God in His Heaven', a concept that emphasises the transcendence and impassibility of God. In the sub-categories 'Benevolent Being' and 'Loving Carer', however, only 1 of the 13 respondents was a boy. These two sub-categories emphasise the loving, concerned, involved attitude of God towards humankind. It seems that the boys preferred the idea of a distant, uninvolved God. This reflects their need to think of themselves as being independent.

Conversely, the girls’ conceptual choices are marked by a combination of their belief in their dependence on God and of their perceptions of their interdependence with God.

Dependence on God is reflected in the following examples:

- Jacinta (p. 85) wrote of God as "our creator and father. He guides, watches and protects us."
- Jasmin (p. 87) wrote of God as "protector of people that love him".
- Stefania (p. 88) thought of God as a person on the look out for people in need, whom God would help.

Notions of interdependence with God can be seen in the following examples:

- Louise (p. 84) described God as a father with whom she could sit and chat and be comfortable.
- Lee (p. 89) drew a picture of God as a loving friend, hugging and comforting her.
The differences between girls and boys in conceptualisation of God is reflected in the field of relationship with God.

The 'Images of God' table (p. 174) shows at a glance the images contained within the written data of the respondents. The images of 'friend', 'father' and 'lover' name different types of relational images. These three images are used 21 times altogether, and each time is used by a girl. No boys employed relational images of God.

A similar pattern can be seen in the 'Relationship with God' table (p. 204). Of the 19 boys who contributed data to this section, 8 wrote of negative or null relationship with God. This amounts to 42% of the male respondents to this section. (In contrast, only 13% of the female respondents wrote of relating to God in this way.)

The category of 'Reciprocal' relationship, which names a two-way, subjective relationship with God, contains nine girls and one boy. That is, 18 out of 19 boys related to God as non-existent, as irrelevant, as a background object, or as the supplier of his needs. Only 1 in 19 boys perceived God as an independent, interactive being and related to God as such. (In contrast, almost 1 in 3 girls related to God in this way.)

Patterns of gendered difference are apparent in this study. Boys tended to maintain a stance of independence from God, that is, their orientation is away from God. This orientation is fostered by their mode of thinking which focussed on self, and personal agency. Girls maintained a stance of dependence on, or interdependence with God, that is, their orientation is towards God. This orientation is fostered by their mode of thinking which focussed on God, on self-sublimation, on their own passivity, and on the activity of God.
Life Experiences/Deep Thought

Two of the more significant findings to emerge from this study were the degree of the influence of life experiences on the respondents' concepts and relationship with God, and the depth of thought and inner struggle evident in the writings of a large proportion of the students.

The influence of life experiences on the development of concepts and relationships with God can be seen in the work of a large number of the respondents of this study. Several of the more apparent of these are:

- Simon (p. 59), whose negative reaction towards God is the result of his father's constant preaching;
- Ant (p. 60), who experiences only blackness when he thinks of God, so concludes that God does not exist;
- Edward (p. 100), in whose familial relationships the presence of God is manifest;
- Antonella (p. 141), who only thinks about God when something good or bad happens;
- Ann (p. 146), who questions God when God does not intervene in the troubled times of her life;
- Fortunato (p. 147), for whom issues like the suffering and injustice in the world lead to a questioning of God;
- Jasmin (p. 152), whose empathetic suffering for her friend with cancer leads her to both question God and deepen her faith in God;
- Chloe (p. 154), whose struggle with the death of her cousin forms the central focus of the question of the existence, nature and role of God.
Evidence of deep thought and struggle with God issues surfaced in the writings of a number of students.

The work of most of the students whose pictures and comments appear in the 'Does God Exist?' category, reflect the thought and personal struggle of their authors. In particular, the work of George, Minh, Bobby, Simon and Maverick give evidence that these students have wrestled with questions of the existence and relevance of God.

The impact of thought about the meaning of God also appears in the work of the following students:

- Lee (p. 89) writes of the doubt and fear that God causes for her, and all the emotions that God has raised in her life.
- Leanne (p. 119) writes of the seeming complexity of God, an idea she rejects. Leanne thinks of God as something simple. She goes on to relate the things that God represents to her.
- Brad (p. 149) thinks in the opposite way from Leanne. He says that God seems simple at first glance, but at a deeper level thinking about God causes confusion and questions to arise.
- Jimmy (p. 138) finds that pondering on nature helps him to develop his ideas about God. For Jimmy, science cannot satisfactorily explain the origin of the universe.
- Stefania (p. 146) finds that the existence of war, hunger and sickness cause many belief questions to arise within her.
- Fortunato (p. 147), Jasmin (p. 152) and Chloe (p. 154) also find that the existence of suffering and death cause them to question God and re-evaluate their faith stance.

In some of these examples, the depth of reflection is profound.
In 1963 Babin first published the findings of an extensive study into the development of the idea of God among 2000 French adolescents. The name of the publication was "The Idea of God. Its evolution between the ages of 11 and 19". The core question that was asked in this study was, "What does God mean to you?"

In discussing the study, Babin made the following observations:

(a) The teams who interpreted the data made reference to the need to examine the totality of each student's reply in order to bring out the sense or meaning of a particular comment about God.
(b) The use of the word 'God' has not led to stereotyped replies about God, but to personal replies about a Being in relation with humankind.
(c) No one idea is dominant among adolescents.
(d) The replies of older adolescents sometimes reveal irony, doubt, or scepticism.
(e) Older adolescents demonstrate a need for harmony between propositional religion and the needs of the human person.

The findings of the current research are consistent with the above-mentioned observations of Babin. Each of his observations is fully supported by the data of this research.
However, a number of Babin's comments about his study's findings are challenged by the findings of this research. These relate to interpretations of gender differences, and include assertions that:

(a) The boys' replies are of a personal character, spontaneous, affective, sometimes expressed in a "charmingly unsophisticated manner". Girls, on the other hand, reply in "a banal manner", and are "content to repeat what they have been taught".

(b) Boys have a much better developed sense of the "objective moral order" than girls.

(c) Boys develop a "sense of loyalty to a leader". That is, they relate to God in a rational, consistent manner. Girls, on the other hand, are emotive and fickle. Their "notions of God are ... strongly coloured by their condition of mind".

(d) The data indicate that there are two ways of approaching God, 'God-in-himself' (the way boys think of God) and 'God-in-relation-to-us' (the way girls think of God).

These conclusions need to be challenged on two levels. Firstly, it is clear that Babin's conclusions are heavily influenced by his own sexist attitudes. His comments are not objective or impartial; they reflect his derogatory attitudes towards females. Such an unexamined prejudicial attitude seriously calls into question the validity of Babin's conclusions.

Secondly, each of the above contentions made by Babin is not corroborated by the findings of this research.

(a) The girls' comments are no more banal than those of the boys, and the boys' comments are no more personal, spontaneous and affective than those of the girls.
(b) The girls show no less moral understanding and orientation than the boys.

(c) The boys do not display any more rationality, loyalty, or consistency towards God than do the girls.

(d) Boys do not think of 'God-in-himself'. What appears at first glance to be a rational, theocentric stance becomes, on closer inspection, an affective statement of what boys expect of God or need God to be.

Babin's findings are coloured by the assumption that male experience is normative. When girls think of and relate to God in a way that differs from boys, this is seen as evidence of their inferiority, not as evidence of a different, equally valid, way of understanding the meaning of God.

**HYDE**

Hyde's book, "Religion in Childhood and Adolescence" (1990), reports on findings from Hyde's own research, as well as the research of many other scholars in the field. Below are comparisons and contrasts with a number of the points raised by Hyde.

In summarising the findings of previous research, Hyde (p. 65) made the following comments about adolescents:

(a) "A search for meaning resulted in some blaming God for the troubles in the world. . ."

(b) "Some expressed an unquestioning faith, and others, doubts."

(c) "... others thought of God as a guide for their actions."

(d) "Finally, at twelve or thirteen, anthropomorphism ended. . ."
(e) "There was eagerness to participate in and contribute to the church, now seen as a place to learn about God".

Points (a), (b) and (c) are reflected in the data of this research.

(a) A number of the respondents questioned God about the existence of suffering and evil in the world, several saying that they could not believe in a loving God who could permit such atrocities.

(b) The concepts of God contain responses that indicate an unquestioning and unreflected belief in God, and also a significant number of students who doubted the existence of God.

(c) Four girls presented the image of God as guide, and two girls spoke of God as a role model.

Hyde's final two comments, however, are directly contradicted by the findings of this research.

(d) Anthropomorphism is not ended by age thirteen. Many of the seventeen year olds in this study held anthropomorphic notions about God.

(e) Comments about the influence of church on their religious lives is noticeably lacking in the data of these students. Far from church being seen as a place to learn about God, the only comments about church were from students who expressed the opinions that church was not a necessary component of one's relationship with God; that there are other, better ways of relating to God; and that organised religion was often a drawback in developing and preserving one's relationship with God. (These comments were not presented with the rest of the data because they were not parts of the three elements being studied.)
In 1996 Tamminen contributed to a book on research in religious education. The contribution was a chapter entitled, “Gender Differences in Religiosity in Children and Adolescence.”

One of the main gender differences identified by Tamminen was in basic conceptualisation of God. It was noted that girls focussed on God as giver of security, and that boys emphasised the greatness and powerfulness of God.

In the present study, security and friendship were of significance to the girls, but not to the boys. This is in keeping with Tamminen’s finding. However, the boys in this study did not emphasise God’s greatness. This was something found more commonly among the girls. The most common orientations of the boys of this study towards God were expressed as a need for independence from God, or an expression of the ways God supplies their needs. This reflects the finding that boys tend to objectify God, and to think in egocentric terms.

Other findings of Tamminen correspond to the findings of this study.

(a) It was noted that girls evaluated God as more safe, real, near, caring and forgiving than the boys. Girls had more thoughts about God’s love, help, care and protection than the boys.

(b) Anthropomorphic expressions were evenly spread between girls and boys.

(c) Boys more than girls gave responses denying or doubting God’s existence.
OTHER RESEARCH

MASCULINE LANGUAGE

That God-language and concept are almost exclusively masculine was one of the findings of Nelson, Cheek, and Au (1985), Hyde (1990), and Foster and Keating (1992). This contrasts with the findings of Blombery (1989) and Thom (1993) who noted a number of feminine and neutral God images in their studies. Nevertheless, all of these researchers noted a strong masculine bias in God-language and conceptualisation.

This study also noted a tendency to use masculine God-language and to think of, and relate to God as male. However, there was considerable evidence of the use of other forms of language when writing about God. These included the use of feminine language, and two categories of neutral language, the use of 'he/she/it' and the use of the repeated noun.

The degree of the use of non-masculine language in this study surpassed that of the studies of both Blombery and Thom. Reasons for this are unclear.

• The higher proportion of girls among the respondents might be a contributing factor.

• Another factor could be the God-language and images of the respondents’ three teachers (all of whom were male).

• Current awareness of the androcentricity of God-language, and discussion and objection to this form of language could also be contributing factors.
A number of researchers and scholars communicated notions about God through the use of dichotomies.

McFague (1982, 1987) spoke of two different ways of imaging and relating to God, God as 'transcendent Being' and God as 'immanent Being'. Evidence of these two ways of thinking are present in the data of this study. However, there are also images and concepts that cannot be readily placed in either of these categories. Thus, some respondents wrote of God being the universe, and of God being everywhere and in everything. Other respondents envisaged God in heaven (a transcendent concept), but also related to a God who was intimately concerned about them and involved in their lives (an immanent concept). The results of this study question the adequacy of the dichotomous concepts of transcendent/immanent in categorising concepts of God, as concepts of the transcendent immanence of God are found within this study.

Gorsuch (cited in Potvin, 1977) saw God-concepts as being divided into the ideas of a 'loving' or a 'punishing' God. These categories are decidedly inadequate in dealing with the concepts of the respondents of this study. Ideas of God as loving were present in the data and were considered to be a key characteristic of God by the students, especially the girls. However, none of the respondents wrote about, or even implied, the idea of God as punishing.

Another dichotomy is found in the categories of intrinsic/extrinsic religious motivation postulated by Hunt and King
(1971), Hoge (1972), Morris and Hood (1981), and Bassett et al. (1990). These researchers found that their respondents expressed their relationship with God either as an integral part of their being that gave meaning and motivation to their lives, or as a non-essential instrument which is subordinated to self-interest.

A problem with this research is that it dichotomises the respondents' answers. There are only two categories into which responses can be placed, intrinsic and extrinsic. The results of this research, however, suggest that it is possible to have a meaningful relationship with God which is, at the same time, motivated by self-interest. For example, Lee (p. 89) drew a picture of herself as a cold, lonely, empty person being hugged by God, a warm, loving giver of security. The picture and the comments that accompany it express both the idea of God as a meaningful element of Lee's life, and the notion that the relationship is essentially one-way; God provides for Lee's needs. Lee's feelings about God are based on God's fulfillment of her needs.

The intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy is also inadequate because it fails to recognise that there are different degrees of intrinsic and extrinsic orientation. Some of the students in this study had a deeply intrinsic orientation in their relationship with God. Jasmin, for example, found that the struggle to understand the life-threatening illness of her friend, and to come to terms with human mortality, led to the strengthening of her relationship with God. Few other students related to God at that level. The degree or depth of one's basic stance towards God is at least as important as the stance itself.
A related theory is that of the concepts of committed and consensual religiousness discussed by Allen and Spilka (1967), Hammersla (1986), Blombery (1989), Bassett et al. (1990), and Rizzuto (1991). These researchers categorised their respondents as religiously committed (that is, holding functional images of God to which one is committed), or religiously consensual (that is, holding official images to which one assents).

As with the intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy, the idea of assigning all responses to one of only two distinct and mutually exclusive groups is problematic. There are responses that do not fit neatly into either category because they contain elements of both. For example, Chantelli (p. 71) drew a picture of a cross, surrounded by a rainbow of colours. Chantelli commented that, “The center focus [of the picture] is the cross - God is at the center of my life and everything revolves around it”. This comment seems to fit the religiously committed category. However, immediately after this statement, Chantelli wrote, “The cross with the slight shade of red at the top and bottom symbolize the blood shed for us - to pay for our sins & so one may have eternal life.” This sounds very much like a religiously consensual image.

The comparison of this study’s results with the results of previous research has uncovered some interesting points. Certain elements seem consistent among all the research. For example, the contention that girls relate more closely to God is agreed upon by most researchers. However, other elements, like the language used about God, and the acceptance of sexist interpretations, have changed. Much of this change is due to expanded or reviewed notions of God and of humanity.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

Several unexpected results surfaced in the data of the students. One was the variety and diversity of the images, concepts, relationships and language employed when discussing the meaning of God.

Teachers are familiar with stage development theories that postulate the idea of development through sequential stages. A concept that is associated with these theories is the notion that students of approximately the same age and the same intellectual capacity will be roughly at the same stage. In the case of religious development, the theory is that students of the same age and ability will be experiencing similar concepts and orientations towards God. The results of this study call these notions into question.

Contrary to expectations and to the findings of other research, students of age seventeen do have anthropomorphic concepts of God. Also contrary to expectations, students of age seventeen are capable of profound insight into the nature and meaning of God, and mature relationship with God. Therefore, the first suggestion for teaching is the need for teachers to become aware of the range and depth of the ideas of God present in the students.

The second suggestion for teaching follows on from the first. Within each class is a wealth of understanding about God and of
relationship with God. This constitutes a rich resource for teachers to use. One of the primary rules of teaching is "begin where the students are". Exploring with the students their notions of God and the meaning of God in their lives, and exposing students to the ideas of the other students in the class, both begins where the students are, and uses the wealth of knowledge they possess.

The respondents of this study showed a considerable degree of self-awareness, and an ability and willingness to analyse themselves and their beliefs. There was an honesty about their endeavours. Many students of this age give the appearance of disliking religious education classes and of thinking of them as irrelevant. The results of this study suggest the old adage, "Appearances can be deceptive". Students are interested in God-issues as long as what is explored is of relevance to their lives.

Research into God-concepts can leave one with the impression that it is the concept of God a student holds that is important. Rizzuto (1991) and others, however, have expressed the opinion that it is the meaning of the concept for the life of the individual that is of primary importance. The results of this study strongly support this notion. The implication for teaching is that it is of great importance for teachers to help their students find the meaning of God in their lives, and to translate notions of God into meaningful, relevant ideas.

The final suggestion for teaching has been mentioned by other researchers, and, given the results of this study, is strongly advocated by this researcher. MacQuarrie (1967) expressed it well when he wrote, "What must be done is to have a variety of images, each correcting and supplementing the others" (p. 228).
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The methods used in this study proved to be very useful in obtaining adequate, relevant, and personally meaningful data. However, this particular arrangement of methods (that is, meditation, followed by drawing, followed by writing) seems not to have been used before. Therefore, in one sense, the data are unique.

This study focussed on only one year level, at one Catholic high school, in the metropolitan area of Perth. Feedback from teachers indicates that it would be beneficial for them to know the results if the following studies were to be done:
(a) A comparison of the God-concepts, relationships and language of a range of Catholic schools.
(b) The God-concepts, relationships and language of other year levels, to determine the development of these elements.
(c) The God-concepts, relationships and language of students in non-Catholic independent schools, to determine the similarities and differences between Catholic and non-Catholic independent schools.
(d) The God-concepts, relationships and language of Catholic, other independent, and state schools to determine similarities and differences among the different schools and to determine the implications of the differences.

Other research could also be done on determining the interrelationships between the concepts, relationship and language about God that a particular individual holds.

These five suggestions for further research would be the most directly relevant and useful studies to pursue.
CONCLUSION

The meaning of God in one’s life is the core of one’s spirituality and the concern of religious education.

One of the key issues in religious education according to Thom (1993) is “to teach about God is such a way as to enable individuals to relate to a personal deity in accordance with each person’s dignity and uniqueness” (p. 35). As this study demonstrates, the meaning of God is unique for each person. For teachers to effectively communicate about God, therefore, it is necessary for them to know something of the meaning of God in the lives of their students. “Only by establishing where people are can one hope to communicate with them. By coming to terms with their present thinking one can challenge and extend them into new ideas and realisations” (Blombery, 1989, p. 85).

Religious education is about enabling our students to know and experience the world of religion. It involves developing the spiritual faculties of each student. It leads to making meaning of human existence, a meaning that includes the spiritual realm. If we do this well, perhaps one day one of our students will also be able to say, “I feel that God has always been a natural part of human life” (Leanne, a respondent, p. 120).
LIST OF REFERENCES


Dublin: Veritas.


