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September 1998
WHO IS GOD FOR US?

IMAGES OF GOD

IN A GROUP OF ROMAN CATHOLIC LAY WOMEN

IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Mary Agnes Ann Betz

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at the University of Otago, Dunedin,

New Zealand

28 November 2003
ABSTRACT

God imagery not only expresses who God is, but shapes understandings of God, self, and others. Traditional God language, which is mostly male and often has connotations of controlling power, may not be conducive to psychological or spiritual well-being, and may not be the way most contemporary women understand God.

The present study identified the God images of eleven New Zealand Catholic lay women (all in middle adulthood), and documented the people and events which formed or changed their God images at various stages of their lives. The study also probed the gender and power attributes of the women’s images, compared their images with traditional and alternative images found in the theological literature, and explored links between women’s God images and their self images, understandings of suffering, and experiences of church.

Study methods (informal but in depth dialogue interviewing, participant verification of transcripts and life/faith stories, emphasis on individual difference as well as similarity) were drawn from the social sciences. The methodology for this study in women’s spirituality was anchored in theoretical feminist theological methodology, which aims for research which is emancipatory, rooted in women’s experience, subjective and participatory, interdisciplinary and concerned with seeking truth.

Childhood images such as God as friend, authoritarian, loving, remote, etc. were found primarily to have been ‘caught’ from the traits of parents or other significant adults, and secondarily to have been ‘taught’ by parents, church, school, books and art. The positive and negative God images ‘caught’ from people were the ones that lasted into adulthood.

Over the women’s lifetimes there was a clear trend toward positive God imagery. By middle adulthood most women’s God images were well developed in depth, often integrated and rich in variety. Four women had always had positive images of God like loving, caring, friend. The other seven women had all had at least some negative images of God as children, but by middle adulthood only one retained a partially negative image of God as judge/parent, and three others had traces of controlling attributes in their God images. A few of these women’s many positive images are birthgiver, painter of sunsets, unfolding, empowering, the sea, light, mystery, storm, acceptance, justice, love, eternal giver, and creator of opportunity. The most common God images in the group as a whole were clusters of images related to nature, love, liberator/power, friend, presence, healer/helper, creator, suffering, compassion and indwelling.
Women who had more involvements with groups, friends, mentors and courses showed more breadth in their God imagery. Women who had experienced acceptance and empowerment from others had better self images, were more likely to image God in a gender balanced or feminine way, more likely to have empowering images, and less likely to have male, controlling or parental God images. All women understood the church as in some way interfering with their relationship with God, and most of the women longed for a church which reflected their images of God as gender inclusive, accepting and freeing.
As with any major work, many people have had varying roles in its accomplishment, and deserve mention and thanks. Peter Matheson was the first to encourage me to undertake doctoral study. Barbara Nicholas and Kevin Toomey listened to the first articulations of my ideas. Nan Burgess helped me in the early stages to narrow the scope of my study from a general desire to explore women’s spirituality to a focus on women’s understandings of God. Sandra Schneiders encouraged me to focus the study on lay women. Graham Webb and Jackie Leckie advised on various aspects of methodology.

The University of Otago supported me with a scholarship, and its Department of the Theology supplemented this with grants for various expenses. From the beginning Paul Trebilco has been ever supportive as post-graduate advisor and then department head. Madelaine Sim was always ready with help, whether arranging library use or photocopying. Library staff, especially Barbara at Knox College, lent help combing data bases, and Frances Muhlrennan retrieved information from the Dunedin Catholic library. Merrin, Lynn, Gillian and the remote services library staff at Otago were terrific in ferreting out obscure periodicals. Tony Davies lent support and recording equipment. Jacqui Ryan, Sr Hilary and ‘Rose’ hosted me when I was interviewing away from home. Elisabeth Mackie gave me valuable socio-religious background on the decades during which my study participants grew up.

Maura Toomey was my pilot study tester for the first draft of the interview questions, and giver of much hospitality along the way. She along with many friends, especially the Marys (Nash and Eastham), Donna Peterson, Mary Clare, the Peters (Paardekooper and Hassan), and the Dominicans (especially Susie Logan, Gemma Findlay and Jan Ogilvy), have been constant supports, reminding me about the importance to persevere in the work, and the importance of the work itself.

There was background support and inspiration from many - the ecumenical women’s group and Catholic women’s liturgy group in Dunedin, Sophia in Palmerston North, the parishes in both cities, the Catholic women’s group from St Ben’s and CIT staff in Auckland. The Women’s Programme in Dunedin kindly funded a portion of my expenses. The Tertiary Chaplaincy Board and Diocese of Palmerston North gave me study leave toward the completion of my thesis, as did the Diocese of Auckland. Chaplaincy students (especially Aileen Tan) and friends in Palmerston North alternately did and did not refrain from mentioning the “T” word in my presence.
At a place of occasional respite for writing near my favourite beach, I was sustained by the bemused staff who received messages from the outside world, as well as by the tuis, wood pigeons, bellbirds, and moreporks who serenaded by day and night. My father Bill’s house in Chicago and a friend’s caravan on yet another beach also were places to write whose owners gave personal support and encouragement. In the background too, were the first learnings about theology instilled by my late mother Betty, and vigorous discussions with my daughters Brigid and Kerry, about who God is and what church should be. In the last few years of this journey, and especially the final months of writing, it has been Peter who has supported me with his presence and unwavering care.

Judith McKinlay and Lydia Johnson lent academic and moral support – including wonderful encouragement - to the latter stages of my writing and revisions. Tony Russell, from nearly the beginning of the project, was a long-suffering supervisor, and Stuart Sellar (who had directed my initial methodology planning) helped guide me to the finish with intuition, expertise and empathy.

Most of all, however, it has been the twelve women who spent hours speaking with me, answered my questions, checked transcripts, and shared their life and faith stories with me who are at the heart of this work. More than making themselves and their stories available for this work, they and their stories have sustained me in times of doubt and despair, not only on an intellectual level or even at the level of institutional church, but on a very personal level in their life experiences and reflections on them. For their trust, faithfulness, hospitality and companionship on this journey, I am very thankful.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study Background

It was first and foremost the researcher's own background and experience which led to an interest in exploring God images. Involvement with liturgy, music, and small faith sharing groups in a number of parishes over two decades had caused the researcher to notice that while some Catholics were open and excited about new God images, the conceptions of God held by others were often confined to those heard in catechism or worship, and did not appear to be particularly open to change.

This observation is illustrated by a small parish's reaction to two events. The first, in 1989-1990, was the preparation and publication of a report\(^1\) on sexism in the Catholic church in New Zealand. Christine Cheyne had sought opinion from around the country on all aspects of church, including structures and practices, which respondents felt to be sexist. Some parish women became alarmed at the perceived issues and implications for their faith, values and lifestyles which the discussion of inclusive language and other issues in the project were raising for them. What would it mean for God to be spoken of as other than male? Might authority and responsibility within the family be changed? As a result of their fears, the local branch of the Catholic Women's League\(^2\) (along with a number of other branches throughout the country\(^3\)) petitioned the national body to withdraw its support for the project.

The second event occurred a few years later, in 1993-1994, when the same parish began a review of the language in the hymns used for Sunday worship. This revision included the introduction of a new hymn with one reference (among many diverse images) to God as mother. Angry backlash from both men and women included:

---


\(^2\) The Catholic Women's League, whose New Zealand chapter began in 1931, is the largest national Catholic women's organisation. Membership peaked in the 1950s at 12,000, but by 1992 the membership was approximately 5000 women, most of whom were middle aged and older, whose lives centred around family and church. See Gillian Puch, "The Catholic Women's League of New Zealand and the Changing Role of Women: A Sociological Analysis with the Emphasis on the CWL Parish Group." M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1978.

"I heard that 'mother' and I didn't like it one bit."

"Mother really referred to 'Mary', didn't it?"

"It is an abomination, an insult to God, to call him a woman."

The unspoken fears in these reactions may have involved the following: a reluctance or fear to consider God in a different way than the way in which one has always believed; a lack of authority for an unfamiliar image; a reluctance or inability to transfer the mother metaphor from Mary to God; or an attitude toward women of disdain, superiority or hostility which made it impossible to use any images for God which might imply feminine characteristics.

The parish council subsequently received a number of letters on the issue of God language and published a reply which explained the purpose of inclusive language and attempted to reassure parishioners that alternative ways of imaging God did not threaten the doctrine of the Trinity. The explanation did not satisfy some parishioners, who demanded to see a papal or episcopal statement on the subject (raising the issues of authority and the hierarchical nature of the church), and who would never have pondered the nature of metaphorical language, especially with regard to God. The latter point was illustrated by one parishioner’s protest: “God is not just like my father, God is my father” (vocal emphasis).

Many authors have noted how the emotional temperature rises when God language is changed. The language used in speech about God is more important than many people acknowledge: it is a channel to the heart of being for a Christian. It expresses deeply felt beliefs about the one whom Christians regard as architect of (and/or the inspiration for) the framework for social as well as religious behaviour. Rosemary Ruether notes that “God-language is always heavy-laden language. To speak of God is our ultimate sanction for what is right and good.” Clifford Geertz says we depend “so deeply on our [religious] constructions for our most basic sense of sanity that any threat to them is a threat to our very being.” Margaret Schrader writes that “our view of God affects everything we do and say,” and she quotes Elizabeth Johnson: “The symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of

---

4 Metaphorical language as related to images of God is discussed further in section 1.4.1.


the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world."^8

Thus if God were to be different tomorrow than God is today, then the way the world is perceived and the way human beings relate in it might drastically change. As theologian Sallie McFague explains, "the current resistance to inclusive or unbiased language ... indicates that people know instinctively that a revolution in language means a revolution in one's world."^9 People may not articulate this spontaneously, but their reactions suggest (as Ruether, Geertz and McFague surmise) that they know intuitively and definitely that a change in language implies a change in image or understanding, which in turn demands a different way of looking at and being in the world.

The above-mentioned incidents illustrate the feeling and belief of a considerable number of people, both women and men, that God is eternally and unchangeably the almighty God and father they have always known 'him' to be in worship and in doctrine. But there are people who welcome the opening up of God images: some have long been exploring alternative images in their own prayer or in community with others. Many seek out both networks of others throughout Aotearoa and writings of feminist theologians from countries overseas, in order to nourish their spirits in a way that their local churches sometimes do not. Noting the differences in the degree of openness to new or different God images led the researcher to wonder how people form God images initially, and both how and why those images change (or do not change) over time.

1.2 Aims of the Research

The researcher's denominational background, interest in women's spirituality, and geographical location led to a decision to focus on the God images of contemporary Roman Catholic women in Aotearoa New Zealand. Further delimitation of the study group to lay women came at the urging of Sandra Schneiders, who wrote that although a number of studies have been done on the spirituality of women religious,^10 little had been done in the

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^10 'Religious' in this context means consecrated or vowed. Canon law divides the people of the church according to function whereby 'clergy' are ordained bishops, priests and deacons; 'religious' are those who are consecrated to live by a canonically approved rule; and 'laity' includes everyone else. (Sandra M. Schneiders, "Religious in a Lay-Centered Church." Dunedin seminar, January 1992.)
area of lay women, and "we need research in this area." A further challenge comes from Joseph Ciarrocchi, who encouraged theologians to enter a closer dialogue with social sciences on important questions related to God images, for example, discovering the personal experiences contributing to God images and whether the experiences and images function for good or ill. Thus, the thesis title became *Who is God for Us? Images of God in a Group of Roman Catholic Lay Women in Aotearoa New Zealand.*

Myriads of questions could be asked, but the following are the ones which this research has explored:

1) What are the God images of some New Zealand Catholic lay women, and what have they been at different stages of their lives?

2) How were the women's God images formed, and if they have changed over time, what caused them to change? Do life experiences (including people and events) affect women's images of God?

3) How do women understand language about God, including the gender and power attributes embedded in it?

4) How do the God images of this group of New Zealand Catholic women compare with traditional images and with those of other groups studied?

5) Are there links between women's images of God and their self images, understandings of suffering, and experiences of church?

To gather meaningful descriptions of women's experience and imagery, this study is mostly qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and, more particularly, follows a feminist theological methodology. Because the methodology developed for this study is in itself experimental, additional questions addressed in the thesis are:

6) What methodology is appropriate for studying an aspect of spirituality such as women's God images, and what should its aims be?

7) Were the methodological aims of the study realised?

As will be seen in sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.3, the study involved interviewing eleven women in considerable depth. Its results are thus not generalisable to all Roman Catholic women in New Zealand or elsewhere. The study intends, rather, to document God images and the experiential context of their formation and change over

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11 Sandra M. Schneiders, Personal communication, January 1993.

the course of each woman's life. The study will also highlight implications of God
image change for the women themselves and for the church.

1.3 Chapter Progression of the Thesis

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the origins of the research, the questions the research
aims to answer, the organisation of the thesis itself, and the definition of terms - especially
those which help define the scope of thesis.

Chapter 2 summarises recent literature on the nature of God language and images
from a theological perspective. It reviews in more detail the results of contemporary
research on God images in the social sciences, mostly psychology and sociology.

Chapter 3 addresses question 6 (previous page) and establishes the need for mostly
qualitative methodology for the present research. It situates the subject of study within the
theological discipline of spirituality, and the overall methodology under the umbrella of
feminist theological methodology. It draws its specific methods from the social sciences, and
sets the context of the study.

Chapters 4-7 address question 1, and present the stories of the eleven women who
participated in this research. Each woman's story is preceded by basic biographical
information, and is told through a series of life stages. At the heart of the telling of each
story is the woman's faith journey, her images of God, and the people and life events which
were most important to her. Woven into the stories is the researcher's interpretive tracing of
the life experiences which have shaped the evolution of each woman's God images
throughout her life.

Chapters 8 and 9 address questions 1-5. Chapter 8 explores the patterns of change,
and origins and reasons for any changes in God images, using the women's life stories and
answers to specific interview questions. Chapter 9 looks at gender and power connotations
in God language; pursues possible links between women's God images and their self images,
understandings of suffering, life experiences and involvements with Church; and evaluates
the research methodology.

Chapter 10 summarises major research findings, addressing each of the aims in 1.2. It
also draws implications from the research and suggests directions for future studies.

13 This research does not address itself to other possible factors such as inborn or acquired personality traits,
temperaments or dispositions, nor does it attend to stages of faith development.
1.4 Defining Some Terminology

1.4.1 Images and Other Ways of Speaking about God

Given that the main thread of inquiry in this research is focussed on the ways in which God is understood, it is important to explore what is connoted by “images” of God. Judaism and Christianity have always understood God to be beyond human attempts at comprehension or even imagination. Augustine argued that if we think we have understood God, then what we have understood is not God.14

Paradoxically, the human knowing of God has to be in terms of what is already known. As pastoral theologian Joann Wolski Conn notes, “The importance of symbolism for spirituality cannot be over-estimated. The experience of grace cannot be accurately recognised or correctly interpreted without the help of symbols derived from the world of ordinary experience.”15 Mystics of all religious traditions, according to Sallie McFague, are especially conscious of the dissimilarity between human ideas of God and divine reality. Yet those same mystics are the freest and most imaginative in using images to speak about God.16 To hold the holy in a totally transcendent sense is to be virtually unable to talk about the human experience of God, which is mediated by historical, social, political, religious, and psychological contexts. Images of God are born of culture, tradition, experience, and imagination.

The term images as well as the words symbol, metaphor, analogy and others are used often by theologians in connection with God. Sometimes they are used almost interchangeably, and sometimes they are carefully defined. Theologians seem to understand their choices of terms on ‘their own terms’, which makes comparison and distinctions difficult. At great risk of generalising, there appear to be two main schools of understanding God-language. The first group of theologians lean toward an understanding that God is basically unlike humanity, and that only a metaphorical language that is based primarily on difference can begin to speak of God. This view is heard from a variety of denominational backgrounds, but tends to be articulated most clearly by Protestants. The second group


understands a fundamental connection between God and humanity, and maintains that analogical language, which rests on that connection, can be used about God so long as there is an ever-present dialectic in that language.

1.4.2 Metaphorical Language

Sallie McFague, a primary proponent of the first view, understands all language about God to be on a continuum from primary - or metaphorical - language through a midpoint of ‘models’ to secondary - or conceptual - language. She would see metaphors, images and parables as primary language which is a means of “spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects ... using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.” A metaphor is “a word or phrase used inappropriately. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another: the arm of a chair ... God the father.” McFague says the parables of Jesus (householders, vineyards, kingdoms) rest on metaphor, and metaphors make use of a world full of images. Images of God abound in the scriptures and in tradition, models less so: “Models are dominant metaphors with comprehensive, or organizational potential.” Models of God are “likely accounts of experiences of relating to God with the help of relationships we know and understand.” Concepts or theories are abstract ideas or thoughts derived from metaphors or models. McFague cites Paul Ricoeur, who understands St Paul’s notion of justification by faith as a move toward conceptualising Jesus’ root metaphor of the kingdom of God. The concept is sometimes not easily traced back to the metaphor because it loses concreteness in the translation.

Sallie McFague speaks about analogy in connection with symbol: analogy.

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16 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 2.

17 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 15.


19 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 39.

stresses the glory of difference. Beneath the distinctions, however, everything is connected and this is the reason why everything in such a universe can be a symbol of everything else and, most especially of God ... The analogical way, the symbolic way, rests on a profound similarity beneath the surface dissimilarities ...

McFague sees more harmony in analogy, speaking of symbolic statements as "sedimentation and solidification of metaphor," and concludes that "the tension of the metaphor is absorbed by the harmony of symbol." 22

An example of such ‘sedimentation’ is offered by Ruth Duck, who argues that to use such terms as ‘Father’ for God as analogy is to lose the tension of the metaphor, for it is more important to stress the tension of likeness and unlikeness than to stress partial likeness. Duck claims that the language of worship is metaphorical, and that “the very use of the term ‘God’ signals metaphorical use of language.” 24

Katherine Zappone has a similar understanding of metaphor, but sees a difference between the metaphor/image, which she understands as more startling because it compares unlike things, and the symbol which more directly relates to what it stands for. She suggests that a “reason why few authors distinguish symbol and image is because they share certain characteristics. Images, like symbols, often arise from the unconscious, impact our behavior, and function in different ways for different people.” 25 She understands images as shaping the meaning of symbols, and believes that “Both the choice for and use of metaphoric imagery interrupt the power of past symbolic imagery of the Sacred and invite a new form of presence.” 26 Although Zappone does not use the word analogy, her understanding of symbol, like most other theologians, is related to analogy. 27

21 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 27.
22 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 12.
23 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 16.
26 Katherine Zappone, A Hope for Wholeness, 108.
27 An exception is Ruth Duck, who understands symbol not as analogical language, even a conceptual form of analogy, but as akin to metaphor because, as in Tillich, “it points to something beyond itself.” See Duck, Gender and the Name of God, 12.
Betty Duncan understands metaphor as based on analogy, but while metaphor relates two dissimilar things, analogy makes a connection between two similar things.\textsuperscript{28} The first part of her definition varies from the dictionary definition, which defines metaphor as “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them."\textsuperscript{29} In this definition, analogy employs metaphor, rather than as Duncan understands it, but both she and the dictionary agree on the attributions of dissimilarity to metaphor and similarity to analogy.

1.4.3 Coalescence of Metaphorical and Analogical Language

Gail Ramshaw notes Aquinas’ understanding of analogy as “trying to say what we mean ... Words like ‘good’ and ‘wise’ when used of God do signify something God really is ...” Her interpretation, however, turns back toward metaphor when she asserts, “Always in analogy what is unlike is more than what is like.”\textsuperscript{30} Ramshaw understands the potential for God language to be both metaphorical and analogical. The use of images like ‘rock’ for God would always be metaphorical, while relational images might be either metaphorical or analogical depending on whether one wants to startle and invite new insights (metaphor) or open ourselves to “awed doxology” and mystery (analogy).\textsuperscript{31}

Rita Gross likewise seems to run together the two terms, imparting both of them with similarity and dissimilarity: “All the words used in the religious enterprise are, in the long run, analogous and metaphorical. Every statement contains a bracketed ‘as if’ ... Statements about God cannot be taken literally.”\textsuperscript{32}

The coalescing of definitions of metaphor and analogy lead to the thought of a major proponent of God language as analogical language. David Tracy’s understanding of analogy is of a language which articulates similarity in difference. Tracy argues that negation is always needed for analogy and, further, that analogy is the only way to understand others -


\textsuperscript{30} Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, “De Divinis Nominibus,” 121-122.

in which he would include God. Analogy is always tensive and dialectical, despite its roots in relatedness and proportionality.

Tracy and other Catholic theologians, as well as a number of Protestant theologians, base their understanding of analogy on Aquinas’ analogy of being. Aquinas justifies use of analogical language for God on the understanding that human beings participate proportionately in God who is source of all being; that is, that there is proportion between the created intellect and understanding God, a proportion ... of a relation of one thing to another ... there is no reason against there being in the creature a proportion to God, consisting in the relation of the one understanding to the thing understood. (Summa contra Gentiles LIV, 6)

Analogical language about God, while based in this connection and relation between God and humans, moves through what Elizabeth Johnson describes as the “threefold motion of affirmation, negation and eminence.” Following Aquinas and in agreement with Tracy, Johnson finds that analogical language contains both similarity and the negation of similarity: it therefore includes symbols - either non-personal, e.g. ground of being, or relational images - and metaphors - which tend to be relational images. The intent is to evoke the mystery of God, using images that mediate that mystery.

The importance of negation was lost for a time in Catholic theology, but is affirmed by contemporary theologians and church teaching as critical to the working of analogy.

32 Rita Gross, “Female God Language,” 169.
34 Anton C. Pegis, Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. V.2. (New York: Random House, 1945), 98.
35 Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is, 113.
36 Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is, 45-46, 116.
38 “Consequently, analogical thought requires a complementary kind of language about God, the language of dialectical statements.” This summary is from Leo Scheffczyk, “GOD: The Divine,” in Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi. Karl Rahner, ed. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 564. Rosemary Ruether notes that within the meaning of analogy, “the tradition of apophatic theology emphasizes the unlikeness between God and human words for God.” See Rosemary Ruether, Sexism and God-talk, 67. Gregory Baum reminds readers of the via negativa of the mystics, which discovered that “since God was infinite, every word that referred to the divine was therefore more untrue than true. God language first had to be negated.” See Gregory Baum, Compassion and Solidarity, 77. The Catechism states, quoting the Lateran Council (even before Aquinas), that...
Analogy occurs when a term is applied to “different domains of reality, under[going] an essential change of meaning ... [in which] similarity and dissimilarity in the things referred to, combine in the logical unity of a signification.”39 The extent to which this understanding of analogy is also applied to metaphor is illustrated by the observations of pastoral theologian Daniel Louw, who writes: “Metaphorical speech is indicated by the derivation of the word from the Greek *metaphorein*, to transfer. ‘There is a transfer of meaning.’ ... [other authors] define a metaphor as the mapping of two concepts belonging to different knowledge domains.”40 The idea of transfer of meaning and the comparison of things or ideas in two different domains of reality or knowledge is present in the understandings of both metaphor and analogy.

1.4.4 Symbols and Images

Bernard Cooke uses symbols and metaphors in the same breath:

All symbols ... can be classified as signs. Signs are that kind of reality which, in being themselves known, lead us to know about something beyond themselves ... In this area of symbol, one can describe but never define; we use metaphors and ... various artistic forms as we attempt to share with one another what cannot be put into words.41

While signs point toward a reality, symbol is a traditionally Catholic understanding of something more, based on analogy. Just as analogy assumes connection, proportion and relation between two different realities, a symbol participates in, as well as signifies, the reality it represents. Richard McBrien quotes Langdon Gilkey in the course of his explanation of symbol: “‘There is in Catholicism’s ‘continuing experience ... the presence of God and of grace mediated through symbols to the entire course of ordinary human life.’ For Gilkey, a symbol points to and communicates the reality of God which lies beyond it.”42

A sacramental understanding of the world is based on sign and symbol, the interconnection between the mystery of God and what we experience through our senses which reveals the sacred. As two Catholic New Zealand authors explain, in Catholicism,
“one learns at a very early age to read the world sacramentally and hence symbolically,” and “I discovered something that outsiders called ‘Catholic superstition’ and Catholics call ‘mystery’.

Dorothy Sölle makes clear that “all talk about God is symbolic talk.” She links the notion of image and symbol by speaking about “the desire for another way of imaging God, other symbols ...”

Raimon Panikkar reminds readers that discourse about God is “discourse about a symbol, not about a concept,” because God needs to be experienced, rather than considered an ‘object’ of knowledge.

Neil Darragh’s definitions of symbol and image are relevant here, though he acknowledges that other authors use the terms differently. Although both image and symbol indicate or reveal something beyond themselves, the distinguishing factor for Darragh is the immediacy or directness of their relationship to our human senses. A symbol ... operates at the most direct sensory level ... An image is a much more complex yet still unified interpretation of the world which nevertheless indicates or reveals something beyond itself. Thus such complex interpretations as shepherd, mother, communion, Jesus, healer, ground of our being, etc. may operate as images of the divine ...

John Shea says that “imaging is not just something that we do; it is at the heart of who we are ... it is through imaging that the self relates to God ...” Langdon Gilkey, in speaking of nature as an image of God, says that “image is taken to mean a sign, symbol, or sacrament of the divine ... By image, then, I will mean that nature manifests or reveals certain unmistakable signs of the divine, namely power, life, order, and redemptive unity

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Another way of speaking of God is to ask 'Where do we meet God?' a question which evokes images.\textsuperscript{50} In \textit{Picturing God}, Ann Belford Ulanov writes,

Picturing God must precede any speaking about God, for our pictures accompany all our words and they continue long after we fall silent before God. Images - the language of the psyche - are the coin of life: they touch our emotions as well as our thoughts; they reach down into our bodies as well as toward our ideas.\textsuperscript{51}

Images are flashes of imagination, word-pictures which attempt to describe an experience or a connection surfaced from the unconscious mind. Images, depending on the user's orientation to the world and/or deliberate linguistic construction, can be used as metaphor or analogy. Images may be evoked by symbols such as pictures or words - using Neil Darragh's sensory definition - and in turn may become important symbols themselves - in a slightly broader definition like that of Bernard Cooke. Images, expressed as either metaphor or analogy, are - following Sallie McFague - of a primary order of language as opposed to a conceptual language. Images operate experientially, and where God is concerned, at the level of spirituality - rather than at the level of theological concepts, which are more systematised and less spontaneous or profuse. Images of God can be understood as windows into the spirituality of the human person.

1.4.5 Terminology in the Social Sciences

As well as the many terms which theologians use as categories of language about God, the social sciences have their own terminology. While sociologists use the term images, psychologists commonly speak of concepts, conceptions, and representations.

Psychoanalytic studies using object relations use the term \textit{image}, but mean by it no single picture, but rather an individual's relationship to a "conscious and unconscious constellation of values, impressions, memories and images."\textsuperscript{52} Because object relations


theory understands every person or thing in an individual's life as an object representation, individual's images of God are known as their God representations.

Other psychological studies use the terms God-concept, concept of God, or conceptions, and the terms usually refer to the conscious way in which a particular culture or society understands God. In the studies themselves, however, concepts appear to be similar to the 'images' (father, healer, helper, and so on) of the theological literature as opposed to the more abstract theological understanding of 'concept'.

1.4.6 Defining Terms in the Thesis Title

'Images' in this thesis will refer to any verbal or non-verbal images, symbols, analogies, metaphors, models, concepts, representations or constructs used to describe God. Images, as described above, are inclusive of the word-pictures and flashes of imagination that spring from both metaphorically and analogically oriented persons. Images will also encompass what the social sciences refer to as concepts and representations. Other relevant words that may indicate that God images are being spoken about include understandings, perceptions, names, titles, attributes, values, impressions, memories, ideas, beliefs, traits, associations and pictures.

The use of 'God' in this thesis refers to the Judeo-Christian God, and more specifically to the God of Christianity. Even the word 'God' is a symbol for the incomprehensible divine, the sacred, the ultimate reality. 'God' in this thesis is used as a common and relatively content-free way of speaking about the divine.

The descriptor 'Roman Catholic' indicates that the participants in this study were all active Catholics (members of parishes and often other Catholic organisations) at the start of the study. Three of the participants had been received into the church at some point in their lives: the others had all been baptised Catholic as infants. At the close of the study, one participant, though understanding herself to be Catholic, or from the Catholic tradition, had ceased a formal association with the church as an institution.

55 For 'God' as symbol, see Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is, 4, 40-44. See also Katherine Zappone, The Hope for Wholeness, 93-99.
'Lay' in this study means that the women involved in the study did not belong to a religious congregation of sisters or nuns. All of the eleven participants were or had been married.

'Aotearoa' is the common Maori word for New Zealand. Whether the two names are used separately or together, they all refer to this same island country in the South Pacific.

Before approaching a study of contemporary Catholic women's God images, it is important to know the God images by which the women have been formed. It is also essential to know what recent literature and research have already discovered about God image formation and change. To these tasks we turn in Chapter 2.

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56 See footnote 10. In Canon law, lay Catholics are those who are neither clergy or religious. (Sandra M. Schneiders, "Religious in a Lay-Centered Church." Dunedin seminar, January 1992.)
CHAPTER 2
GOD IMAGES IN RECENT WRITING AND RESEARCH

In order to discover ‘Who is God for us?’ at this point in time, it is necessary to be familiar with the God language contemporary women grew up with, and how traditional images functioned in shaping them. ‘Alternative’ God images are widespread in the literature and - it is suspected - also in life, despite the controversy which sometimes surrounds them. Both kinds of images will be explored in Section 2.1.

With a view toward understanding how women’s images form and change, recent empirical research will be reviewed, including factors involved in both the formation of God images, and the influences that God images have on persons and society (2.2).

2.1 God Language and Images in Theology and Spirituality

2.1.1 Traditional God Language

The God language officially used by Catholics today, for example, in the prayers for Eucharist in the Sunday Missal,87 professes belief in a Trinitarian God, but a God who is powerful, male, and a parent/child/spirit trinity. God is also more abstractly truth, life, love, mercy, goodness, and so on, but the titles used most often are Lord and Father, and the pronouns used are exclusively male, leaving the distinct impression of a powerful male God.88

57 The Sunday Missal. (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1987).
58 The predominant use of Lord and Father is also noted by other New Zealanders, such as Catholic theologian Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 18, and Presbyterian Margaret Schrader, “Women’s Spirituality,” in Women and Church Shaping the Future: 4th National Feminist Theology Conference. (Auckland: Women in Ministry, 1994): 23.
59 In the Missal prayers (see footnote 57) for a typical Sunday Eucharist, God may be referred to approximately 230 times (excluding second person parts of speech) of which approximately 105 references use male nouns, pronouns or adjectives. No female parts of speech are used. Of the approximately 200 times in which nouns and adjectives are used for God, in approximately sixty cases the words have obvious power connotations (for example: Lord, King, almighty, judge). While ‘Lord’ is used approximately forty-five times, ‘God’ is used only approximately twenty-two times. More than twenty-five relatively gender and power neutral titles and ascriptions are used (holy one, giver of life, and so on), but only approximately one to five times each.
While Christianity inherited from the scriptures a vast storehouse of God images, including feminine and gender-neutral images, early and medieval theologians focused more on defining the Trinitarian God against heresy with the assistance of Greek philosophy. Augustine contributed the understanding that God was sufficient in Godself. Aquinas, for whom even the structure of the Summa conceives of God first in terms of God’s inner life and then in terms of God’s relationship to creation, built on that understanding. The effect of this speculative theology was to understand God as a self-sufficient divinity removed from humanity.

The tradition called classical theism came to posit a transcendent God who was akin to an earthly - but absentee - absolute monarch, benevolent but with judgement and dominion over all creatures. Triumphalist imperialist metaphors entered the theological and liturgical language of the church after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, and any remaining traces of the use of feminine symbolism for God like Sophia and mother also disappeared in the condemnation of Gnostics, Montanists and other heterodox groups. God came to be known as a “remote, other-worldly, ‘supreme Being’” whose central attributes are, in the summary of Gerard Hughes, existence, simplicity, omniscience, omnipotence and goodness; or “infinite, self-existent, incorporeal, eternal, immutable,

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65 Ruth Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 74.


impassable, simple, perfect, omniscient and omnipotent," in the list of H. P. Owen. Edward Sillen records the traditional teaching on God from Lateran IV: "one, true, eternal, incommensurable and unchangeable, incomprehensible, omnipotent and ineffable God." It is no wonder, then, that contemporary commentators on God image offer reflections such as, "somewhere in the background a whiskery old man in a night-gown lurked, 'He-who-must-be-obeyed.'" In speaking about God as an "old man," Gustav Aulen comments wryly that "with such imagery, there is good reason to regret that the Old Testament prohibition of images [graven] has not been respected by the Christian Church."

If classical theism presents a God who is self-sufficient, all-powerful, immovable, unchangeable and imperturbable, and so on, it has also carried the understanding of that God as a male God. Although theological tradition has maintained that God has no sex, church prayer (note 59), catechism and the popular imagination (above quote) all assign God to the male sex.

Mary Collins and Frank Henderson both note that the post-Vatican Council II Catholic English-language liturgies became even more masculine than previously. Classic Roman invocations such as 'almighty and eternal God' were replaced in places by 'father', perhaps out of a desire for a more relational God on the part of the translators.

Sociologist David Nicholls has found that, over centuries, "concepts and images used of God have been closely associated with images and concepts of political authority, which

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71 Gustav Aulen, The Drama and the Symbols: A Book on Images of God and the Problems They Raise. (London: SPCK, 1970), 97. Christian art was, of course, inspired by the language used about God, but the art then further fed communal thought imagery, which lead to ever-growing and deeply imbedded imagery in individuals.

72 Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 56 and following.


74 Mary Collins, "Naming God in Public Prayer." Worship. 59 (1985): 301 and J. Frank Henderson in Ruth Duck, Gender and the Name of God, 79. Henderson’s study on the use of ‘father’ in Christian worship found that English translations of collects in editions of the 1570 Roman missal prior to the twentieth century address God as pater only four times. The Latin edition of the 1970 missal still only addresses god as pater in twenty-two of 1500 collects. But when the missal was translated into English by ICEL, 555 collects addressed God as father. Henderson suggests that a desire for euphony and the lessening of the distance between God and humanity may have contributed to the increasing use of ‘father’. 
in turn have been related to institutional [both church and state] developments."\textsuperscript{75} He demonstrates how images of God are related to the ideas of state, whether king, warrior (ancient Palestine), perfection, self-sufficiency (ancient Greece), hierarchy, order (Middle Ages), sovereignty, authority (Renaissance), or unlimited power, paternalism, and benevolence (late 19\textsuperscript{th} through 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries). Noting these later trends, the recent use of father might well be understood as a sociological phenomenon.

Edward Edinger, following theories of Jung, also understands God image development as a cultural process, but adds that it is an evolutionary process with biological underpinnings: "The history of Western man [sic] can be viewed as a history of its God-images, the primary formulations of how mankind [sic] orients itself to the basic questions of life, its mysteries."\textsuperscript{76}

The official God language of liturgy and doctrine in the Catholic church is thus a language of classical theism, a mixture of images culled from religious and probably wider social and psychological history, in which God is removed from creation, but also Lord of all. God, although theologically without sex, is nonetheless referred to with many masculine terms, and solely with male pronouns. Recently in some parts of the English language liturgy, 'father' has replaced some of the more distant Roman addresses. This combination of male monarch and distant but fatherly parent who sees and knows all, who is merciful but is ultimately judge, is part of what this research will refer to henceforth as traditional God language.

2.1.2 How God Language Functions

In the opening pages of \textit{Models of God},\textsuperscript{77} Sallie McFague reminds readers how much words can hurt; conversely, they also have the potential for healing, encouragement and giving life. In reflecting on McFague's understanding of language, Rosemary Ruether points


\textsuperscript{77} Sallie McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 3.
out the “capacity for language to generate reality.” 78 Language not only reflects the world in which we live, it also has the capacity to create it. Sarah Mitchell expands on this idea: “Language shapes our understanding of reality and at the same time, reflects and reinforces the underlying belief structures and accepted implicit assumptions of our society.” 79

God language is no different. The way we speak to or about God reveals who and what God is for us; it carries implicit or explicit assumptions about what we value, our place and time in history; and it also has the potential to change us and those around us. Carol Christ, in explaining that religious symbols, including God language, shape our culture and define our values, calls on the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who understands symbols as producing “powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations.” 80 Three New Zealand theologians, reflecting on recent work in sociolinguistics, write:

The very language we use can shape the culture and relationships within our society. The language we use for God forms our ideas of not only what we think of God, but how we see ourselves in relation to others in the world ... Recent linguistic studies have forced us to recognise that language is the chief way that social structure is stated and maintained ... 81

If language to and about God is so formative, then liturgical God language may be even more so, because it is used in an environment of prayer, one in which ideally the deepest parts of the self are open for listening to God. Neil Darragh says that liturgical language “both exposes and forms our images of God.” 82 Words in liturgy, in particular, work at a “deeper than rational level - they affect our feelings and emotions,” and it is in liturgy that our language can most affect our understanding of God. 83 Ruth Duck emphasises the role of liturgical language in drawing us into relationship with God. She quotes Mark Searle, who writes, “The role of liturgical language is not simply to convey


82 Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 18.

The God language we use in worship reveals something about who we and God are in relation to one another. Images influence belief and behaviour because of their vividness and immediacy, and because images are often relational, as when God is spoken of as father, mother, friend, lord, king and so on.\textsuperscript{85}

It is not only specific images - nouns or phrases - which influence our understandings of God, but also pronouns. Mary Collins singles out the metaphorical status of pronouns because “their power of interpretation is all out of proportion to their virtual concealment in our ordinary nonconscious use of language ... they function to interpret our naming and so to control our imaginative freedom.”\textsuperscript{86} In Catholic liturgical and catechetical language, English third person pronouns and possessive adjectives for God have always been male. Hearing repeated, exclusively male referents, even to gender-neutral nouns like ‘God,’ cannot but shape our understanding of God.\textsuperscript{87}

A growing number of theologians are drawing attention to the effect that God language has on the health and well-being of individuals.\textsuperscript{88} Because how we understand God is foundational to values, there may be little in our lives that is unaffected by images of God.\textsuperscript{89} The way we speak of God is significant not only for our own lives, but our relationships and even the life of our planet.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{84} Mark Searle, in Ruth C. Duck, \textit{Gender and the Name of God}, 11.

\textsuperscript{85} Sallie McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 38.

\textsuperscript{86} Mary Collins, “Naming God in Public Prayer,” 299.

\textsuperscript{87} David Cunningham cites recent psychoanalytic writing which concludes: “Language affects our psyche and our construction of gender more deeply than we realise.” See “On Translating the Divine Name.” \textit{Theological Studies}. 56 (Sept 95): 434.

\textsuperscript{88} Jann Aldredge-Clanton, “Great Physician, Wisdom, Friend: Images of God Influence the Healing of People with Cancer.” \textit{The Christian Ministry}. 29 (November-December 1998): 10-12. In working with cancer patients, Jann Aldredge-Clanton has found that “our names for God may increase the stress of our disease or contribute to new discoveries that lead to wholeness. Our God-images may increase spiritual anguish to the point of despair or form the foundation for hope.”


2.1.3 Critique of Traditional God Language/Images

The ‘traditional’ God (2.1.1) was commonly father, lord, almighty, heavenly, king, master, triumphal, judge and always male. Since Mary Daly first questioned prevailing God images in 1968,91 however, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish theologians, particularly feminist theologians, as well as spiritual and pastoral writers have produced an immense literature92 critiquing inherited images. God images were criticised principally because they were solely male; implied dominance, control or power-over; were imperialist, triumphalist or militaristic; had parental connotations; and/or were distant and other-worldly.

Solely male images of God like father, lord, king and the ubiquitous ‘he’ made it impossible for women to understand themselves in God’s image, conferred an undue degree of sanctity and power to human males and thus devalued women. Use of lord, master, king, judge, and even father - especially when combined with ‘almighty’ - is understood to promote dependence and prevent acceptance of responsibility in both women and men. Triumphal military images appear to condone authoritarianism, violence and war. Parental metaphors are seen to discourage adult faith and mature psychological development. Distant God images do not encourage healthy intimate person - person relationships or person - God relationships.

Theologians in the vanguard of the critique included Rosemary Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sallie McFague, Dorothee Soelle, Sandra Schneiders, Joann Wolski Conn, Anne Carr, Elizabeth Johnson, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow. In later years Gail Ramshaw, Kathleen Zappone, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Elaine Wainwright, Neil Darragh, Mary Grey and many others joined their predecessors and built on the critique.

The thirty-five year critique can be summarised by the effects various traditional images are thought to have on different aspects of human life:

1) Psychological effects on women including feelings of inferiority and dependence; low self-image, self esteem, and sense of self-worth; inability to believe in their own sacredness or that they image the divine; discouragement of autonomy and encouragement of sacrifice, suffering, and obedience;

2) Psychological effects on both women and men including the valuing of men and devaluing of women; passivity and powerlessness in the face of injustice, and the taking


92 The critique is traced in detail by decade in Appendix A. It is recommended that the Appendix be read for a fuller understanding of the feminist theological perspective which informs this research.
away of human responsibility; prevention of growth of human persons; encouragement of acceptance of authoritarianism;

3) Sociological effects on women's and men's relationships with one another, including creating the illusion that men are more like God thus distorting relationships; reinforcing men's power, holiness and superiority;

4) Sociological effects in which a patriarchal God rules over a patriarchal society, including the sanction and justification of gender and ethnicity relationships of domination and subordination, oppression and marginalisation; the acceptance of hierarchy in social institutions as normative; and the support of militarism and imperialism;

5) Ecological effects caused by a mentality of absolute authority over the earth, including misuse and abuse of natural resources and the environment;

6) Theological effects on spirituality, including encouraging people to relate to an essentially non-relational God, but one who is cloaked in male imagery; reinforcing belief that men are more like God and that God is like an all powerful, all seeing, royal male; making God into an idol which violates the mystery of God and impoverishes knowledge of God; restricting God; and producing a God who cannot answer the question of suffering;

7) Theological effects on the church, including an all male clergy and patriarchal structure; denial of women's full participation; the mediation of sacramental life only through men.

Feminist theologians and others have engaged themselves for the last thirty-five years in the destruction of the idol of God which has been a powerful male symbol, perceived to be either a root cause or a sanction of many of the social, psychological, theological and ecological ills of our time and place. Karl Rahner comments: "The true radicalism in the doctrine of God can only be the continual destruction of an idol, an idol in the place of God, the idol of a theory about God."93 In the place of, and in addition to traditional God images, contemporary spiritual and theological writers offer an abundance of alternatives.

2.1.4 Alternative God Images

Theologians and those in related fields such as spiritual direction, counselling, liturgy have used 'alternative' God images long before the recent image critique. The results of a

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partial survey of recent ‘alternative’ images in the major works of fifty authors are summarised in Table 2-1. Over three hundred ways of speaking about God were identified and clustered into twenty-eight categories according to meaning/content. The God images of women in the thesis study will later be compared with these images.

TABLE 2-1
Categories of Alternative God Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God Image or Cluster</th>
<th>Times Mentioned by Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature (Water, Rock, Fire, etc.)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom/ Sophia</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healer/ Helper</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Womb/ Compassion</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence/ Shekhinah</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberator/ Power</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human-made objects (Cup, Door, etc.)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Water - within Nature cluster)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Rock - within Nature cluster)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other Woman/ Feminine</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract Relational (Love, Truth, etc.)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goddess</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lover</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indwelling</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other Anthropomorphic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaddai</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mother Bird - within Nature cluster)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Image, Mystery</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejoicing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YHWH/ I am</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other images</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is immediately evident is that these images do not reflect the list of traditional God images which might begin ‘father, Lord, king, almighty, heavenly,’ and yet most of the alternative images in most of the categories are equally as scriptural in origin, goddess being

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94 Some categories (e.g., Mother and Womb, Wisdom and Spirit) have images which potentially overlap. They have been assigned to a given category based on researcher judgement. See Appendix B for more detail.
the only image category that is not. Those who suggest alternative images have retrieved some of the wealth of imagery that is already in the tradition, and also made some creative additions. A second observation on the list of alternative images is that most of the anthropomorphic images connote ethics of care, wisdom, freedom, presence, mutuality and female relationship rather than power, might, distance, royalty and male relationship. A third set of observations regards the gender of God images. While father is included, it is balanced by mother; and except for sister and goddess (and several images in other categories - see Appendix B), most of the images are, on the surface, gender-neutral. Many, like wisdom, spirit, Shaddai and compassion have feminine linguistic roots in Hebrew or Greek, feminine personification, or alternative feminine meanings to the one traditionally used.

Alternative God images among those who write theological literature are varied, imaginative, and faithful to the biblical tradition - but not usually to the position of classical theism. Some authors complement traditional male images of God with female images. Many images challenge the traditional ideas of God, especially as omnipotent - in the sense of having 'power over' - and impassable. For recent feminist theological writers, God is understood best in many images: nature images such as wellspring, rock and soaring protective mother eagle; strong, labouring, nurturing mother; wisdom sophia who counsels and invites; healer and binder of wounds; intimate friend; womb of compassion; breath of life; ever-presence; on-going creator; freedom-giver; one who trembles with our tears; and much more.95

The ways in which God has been understood by the theological tradition and by contemporary theologians can be kept in mind when Chapters 4 through 9 trace the God images of the group of New Zealand Catholic women in this study. First it is appropriate to review the findings of empirical research on God image formation, change and effects.

2.2 Recent Research on God Images

Most of the theological writing on God images described in previous sections is either theoretical, or based on personal and pastoral experience. Very few of the authors have formally studied factors involved in the formation of God images or the effects God images

95 A deeper look at alternative images for God can be found in Appendix B, including some envisioning by several prominent theologians.
have on aspects of human development, attitudes and behaviours. Psychologist of
religion Joseph Ciarrocchi has, in fact, criticised theologians for not citing relevant empirical
literature and for making "incautious statements about matters that are empirical
questions."\textsuperscript{96} In this section, the major findings of both qualitative and quantitative research
on God images will be presented.\textsuperscript{97} These findings will in many cases be seen to confirm the
intuitions of the theoretical writers, and help provide a foundation on which this thesis
research on New Zealand Catholic \textit{pakeha}\textsuperscript{98} women’s God images is built.

Just as feminist theologians understand God images to affect nearly everything in life,
psychological and social researchers attempt empirical studies which might demonstrate that
human life either affects or is affected by God images. A multitude of factors have been
studied so, for clarity, research will first be divided into two subsections: psychological
factors and social factors. These subsections are further divided into underlined categories to
facilitate discussion of the many factors believed to be related to God images.\textsuperscript{99}

\textbf{2.2.1 Images of God and Psychological Factors}

The factors potentially related to the development of God images reviewed here are
childhood development, parental influence, object relations, self esteem, gender and others.

\textsuperscript{96} Joseph W. Ciarrocchi, "Psychology and Theology Need Each Other," 19.

\textsuperscript{97} Some of the research comes from the theological disciplines, particularly pastoral theology; some of it comes
from sociology; and much of it originates in various fields of psychology - largely from clinical, psychoanalytic,
and counselling fields. While psychological interest in researching God images has a long history, theological
research interest is fairly recent. (An especially good summary of the history of psychological research on God
images can be found in Beth Fletcher Brokaw and Keith J. Edwards, "The Relationship of God Image to Level of
in the past decade have been doctoral research projects from both theology and psychology departments. Because
most were done overseas, very few were available to read in their entirety. The findings of most (as will be
indicated in their citations) were gleaned only from internet data base abstracts.

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Pakeha} is the Maori word for anyone who is not Maori, and is commonly used by non-Maori as well.

\textsuperscript{99} There is necessarily some overlap of some studies between categories and even subsections due to the diversity
of factors researchers study together. The volume of research is more than could be reported here. The studies
2.2.1.1 Studies of Age and Development from Childhood through Adolescence

How do God images begin to form in children, and do they change or grow throughout childhood and adolescence?¹⁰⁰

David Ludwig¹⁰¹ found that young children at age 7 are concerned with physical well-being and security, and tended to see God as a father-authority-provider.¹⁰² Middle children at age 10 - an age at which Jean Piaget¹⁰³ predicts a concern over rules - see God as a remote, abstract rule-giver and are preoccupied with doctrinal confessions. By late childhood at age 13, children are absorbed with emotional needs and understand God more as a friend.

David Heller found that young children associated God with play and gaiety, and to preserve a sense of security, often create two gods, one good and the other bad. In each individual, the God figure changes slightly to suit the psychological needs of the child."¹⁰⁴ For most children, God is a healer and nurturer who can mend everything. Heller notes that children often compare God to their parents or grandparents.

Brad Johnson and Mark Eastburg¹⁰⁵ found that there were no differences in God concepts in childhood between abused and non-abused children.¹⁰⁶ Positive correlation in all cited are ones which are anticipated to have the most applicability to research on Catholic women in New Zealand.

¹⁰⁰ The italicised questions under the underlined categories in Section 2.2 are linked with the aims of the research in Section 1.2. The research findings under each heading will provide some guideline as to what is already thought to be known in this area, and what might be expected to be true of the participants in the New Zealand study.


¹⁰² The categories for identifying God images were chosen by the researchers, and limited to Remote, Father, and Friend. ‘Father’ is inclusive of any God-descriptor as authority or provider, just as advisor and confidant are included in ‘friend’, and abstract is included in remote. Though these categories may seem arbitrary and limited in 2002, they may not be unreasonable from a 1974 cultural standpoint.


¹⁰⁶ Although childhood God images may not show differences, adult God images do. Adult abuse survivors experience God as more distant, punitive and uncaring. See Donna Kane, Sharon E. Cheston, and Janne Greer “Perceptions of God by survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: An Exploratory Study in an Underresearched Area.” Journal of Psychology and Theology. 21 (1993): 22-337; Margaret Schrader, “The Effect of Sexual Abuse,” 49. No determination of childhood abuse has been made by the present research.
*children* between God as wrathful, kind and distant confirms Heller’s finding that children may hold various seemingly contradictory aspects of God in tension.

Jane Dickie studied the relationship of children to their parents and children’s images of God, looking at age, gender and parental discipline style, finding that when parents were perceived as nurturing and powerful (especially when mother was perceived as powerful and father was perceived as nurturing), children perceived God as both nurturing and powerful … God seems to become the perfect ‘substitute attachment figure’ as children separate from parents with age.¹⁰⁷

The researchers suspect that there is a transition in adolescence or early adulthood from parental image to self image as more predictive of God image.

Kevin Ladd and others investigated the influence of denomination on children’s God concepts and found no direct influence.¹⁰⁸

Amy Eshleman and others “explored perceived distance from and involvement with God,” finding that children felt closer to God with age or if their parents were less involved with them. Their findings corroborate Ludwig’s that older children tend to relate more to God as friend, and Dickie’s that God can become a ‘substitute’ parent as children move into adolescence. A new finding is that when God was perceived as male, boys felt God was closer; girls felt closer when God was perceived as female. The research indicates that the prevailing understanding of “God as male may distance God for girls and women.”¹⁰⁹

A longitudinal Belgian study of adolescents found that throughout adolescence, the understanding of God in traditional images (creator, help, relation, Christ, ethics, transcendence, reality) decreased.¹¹⁰ The images of God which appear to have increased slightly with age are God as ultimate meaning and God as immanent, but the largest growth

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¹¹⁰ Dirk Hutsebaut and Dominic Verhoeven, “The Adolescents’ Representation of God from Age 12 to 18: Changes or Evolution?” *Journal of Empirical Theology.* 4 (1991): 59-72. The authors attribute this to the fact that (by 1991) only a minority of adolescents attended church, compared with a majority in a baseline 1970 study. One might suggest however, that the opposite proposition could be equally valid; that the God images used in liturgy no longer related to adolescent lives, and therefore, young people voted with their feet.
has to do with categories of doubt, unreality (unbelief) and negative ascriptions. Despite the decreases in identification with most traditional images, the understanding of God as help/refuge still remained relatively high as did a God of relation and transcendence.

Jacques Janssen found that the most common activity of God mentioned was the wielding of power. A gender analysis showed that boys preferred words for God which involved 'power' and girls preferred words which indicated ethics, help and support.

An Australian study of high school students found a predominance of traditional imagery (old man, loving father, king, Jesus, judge) and a minority of idiosyncratic responses (woman, nature images).

2.2.1.2 Studies of Parental Images

Do the teachings or behaviour of parents influence children's God images?

Much research has been done linking parental images to God images. As a review by Elaine Donelson has pointed out, psychoanalytic and sociological theories share the view

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111 The authors note that changes may have been influenced by adults. While this may be, it might be suggested that normal increased awareness of global situations during adolescence could easily plant doubt and encourage struggle with traditional God images.

112 Jacques Janssen, Joep De Hart, and Marcel Gerardts, "Images of God in Adolescence." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion.* 4 (1994): 105-121. They first used a scale developed in 1964 to measure parental qualities in God representations. (See Alfred Vannesse and Patrick de Neuter, "The Semantic Differential Parental Scale," in *The Parental Figures and the Representation of God: A Psychological and Cross-Cultural Study.* Antoine Vergote and Alvaro Tamayo, eds. (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 25-41.) The 1964 scale was developed to trace archetypal paternal and maternal characteristics of God. The researchers soon found that that items on the scale were meaningless to approximately 75 percent of their participants, due to the increasing trend away from belief in a personal God, and to contemporary adolescent understandings of God. They used open ended questions for the rest of the study.

113 The examples given in the paper, however, would seem to indicate that God as directing or authoritative might have been more accurate. Because both the Janssen study and the Hutsebaut study appear to be written in English as a second (or third) language, some of the translation may obscure the author's meaning. Other examples include use of the word 'deception' where it appears that 'deconstruction' is the right word in the context (Hutsebaut) and a description of 'pillarization' where clearly, 'polarisation' is intended (Janssen)! Some of the resulting discussion of God images may thus be affected.

that parents are important, but for different reasons. Major findings of research on God images and parental images are as follows:

1) God concepts of an individual are similar to the individual's preferred parent concept.
2) Childhood perceptions of both mother and father are related to a person's current images of God. A person with a negative image of parents will also have a negative image of God. The personalities of parents may be far more consequential in the development of the God concept than religious instruction.
3) An individual's composite image of both parents correlates with her/his God image, as does the image of the individual's idealised favourite parent.
4) Powerful cultural dynamics can mould God images. In a doctoral study exploring Italian Americans, subjects' images and relationships with God were found to be thematized in patterns strikingly similar to those of attitudes toward and relationships with subjects' fathers, and they were related to distinctive subthemes in Italian American identity pertaining to relationships with men ... the unique role of the


116 A large number of studies on the relationship of individual's images of their parents (or of idealised parents) to their God images in the 1960s through 1980s were based on the work of Antoine Vergote and his students who developed scales measuring the maternal and paternal components of God images. These studies have shown different results for groups of different cultures, ages, sexes, and so on. As was true with the original study by Janssen, many of these studies are flawed because their underlying assumptions about what constitutes 'maternal' and 'paternal' are culture and time conditioned. In addition, Vergote concludes in one study that "The paternal image is the most adequate symbol for the image of God since the divine image is always closer to the father than to the mother." His research studied prevalence of images in a particular group, but he did not have grounds to judge 'adequacy'. The results of these studies are not reported in this thesis but more recent studies have covered the same ground and are included. For the work of Vergote and colleagues, see (source of quote): Antoine Vergote, Alvaro Tamayo, Luiz Pasqualiti, Michel Bouami, Marie-Rose Pattyn, and Anne Clusters, "Concept of God and Parental Values." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 8 (1969): 79-87. See also Antoine Vergote and Alvaro Tamayo, *The Parental Figures and the Representation of God*; and Alvaro Tamayo and Leandre Dejardens, "Belief Systems and Conceptual Images of Parents and God." *Journal of Psychology*. 92 (1976): 131-140.


119 Ian T. Birky and Samuel Ball, "Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation." *The Journal of Psychology*. 122 (1988): 133-137. Although this study utilized a scale developed by Vergote's associates, it appears to have used it independently of gender labels, so the results should be more reliable. Recent doctoral research has found similar findings of parent-Jesus comparisons. Patricia Criste found that positive representations of Jesus, including perceptions of him as loving, forgiving, encouraging individuality, accepting and sharing human suffering bore a strong resemblance to how people remembered their primary caregivers in childhood, a finding was similar to findings of God representations. See Patricia Ann Beech Criste, "Mental Representations of Jesus Christ and the Subjects' Retrospective Mental Representations of Primary Caregivers." Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1996. Abstract in UMI ProQuest Digital Dissertations. http://wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations/fullcit/9621671.
father in Italian culture is so powerful that its effect upon God images is hardly diminished for the third generation ... [this role] reinforce[s] views of father as powerful authority and contribut[e]s to Italian American daughters’ views of God as threateningly distant, unknowable, powerful, and requiring appeasement.120

5) In America there is a strong prevalence of the understanding of God as love over God as authority. Girls and mothers are more likely to view God as love, and boys and fathers are more likely to see God as authority or authoritarian. Children’s views of parents and parents’ views of God predict children’s God images.121

2.2.1.3 Studies of Object Relations Development
Is how we relate to God related to our experience of others?

Object relations theory derives from the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, which sought to explain and influence human behaviour by understanding the interplay between conscious and unconscious, and by helping bring unconscious thoughts, feelings and desires into the realm of consciousness. Freud’s identified a child’s earliest experiences, especially identification with the father, as lasting imprints which the rest of life would reflect.122 Freud’s work spawned several schools, including those of Anna Freud, Carl Jung and Melanie Klein, of whom the latter is understood as a transitional figure to the object relations school, some of whose early theorists include Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg and Donald Winnicott.123


121 Bradley R. Hertel and Michael J. Donahue, “Parental Influences on God Images among Children: Testing Durkheim’s Metaphoric Parallelism.” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. 34 (1995): 186-199. Although the authors found some support for causality (that parents’ attitudes influence children’s images) in a regression analysis, this may not necessarily be a one-way relationship: for as children grow, their attitudes have other influences as well, not to mention their own creativity, and children’s God images might very well affect their parents’ God images. Other findings from the study include the following: Both girls and boys view mothers as more loving than fathers. Boys are more likely to view parents as authoritarian. Both girls and boys find their same sex parent as more authoritarian than the opposite sex parent. Mothers’ images of God as loving have slightly greater impact than father’s on children’s images of God. Children’s images of mothers as authoritarian (and for girls, their mother’s images of God as authoritarian) were usually stronger predictors of children’s images of God than were comparable images of/for fathers.


123 For further information on theories of early object relations theorists, see, for example, Heinz Kohut. The Analysis of the Self. (New York: International Universities Press, 1971) and D. W. Winnicott. Playing and Reality.
Many psychoanalysts disagreed with Freud about his emphasis on sexuality and the primacy of experience of the father in subsequent development and his insistence on a rather static understanding of human development, confined as it was by early experience. Object relations theorists like Winnicott emphasise instead wider interactions throughout childhood, especially the mother-child relationship, and add the human dimensions of creativity and the ability to reshape early impressions in later life. Object relations theories are strongly reflected in the works of contemporary object relations theorists whose research on God images is most applicable to the present study.

Object relations is an unfortunate choice of words for a theory which is largely concerned with relationships. It includes “all of the people, things, and conditions to which a person relates” and refers to the “dynamic effect these objects have on one’s self.” Beth Brokow explains that “within an individual’s early interpersonal environment, various internal representations of self and others are formed. These then influence the creation and projection of God images later in life.” Mature object relations development is considered mature psychological development, and as a factor is sometimes compared with which God images people prefer.

Ana-Marie Rizzuto regards parents as the primary source of children’s original God representations, following which, “each epigenetic phenomenon [life crisis, developmental stage, significant relationship, etc.] offers a new opportunity to revise the representation or leave it unchanged.” Her findings indicated that the mother especially influenced the God representation of the child, primarily through personality traits. Studying psychiatric patients, Rizzuto found that some of her patients had such negative and entrenched God images that even encounters with friendlier God representations from clergy or doctrines had not budged the older representations. She nonetheless believed that later life events could and should cause God representations to change and grow just as other relationships do. She concluded

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124 D. W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 54-56.
that, unlike Genesis 2.27, “we create our own Gods from the warp and woof of our everyday life.”

John McDargh used object relations theory in a way similar to Rizzuto. He found midlife women’s representations of God and self to have “origins in the same matrix of relationship ... [forming in] the same vexed or blessed circumstances of family and culture ...”¹²⁸ For a God representation to evolve and change during life, two things must occur: first, alternative understandings of God are found that engage both conscious and unconscious aspects of a God representation; second, the individual hearing the new images must have experienced God in that new way. No amount of intellectual discourse will alone provoke a transformation of the heart.

Martha Robbins also draws on Rizzuto’s work. She theorised that women’s images of God

1) begin with a compounded image resulting from childhood relationships, as in Rizzuto’s results, plus the “prevailing images, symbols, rituals, and conceptual representations first offered to [them] by [their] mothers”;

2) changed as women’s “prevailing images or representations of God interact with the larger cultural images ... employed by other significant persons as well as authorities or institutions.”¹²⁹

Women are constantly reweaving images of themselves in relation to God and the world. As their understandings of self change, so will their understandings of God, and vice versa: “Human beings create themselves in the image of the Divine that they create, hold and interpret.”¹³⁰ Such reweaving, she believes, is the fruit of human imagination, which is in turn the activity of the Spirit drawing human persons closer to the divine.¹³¹

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¹²⁸ John McDargh, Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory, 115.

¹²⁹ Martha Robbins, Midlife Women and Death of Mother: A Study of Psychohistorical and Spiritual Transformation. (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 73-75.

¹³⁰ Martha Robbins, Midlife Women and Death of Mother, 250.

¹³¹ While Robbins believed that change agents may be age (particularly mid-life), crises such as losses due to death or divorce, exposure to feminism, educational and career opportunities, her study was focused only on the time surrounding the deaths of the women’s mothers’, so there was no comprehensive look at God images and change agents.
Beth Brokaw and Keith Edwards compared the level of object relations development to God images among university students. Object relations development correlated positively with a number of measures of God as loving and benevolent, and negatively with God as wrathful, irrelevant or controlling. These results indicate that people with the capacity for healthy relationships in general have a positive understanding of God. People with disturbed object relations see God in a negative light, much as they may project their own feelings of anger, over-control or sense of worthlessness on others.

Todd Hall and Beth Brokaw found that both God image and object relations development were related to spiritual maturity. Psychological maturity – known as object relations development - and spirituality were positively correlated with God attributes such as benevolence, evaluation, potency, and omni-ness; and negatively correlated with deisticness, irrelevancy and wrathfulness.

A study of patients being treated for depression demonstrated that a treatment programme based on understanding and improving object relations showed significant positive changes in patients’ views of themselves, and of God as close, loving, present and accepting. These new positive God images were correlated positively with high personal adjustment and mature object relations development.

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133 Todd W. Hall and Beth Fletcher Brokaw, “The Relationship of Spiritual Maturity to Level of Object Relations Development and God Image,” Pastoral Psychology, 43 (1995): 373-391. The reader must apparently take the researcher’s word that the former God attributes (which are themselves composites about which the reader is not told) are healthy and mature, while the latter are not, as there is no explanation of the meaning of the attributes. Further, when the spiritual maturity measure is examined, it is a composite of spiritual well-being, worship and commitment, involvement in organised religion and fellowship. One may well question whether what is included in those factors (or traditional God image characteristics such as potency and omni-ness) are what spiritual directors would consider spiritual maturity. The discussion posits that the level of object relations development may impact one’s ability to develop a mature relationship with God; perhaps this is so, but the reverse relationship may also be true. The authors do add at the end of their paper that further studies could examine causal relationships between the three variables studied, and that both spiritual maturity and God image measures could be refined. They also add that a social desirability check could be done to ascertain whether study participants were inclined to answer in ways that were perhaps more acceptable, but not necessarily accurate.

Major findings of several recent doctoral studies include:

1) People who image God as masculine demonstrated greater psychopathology, and those who attributed feminine characteristics to God demonstrated greater mental health.\(^{135}\)

2) In making a transition from an exclusively male God image to female God images, there is an adaptation process involving loss and changes in self valuation and self-object representations.\(^{136}\)

3) Catholics who reported having had a significant religious experience had a more developed God representation than a control group.\(^{137}\)

4) There is a positive correlation between loving God images and increased spiritual well-being.\(^{138}\)

5) Not only do parental and other factors influence God representation, but “a positive sense of connection with God can decrease the effects of trauma such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicidal impulses ... [and promote] psychic integration and healthier interpersonal functioning.”\(^{139}\)

### 2.2.1.4 Studies of Self Esteem

Is there a link between women’s self image, including esteem, and their God images? As theological literature suggests, do traditional God images cause low self-esteem in women?

In a study of adolescents, Peter Benson and Bernard Spilka found that self esteem was positively correlated to God images which involved attributes like love, acceptance, freedom


and forgiveness, and negatively correlated with images which included rejection, control, rigidity, sternness and so on. The results led the researchers to believe in self esteem as an important influence on God images: although they noted that some variables like parents, peers and religious instruction may influence both, they did not believe these other variables were "of sufficient strength to account for any large portion of the shared variance between self-esteem and God-images."140

Another study of adolescents examined the relationships between God images, self esteem and the degree of constructive, accepting communication that teens perceived they had with their parents, testing out one of the variables Benson and Spilka had perhaps too hastily written off. Taking into account previous studies which indicated the importance of quality parent-child interaction as an antecedent of good self esteem, researchers141 found that all three of these variables were positively correlated with one another. Their results led them to posit, similar to McDargh, that a loving God image develops in the same kind of family atmosphere necessary for the development of high self esteem.

Carroll Saussy142 found that many women discover that a change in their image of God and relationship with God gives them a greater sense of well-being - contrary to the contentions of Bernard Spilka. From traditional images of father, old white man with a beard, demanding God, dictator and wrathful judge, women had moved to God as she, goddess, spirit, unconditionally loving mother, fire, an inner voice, and so on. Like Rizzuto, Chartier and Goehner, Saussy believes that parental acceptance is foundational to a healthy sense of self, and women who do not receive basic respect and support from their parents have a tougher challenge to gain self esteem through other means. Saussy's study also finds that the change of God images from male to female or gender-neutral is a factor in increasing women's self esteem, which adds to previous findings that people with positive God images have higher self-esteem than those with negative images.

140 Peter Benson and Bernard Spilka, "God Image as a Function of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control." Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. 12 (5 1973): 306. Despite the authors' views that self esteem influences God images, the analysis used indicates only that self esteem and God images are related: it is their logic and sampling what they believed to be homogenous religious population (a Catholic high school) that provide the rationale for their attribution of causality. There are too many other potential overlapping variables to control for all of them, and in any case, their logic does not seem to extend to the possibility that an experiential understanding of and belief in a loving God might well influence a person's self esteem.


2.2.1.5 Gender Studies

What are women’s images of God, and are they different from traditional images?

Hart Nelson and others examined the preferences of men and women for various God images. They found, after clustering the God images, three composite images: God as healer (including creator, healer, friend and father), God as king (king, judge, master and liberator) and God as relational (spouse, mother and lover). Their only findings of gender difference indicated that women identified more with the healer composite of God images than men did.

Jann Clanton’s study of God images and character traits indicates that women whose God images are masculine score higher on scales for abasement and deference; and women whose images are feminine or androgynous score more highly on scales of creative personality, self-confidence, autonomy, dominance and achievement.

Nancy Cunningham concluded that “the self-other-God image is a personally constructed psychological constellation which evolves over the life-span. If one component of the construct is modified, the other two will be influenced as well,” a finding which confirms Robbins’ work.

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143 Gender, of course, could be a sociological variable as well as a psychological one, and studies on gender come from both disciplines. Gender is usually determined first by a human being born as visibly male or female, and sociocultural factors build onto biology gender expectations and roles. It is not part of this thesis to discuss the degree of nature/nurture involved, but a somewhat arbitrary decision to discuss gender under psychological factors has been made because many of the studies (though not all) come from schools of psychology. Studies looking at women as a social group are in Section 2.2.2.


145 Curiously, father and friend appear in the healer group rather than the relational group, which raises questions about the researchers’ understandings of the terms, while mother remained in the relational group.

146 Jann Aldredge Clanton, In Whose Image: God and Gender. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991). 76. Clanton, like many others, is quick to conclude that feminine God images cause these character traits in people, while it should be fairly obvious that the trait may very well have had a prior existence, and was a factor in the person’s ability to choose or formulate alternate images of God. For example, a person in today’s Christian climate needs to be autonomous in order to profess belief in a God image that is feminine. Clanton provides excerpts from interviews which go some way to support her belief that “images of God that include the feminine or transcend gender result in the increase of self-confidence, independence, and achievement in women.” Interviews were not in-depth however, which makes it impossible to support her conclusion unambiguously. Nonetheless, Clanton has demonstrated important links between human gender, character traits and the gender of God images: it remains to be shown what the causal direction of the relationship is, or whether perhaps each may affect the other. Her findings for men indicated that men with feminine or androgynous God images score higher on autonomy and ability to risk change, which makes sense given that prevailing traditions would require those traits in a man who believes in a feminine or androgynous God.

Joseph Ciarrocchi reported preliminary results from gender studies on God images. Findings indicated that:

1) Women see God as more emotionally stable and interpersonally adjusted;
2) Women more often combine traits in God and Jesus related both to dominance/achievement and relationships;
3) Negative images of God in women are related to childhood abuse and adult domestic abuse;
4) Images of God for women, but not for men, predict emotional well-being;
5) Women put more of their own personality into their images of God and Jesus;
6) Women put less of their preferred parent's traits into God images than do men.

Because the findings are preliminary and no methodology was given, a proper evaluation of results is not possible at present.148

2.2.1.6 Studies of Other Psychology-Related Factors

What other factors might be related to the kinds of God images women have?

Some results of studies of God images exploring psychological factors among various groups of people are as follows:

1) People who view themselves as generous, sincere and quick to forgive imagine God as nurturing, but those who see themselves as suspicious of others view God as disciplining.149
2) When individuals discover a new God concept that provides a better understanding of their world, they are able to see and relate to other people in a more positive light.150

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148 Joseph W. Ciarrocchi, “Psychology and Theology,” 19. It can be noted, however, that if psychological well-being in the study by Brokaw and Edwards is similar to the emotional well-being in (5), Ciarrocchi’s finding that God images predict emotional well-being only in women contradicts the earlier study, in which images of God correlated with psychological well-being for both women and men.

3) People who hear God spoken of as male, regardless of whether the voice which
spoke about God was male or female, attributed more power to God, while those
who hear God spoken about as female attributed more mercy to God. The results
support the belief that God is perceived differently depending on the gender used
to represent God. 151

4) Different beliefs about suffering, and different ways of coping with suffering
resulted in different understandings of God.152

5) Seriously ill persons with explicit spiritualities including Christian and New Age
were more likely to recover if their spirituality and God images freed them to
explore new possibilities. Morbidity levels were high among those who had
controlling images of God.153

6) There is a significant correlation between people's self concepts and concepts of
Jesus, particularly in the areas of warmth, gregariousness, empathy and acceptance.
Perceptions of Jesus are also related to the needs of individuals.154

7) Depression correlated positively with a wrathful image of God and negatively with
loving and kindliness images. The authors suggest that images of God can be
predictors of depression.155

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150 James L. Griffith and Melissa Elliott Griffith, "Therapeutic Change in Religious Families: Working with the
Griffiths looked at the interaction of God image in the context of therapy. Operating on the observation that
while God is a nearly universal concept, and an especially important one for many people, they began to treat
God as an invisible but crucial partner in therapy sessions. They presumed (based on past studies) that the God
construct develops in a similar manner to parenting figures, and when a conception of God seemed
immatUre,
they encouraged its growth.

151 Mark R. McMinn, Sonja D. Brooks, Marcia A. (Hallmark) Triplett, Wesley E. Hoffman, and Paul G. Huizinga,
309-314. The experiment involved participants hearing either a male or female voice speaking about God, and
referring to God as either male or female. A follow-up question about enjoyment of the experiment as a whole
showed that having God spoken about by a person of the opposite sex to the one the tape attributed to God
brought significantly more enjoyment. This seems to indicate that people also respond differently to images of
God presented by persons of different genders.

Because this paper is in translation, it is not always easy to determine accurate meaning. Sometimes the causality
is confused, but overall, the results point in the direction indicated above, that beliefs and experience are factors
in God images, rather than the other way around.


http://wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations/fultit/9227791. A number of studies use the term 'predictors', which
isn't quite the same as assigning causality, but it seems to tentatively suggest that the causal relationship here
goes from God image to depression rather than the other way around. This makes sense if one assumes that God
The relationship between images of God and psychological factors discussed in this section, such as age, parents, esteem, gender and psychological development, is complex, but a number of generalisations can be made:

1) Children's images of God are related to the traits of one or both parents; often have a mix of parental qualities related to both authority and nurture; and reflect children's imagination. Children are more likely to feel closer to a God reflective of their own gender.

2) Adolescents' stage of differentiation from parents is reflected in the doubt and negativity of their changing God images. There is increasing gender differentiation toward authority images for boys and support images for girls.

3) Adult God images are, in part, made up of preferred, composite, and - in some cases - inculturated parent images. Adults who have positive images of God are more likely to be psychologically healthy, have less depression and perhaps less illness. A God perceived to be female will be a more merciful God, while a God perceived to be male will be more powerful. Adult God images change with age, and are reflective not only of parental traits, but unfilled needs, significant people and life-events, self-image, and experiences of suffering. New images of God presented to adults may have the capacity to change persons if there is an experiential as well as intellectual identification with the God suggested by the new image. The relationships among images of God, self and others may each have the capacity for changing the others.

2.2.2 Images of God and Social Factors

In addition to psychological factors, social factors may also affect or be affected by God image. Included here are the results of studies of women156 and studies of social and political attitudes.157

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156 Psychological studies of women were included in last subsection on psychological factors. The studies of women presented here are studies of women as a socio-cultural group in society.

157 Research on the effects of another sociological factor, abuse, on images of God is not reported here as no questions were directly asked about it in this study. Some women were subject to what they called authoritarian parental behaviour as well as corporal punishment in the schools, which was not uncommon in mid-twentieth century New Zealand. Recent research is reported in Donna Kane et al., "Perceptions of God"; Margaret
2.2.2.1 Studies of Women

What findings about God images from other studies of women may be relevant for the present study?

Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins found that many women traced their first contacts with the divine to early contacts with a sense of the sacred in people, places or things: a great-grandmother, father, a tree, angel voices, neighbours, nature, an interior friend. Women’s images of God changed when “old concepts, ideals, and emotional meanings no longer fit.” The researchers found that women had to understand God as somehow reflecting the feminine in order to have a relationship with God; that women made connections between being able to accept and celebrate their own womanhood and opening up to the feminine aspects of God; that women’s search for God meant following intuitive paths rather than those set down by others; and that each of these paths was unique. The researchers also noted that women’s search for and relationship with the divine did not exempt them from pain and suffering, but that “a fundamental characteristic ... was the ability to use times of trial and adversity as an opportunity for spiritual awakening and deepening.”


Catholic sisters, Protestant clergywomen or liberal Protestant laywomen. Women of any denomination who put more emphasis on male images of God, including Jesus, are happier in the institutional church than those who endorse distinctly feminine images: two thirds of the women in the study including 80 percent of Catholic women often feel alienated from their churches.  

An Australian study of Catholic women and church touched lightly on the issue of God language, noting its importance in shaping reality, and the frustration of women with male-only God images. A concurrent study by the Australian Catholic Bishops found that "current use of exclusive religious and social language represents the third greatest barrier to women's participation in the Catholic Church after its patriarchal system and hierarchical structure."  

Recent doctoral theses focused on women's God images have found that:

1) Working class women in Quebec had "fluid images and concepts grounded in and respectful of the dynamics of transformation." The women in the study had struggled with many institutions, and the God implicit in their stories was one of blessing, transforming, present in the struggle, solidarity and tenacity, breath, grace, source of life and courage, sustaining strength and hope, interconnectedness, empowering dignity and agency, ground of existence, initiative, dreaming, forcefulness, anger, toughness and recreating.  

159 Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, The Feminine Face of God, 43.

160 Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lununis, and Allison Stokes, Deflecting in Place: Women claiming responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995). The study included 3746 women, of whom 30 percent were Catholic. Most of the differences are noticeable between white women of mainstream denominations and both conservative Protestant laywomen and ethnic groups like African Americans and Hispanic Americans. More women in the latter groups have father, Jesus and the Trinity among their major God images. Among other God images, the latter groups are also more likely to see God as their help. Conservative Protestant laywomen are particularly less likely than any of the groups to see God as mystery or as encompassing presence. Lesbians were most likely of any group to see God as Goddess and least likely to see God as father, Jesus, Trinity or help. Some differences between Catholic sisters and Catholic laywomen emerged when exploring whether they understand various images in the same way. While sisters see Jesus as both part of the 'power' Trinity and as a supportive loving protector and guide, laywomen see Jesus more as part of the 'power' Trinity with the role of master and judge. Sisters tend to see the Goddess as present in women as an emerging connection and as an elemental force, while laywomen understand Goddess as a warm mother or part of a mother-father divinity: women in different social relational contexts can thus have different understandings of the same image.


2) A study of Catholic and Mormon women suggests that the incorporation of “the feminine principle, the relational Trinity, and mother in heaven into the image of God empowers women.”

3) In wrestling with patriarchal God concepts and parental legacies, women’s confidence in their own creativity and inner guidance increased, along with rich, varied and non-traditional God images.

2.2.2.2 Studies of Social and Political Attitudes

Are God images related to social and political values?

A study exploring the relationship between images of God and social attitudes found that those who believe that God has influence on their personal lives, but does not ordain the social order, identify themselves as politically liberal, support racial equality, and would tend to become personally involved if someone needed help. Those who believe God has ordained the existing social order identify as politically conservative, are less supportive of racial equality and would be less likely to involve themselves in a situation where someone else needed help.

In a study of 2500 North Americans, Andrew Greeley found social attitudes are reflected in people’s images of God: for example, those who picture God as lover, and especially as mother, are much more likely to be socially concerned – defined as working for causes, campaigning politically, etc. In looking at how people responded to various God images, he found that that respondents looked at God the Father in a less positive light than they looked at Jesus and Mary. God was thought of in harsher images such as judge and master rather than lover.

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165 Thomas Piazza and Charles Y. Glock, “Images of God and Their Social Meanings,” in The Religious Dimension: New Directions. Robert Wuthnow, ed. (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 69-91. One distressing finding was that members of minority groups in this study were likely to believe that God had ordained the status quo, and this was explained by another measure that showed these members also scored high on a scale of anomie.

Another survey found that when given choices of God images 'most likely to come to mind', people responded in order: creator, healer, friend, redeemer, father, master, king, judge, lover, liberator, mother and spouse. The four most chosen images were gender-neutral and not overtly all-powerful. The next four were male and overtly power-over images, followed by relatively new alternatives, including a female image, plus liberator.\textsuperscript{167}

A Catholic study\textsuperscript{168} looked at the relationships between God and socio-political attitudes. The God as judge image correlated highly significantly with those who identified as politically conservative and favoured traditional family structures, capital punishment and defence spending, but not the Equal Rights Amendment or cohabitation. The authors understand their findings to support the contention that religious imagery is a strong predictor of political and social values of Catholics: given that none of the other images were predictive, it may be more accurate to conclude that a judging image of God, in particular, is a strong predictor of such values.

An Australian study\textsuperscript{169} of over 6000 church attendees explored God image by age and gender, attempting to explain differences from a sociological perspective. Of five images of God as power or presence, creator of the universe, ever-present helper, personal friend or almighty and eternal, adolescents understand God primarily as a friend and secondarily as helper: this image reflects the adolescent need for peer relationship and a focus on personal need rather than the wider world. In the 20-39 age group, God is increasingly seen as non-anthropomorphic and connected to the wider world: images of presence, creator and almighty are more preferred. In the 40-59 age group, God as friend continues to decrease as a preferred image, replaced by power or presence, and ever-present helper, reflecting the

\textsuperscript{167} Wade Clark Roof and Jennifer L. Roof, "Review of the Polls: Images of God among Americans." \textit{Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.} 23 (1984): 201-205. The study used data from a representative survey of 1599 people. Overall differences showed that women, southerners and those with less education were more likely to see God in more images (but chose them in nearly the same order as the overall population); the authors suggest that these groups are the conventionally religious: they also appear to contain groups who are socio-economically more disadvantaged. It may also be that given a different choice of images, other groups (such as those with more education) may very well have chosen more images.


\textsuperscript{169} Tricia Blombery, "Social Factors," 78-91. In the 20-39 age group, gender differences appear, and reveal a lower proportion of males to females giving first preference to the earlier two relational God images. People in this age group have had wider experience of and success in the world, and God becomes more removed from the personal. Blombery suggests a tendency toward dependence in the older age group accounts for the emphasis on helper. (If one used, instead, a combination of spirituality with sociology in exploring reasons for preferences, one might find that the idea of God as presence is one that is grown into over years of faith and experience.) Blombery finds that age differences in God images are greater than denominational or gender differences, but she also points out that overall, men prefer images like creator of the universe more than women, and women prefer images like helper and friend.
success and position in society: all five images are roughly equally chosen by this age group. In the over 60 age group, the image of power and presence peaks, and even more preferred is ever-present helper.

In support of feminist theologians’ premise that the prevailing image of God is male, Rachel Foster and John Keating found that people spontaneously use male language when talking about God; that when referring to how ‘most people’ describe God and how they themselves describe God - cultural and personal God concepts, respectively - people are more likely to describe God as father than mother; and when asked to give a physical description of the cultural God concept, they overwhelmingly specify male.170

Linda Mercadante’s examination of God imagery and social structures in historical Shaker communities found that gender inclusive imagery for God followed the institution of gender-parallel work and formation of group consciousness. She concluded that the rethinking of theological concepts was inadequate for changing experience – that “imagery must emerge from, confirm, and relate to changes in experience, and be encouraged and reinforced by changes in social structures.”171

From the research cited in this section, it is evident that a number of social factors are related to images of God, though there is argument over whether God images cause social attitudes and behaviour, or whether social attitudes cause identification with a particular God image. Catholic women show little difference in God image from women of mainline Protestant denominations, but these groups differ from women of evangelical denominations and cultural groups. On the whole, Americans as a group and women as group prefer gender-neutral and power-neutral images of God. Women’s images of God are reflective of early contacts with the divine through people, nature or their interior life; life changes, crises, and suffering; self-acceptance; and age. Those who see God as judge or as having ordained the social order are more likely to have socially conservative attitudes. Those who do not see God as having ordained the social order are more politically liberal, favour racial equality, and would more likely help someone in need.

To summarise this chapter, psychological and social research supports many of the theories of theologians who suggest that God images are linked with people’s well-being and behaviour, e.g., that prevailing God images are male, that self-image and God image are positively correlated, that changing one of the images of God, self or others will change the

others, that God images do change over time with experience and are related to people's wider social activities and attitudes.

While previous studies have examined various aspects of God images, none have comprehensively explored patterns in women's God images over their lifetimes, documented the life experiences that may cause changes at various life stages, or studied New Zealand women's experiences of God through their images. The present study will document images, changes and related life experiences in a group of New Zealand Catholic lay women, concluding with implications for women themselves and for church.

Quantitative studies have been helpful in determining links between God images and various factors, but they can only look at a few variables at a time, and do not reflect the complexity and richness of human life and spirituality. It is primarily more qualitative research - listening to the people, places, life-changing and everyday events, the choices, struggles and delights of women's lives - which may offer a fuller context for exploring in richer detail, 'Who is God for us?'
CHAPTER 3
STUDY METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

This chapter situates the content and methodology of the thesis research within academic discipline and ideology, describes the study methods used throughout each stage of the research, and sets the context of the study.

3.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research developed from and in reaction to quantitative positivist research. The positivist paradigm is one in which objectivity is held to be a goal in all research. Positivists believe that there is one reality, and that by rigorous scientific study it can be accurately described. To obtain accurate results, the researcher must be detached, distant and objective.

Qualitative research developed in the postpositivist environment of the second half of the twentieth century, in tandem with arguments that reality can never be fully understood, and only partially described. Postmodern and poststructural critical theories and constructivism rejected the 'objectivity' of positivism, and located the truth criterion in the subjective, around persons within their concrete historical and social realities.

Forms of qualitative research are used by all of the diverse postpositivist schools of thought and in all social science disciplines. Valerie Janesick helpfully delineates eleven characteristics of qualitative research. It is a research that is 1) holistic - wanting to look at the whole picture, not just a narrow part; 2) contextual; 3) personal; 4) focused on understanding, not making predictions. It demands that 5) the researcher spend time in the research setting; 6) equal time in analysis; and 7) time developing a model of what happened in the research setting. Qualitative research 8) requires the interviewer to be an instrument of observation; 9) requires informed consent and sensitivity to ethical concerns;

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172 Renata Tesch gives an exhaustive summary of the development of qualitative research in psychology, education, sociology and anthropology, and of the multiplicity of methods which have been developed within each discipline. See her Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software Tools. (New York: The Falmer Press, 1990). Various postpositivist schools are also discussed in section 3.3.1.

173 Not all qualitative researchers would include this characteristic: it is most common in educational research.
10) is attentive to the researcher's own bias and preferences; and 11) requires ongoing analysis through all stages of research.\textsuperscript{174}

Qualitative research uses a variety of empirical methods: personal experience, life stories, observation, interviews. The qualitative researcher must be a "bricoleur"\textsuperscript{175} - a "jack of all trades" - using methods from many places and inventing new ones. Research is understood as interactive and shaped by the researcher's own history. Qualitative researchers believe that there is no value-free research or complete objectivity. Researchers tend to adhere to a methodology consistent with their own worldview,\textsuperscript{176} so must attempt insofar as is possible to articulate the characteristics and biases of that worldview as related to their research.

Corrine Glesne and Alan Peshkin\textsuperscript{177} make three observations about qualitative research:

1) While quantitative methods are supported by the positivist or scientific paradigm in which the world is made up of observable measurable facts, qualitative methodology is supported by an interpretivist paradigm in which reality is socially constructed, complex and ever-changing;

2) While in quantitative research, results are wanted that are objectively obtained and generalisable, qualitative research seeks to learn how various participants in their own social settings construct their world;

3) Where quantitative research begins with hypotheses, qualitative research ends with them. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to interpret and describe in order to understand lived experience, as opposed to developing universal laws\textsuperscript{178} of human behaviour or societal functioning.


\textsuperscript{177} Corrine Glesne & Allan Peshkin, Becoming Qualitative Researchers, 6, 19.

\textsuperscript{178} Universalising will always result in inadequate explanations for every person or context, and thus is not a major goal of qualitative research. Nonetheless, qualitative researchers do seek to draw appropriate conclusions from their observations where commonalities as well as individual differences are clear.
The nature of God imagery and the academic disciplines it touches on suggest that qualitative methodology is appropriate and necessary, as will become evident in the next sections.

3.2 Situating the Present Research among Academic Disciplines

A study of women’s images of God might theoretically be undertaken under the umbrella of any number of academic disciplines depending on its major thrust, the background of the researcher, or the methods the researcher chooses to employ. With major research questions and the general research methodology identified, it is timely to examine the aims and methods of similar research on God images to determine which studies may model similar aims and reflect the desired stance toward research. Only then can the research methodology and actual methods for the thesis research be located in a ‘home’ discipline and more carefully defined. As has been seen, although there has been a profusion of theological writing, very little research has come from that field: most previous research on images of God has been situated within the social sciences - primarily sociology and psychology.

Among the studies reviewed in Chapter 2, eight explored individuals’ present and past God images in some depth and used mostly qualitative methodology to do so: their methodologies will be examined more closely in 3.2.1 (research rooted in the social sciences) and 3.2.2 (research stemming primarily from a theological perspective). While these subsections comb past research to find near relations of the current thesis in methodological terms, 3.2.3 looks for a ‘home’ discipline for the content of this study - all in preparation for establishing the methodology (3.3) and methods (3.4) for the present research.

179 “Theology” here means all of what have sometimes been referred to as the ‘sacred sciences’ - such disciplines as biblical studies; church history; liturgics and homiletics; ethics; ministerial practice; Christology; ecclesiology and all other aspects of systematic theology; and spirituality. “Theology” can also refer more narrowly to systematic theology, that is, the articulation of a belief system. See Sandra M. Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” *Theological Studies*. 50 (1989): 687; and Anne E. Carr, “The New Vision of Feminist Theology: Method,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 8. In this chapter, the inclusive meaning is intended unless the narrower use is clear in the context.

180 The content of such research has already been discussed in Chapter 2. What is of concern here is to examine the methodologies further in order to determine which methods which would be the most appropriate for the present study.
Some of the studies\textsuperscript{181} which follow, e.g., Clanton and Saussy, combine qualitative and quantitative methods in either obtaining information or in analysing it. Five studies focus specifically on women, i.e., McDargh, Randour and Bondanza, Robbins, Anderson and Hopkins, and Sharp; and three draw on women's experience explicitly as a means of feminist theological praxis, i.e., Robbins, Saussy and Sharp. Two additional studies not discussed in the previous chapter because they did not focus directly on God images, but whose methodology may be appropriate, will also be discussed.\textsuperscript{182}

3.2.1 Research Rooted in the Social Sciences (Psychology, Sociology, Oral History)

Although the following studies cross disciplinary lines in their content into theology, or more particularly, spirituality, they are first of all social science studies in terms of their methodology and research interest\textsuperscript{183}. Ana-Marie Rizzuto's detailed study of God representations and their formation\textsuperscript{184} used clinical case studies in which the life histories of her subjects are the substance for her analysis and conclusions. Her study is a psychoanalytic one, and because it took place in a hospital/clinic context, there is no attempt to have anything but a rather distant and hierarchical doctor-patient relationship with those she was studying. Her study methods include interviews with patients and hospital staff, as well as some non-cognitive exercises. By asking her subjects to draw God as well as asking them questions about God, she attempted to tap into the aspects of a person's beliefs which were not entirely conscious.

Another use of the clinical case method is Mary Lou Randour and Julie Bondanza's study of the relationship between God images and female psychological development.\textsuperscript{185} These researchers tell the story of a client in therapy, tying in her life history with the growth

\textsuperscript{181} Studies by the authors listed here are discussed in more detail in the following sections, and are fully referenced there.

\textsuperscript{182} As would be expected, these mostly qualitative studies differ from the wholly quantitative studies mentioned in Chapter 2 in important ways: they are more holistic in their approach to people and issues; and they tend to present people in their research more as individuals and participants, rather than as anonymous subjects. In addition, the God image studies which have been qualitative are ones which focus on and/or are authored by women.

\textsuperscript{183} McDargh's study is arguably equally theological, but because of his deeply psychoanalytic training and methodology, his study will be discussed here for convenience.


\textsuperscript{185} Mary Lou Randour and Julie Bondanza, "The Concept of God," 301-313.
of her God images. Here the researchers' relationship with the client is less distant and more interactive, although still in a clinical context. Both their and Rizzuto's methods used a combination of interviews/life histories which allowed for the participants' beliefs to be seen in the context of their lives.

Two other qualitative studies have drawn on Rizzuto's work and, by virtue of their authors' experience/training in two fields, have brought more theological depth into object-relations\textsuperscript{186} studies. These latter two studies probed God images in relation to faith; first John McDargh\textsuperscript{187}, and then in connection with coming to terms with the death of a mother, Martha Robbins.\textsuperscript{188} They show consideration of the women they study as equally capable human beings, although McDargh's study grew out of clinical research. Both studies integrate theological knowledge as well as reverence with a psychological perspective of the formation and development of God images. In addition, Robbins allows the women's stories - rich with life experiences - to enflesh and form her theories of psychological and spiritual growth.

Such psychological studies are concerned primarily with the interplay of personal/interpersonal psychology and the formation of God images, although Robbins' study also touches on the wider sociopolitical context of her participants.

Two related New Zealand studies offer other study method options. Sociologist Christine Cheyne's study of sexism in the Catholic church\textsuperscript{189} invited people to participate through interviews, or written or oral submissions. Each person was encouraged to tell her or his story of relationship with the church, and was given a number of confidentiality options. Through excerpts from hundreds of stories, Cheyne then presented the main emergent themes. Likewise, Jane Tolerton\textsuperscript{190} invited convent-schooled women to tell stories of their schooling and how it has affected their lives. Because the stories were to appear under real names, Tolerton gave her interviewees total right of veto: some women chose to withdraw their stories or to temper their words before they appeared in print. In the final

\textsuperscript{186} Object-relations theory has the aim of understanding "how the self develops in the context of significant others." (Ana-Marie Rizzuto, \textit{The Birth of the Living God}, 11.) The significant others - including God - are the "objects" to which the self relates. John McDargh explains that a human being's first relationships are with "parts" of persons (mother's breasts, eyes), and that only later does the self become capable of relating to an entire person. Notwithstanding, he regrets "object" as an unfortunate carry-over from Freudian terminology. See John McDargh, \textit{Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory}, 18.

\textsuperscript{187} John McDargh, \textit{Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory}.

\textsuperscript{188} Martha A. Robbins, \textit{Midlife Women and Death of Mother}.

\textsuperscript{189} Christine Cheyne, \textit{Made in God's Image}.

oral histories, Tolerton simply wove each of the women's stories from her interview questions, allowing the woman's words themselves to tell the story.

From doctor/patient relationships to dialogue and mutuality, from researcher use of medical records to fully informed participation, from description to allowing the women's words to speak loudly – the sequence of the above qualitative studies represents a subtle shift in methodology toward moving the persons interviewed from 'subjects' to 'participants'.

3.2.2 Research Coming from the Perspective of Theology (Ministerial Practice, Spirituality and Feminist Theology)

Although the following studies use social science methodology, and some of their researchers are trained in both theology and psychology, the studies come out of a ministry context or result from theological/spiritual research questions, and specifically address theological/spiritual implications. Two studies which use both qualitative and quantitative social science methodology are the projects reported by Jann Aldredge Clanton191 and Carroll Saussy.192 These studies attempt to link people's God images, personality characteristics and self esteem; in other words, exploring aspects of their theology/spirituality and their psychological complexion.

Clanton, a medical chaplain, conducted an opinion survey to determine whether there were relationships between the gender of God images of men and women and self-esteem. Her survey and analysis were quantitative in style, but the survey was accompanied by personal interviews which gave somewhat more depth to her survey findings.

Saussy's study began with a written faith and self esteem inventory given to a large number of women, but she realised that: "Inventcry results lacked the concrete, interpersonal exploration and connection that has been the mark of feminist studies ... Understanding the relationship between faith in self and self esteem required engagement with women ..."193 Saussy, a professor of pastoral theology, then proceeded to use

191 Jann Aldredge Clanton, In Whose Image?
192 Carroll Saussy, God Images and Self Esteem.
193 Carroll Saussy, God Images and Self Esteem, 22-23.
interviews with a smaller number of women so that she could better discover and describe
the relationship between faith and self esteem in the context of each woman's life.194

In The Feminine Face of God,195 Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins explored
women's spiritualities and their understandings of God. The researchers interviewed more
than 100 women for about two days each, and although they had a question guide, they
simply asked the women to tell their life stories. The researchers did not set out to prove or
disprove a hypothesis; they went into the project simply wanting to understand more about
how women found God in their lives. Neither were there any preset methods of analysis or
preconceived models for women's spiritual growth. The researchers, one of whom comes
from a background in psychology, looked for patterns and commonalities in the women's
stories: but in the end, although some broad conclusions were drawn, the main one was that
each woman's story had its own patterns which could not be collapsed or moulded into a
common shape or generic model.

A doctoral dissertation by Carolyn Louise Sharp196 used previously filmed videotapes
of Quebecois women telling their life stories in order to explore the question of God in their
lives. More than any of the previous studies, Sharp insists on the centrality of women's
experience in the whole endeavour of feminist theology. She is clear that feminist theological
methodology requires listening to women's stories, and that “nos paroles sont paroles vivantes,
parole de Dieu”197 - women's words are words of life, are the word of God. She acknowledges
the diversity of women's experiences, and seeks to articulate the theology of women in the
context of working class Quebec, by listening to women and allowing their stories to reflect
the struggles and hopes of their lives and, ultimately, the ground of their being. Sharp did
find images of God in the narratives she examined, but because her goal was explicitly to
look for the images in pre-existing narratives, the God images are not directly or fully
articulated.

194 Another study discussed in Chapter 2 also rejected the quantitative portion of its findings because the
researchers realised that participants did not understand the theological distinctions in the categories of God
images they chose. The use of pre-arranged categories of images will always be a problem for quantitative
studies, because not everyone understands nor do their God images fit the categories researchers choose. Like
Saussy, these researchers used only the qualitative portion of their research, in which open-ended questions were
asked about God images. See D. Hutsebaut and D. Verhoeven, “Studying Dimensions of God Representation:
Choosing Closed or Open-Ended Research Questions.” The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion. 5

195 Sherry Ruth Anderson & Patricia Hopkins, The Feminine Face of God.

196 Carolyn Louise Sharp, “Listening to Women.”

The latter two studies, though theological in content, use methodology which is close to the cutting edge of postmodern social science methodology. The stance toward research and the methods employed are wholly qualitative and employ tenets of feminist methodology - implicitly in the former case, explicitly in the latter case: the researchers believe in the importance of women’s stories and experience; they seek to articulate the divine in women’s lives by sifting their stories and using the words of the women themselves; they look for common themes but also respect diversity and the importance of context.

A study which is closely related to Sharp’s in methodology is reported by Mary McClintock Fulkerson. Fulkerson analyses existing discourses of mid-twentieth century Presbyterian women (publications), Pentecostal women (call narratives and testimonies) and recent feminist theologians (books) to identify if and how God works as a liberating force in their lives. While the first two groups had God images which upheld their less-than-liberated roles in society, they both demonstrated a liberation in terms of their self-worth given their places in society. After an examination of feminist theology, Fulkerson concludes that it produces experts on a God beyond patriarchy, but asks if it contributes to liberation of other women by honouring difference.

The present study, as will be seen in more detail in 3.4, will draw on methods from a number of previous studies. Its overall methodology comes closest to that of Martha Robbins in its dialogical approach and allowing participants’ words to enflesh interpretations of God images and the experiences contributing to their formation and change. But in which academic discipline does such a study fit?

3.2.3 Spirituality as a Theological Discipline

The questions raised about God images in Chapter 1 include some that have been previously asked by psychologists: What are women’s God images, how do they change over time, and why? The present research would like to ask the questions again, but with a group of women in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, searching especially for life.


199 Difference, an issue and distinguishing feature in feminist theologies, is explored in 3.3.1.
experiences which may be involved in the formation and change of God images. Such a study might be considered in the realms of sociology, social psychology, social anthropology, or women’s studies. Probing women’s God images in depth, however - and the relationship between those God images and women’s understandings of related phenomena like church or suffering - is an endeavour which would seem to belong to theology, and to the lived theology which is spirituality.

The present research is focused on the fundamentally theological question, “Who is God for Us?”, which arises from a situation of pastoral concern (1.1), aims to explore where women find God, and looks at the implications for women and church. Because the way in which this research question will interact with its context, probing not only women’s faith lives but their whole lives, the research finds a home alongside biblical studies, theology and others within the emerging discipline of spirituality.

Spirituality as an academic discipline studies the spirituality of persons which, as Sandra Schneiders notes, is both a fundamental dimension of human beings and the lived experience which actualises that dimension. A study like the present one, which intends to explore how God is present in the lives of human beings, would listen to the experiences of people and how they make sense of experiences in connection to their relationship with God: it would explore the spirituality of persons.

Spirituality of persons has been defined and explored by hundreds of writers, and its meaning has changed and evolved over the centuries since St. Paul first distinguished life in the spirit from life in the flesh. Contemporary definitions of spirituality strive first of all to articulate a connection between the individual person’s experience and God. Spirituality

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200 Martha Robbins thoroughly explored one such experience, the death of a mother, as a factor which resulted in changes in women’s lives, and in changes in their images of God. Her work suggests that any significant change can cause others, and that exposure to feminism, career opportunities, mid-life and other life circumstances can all play roles in life change and growth for women. See her *Midlife Women and Death of Mother*, 75.

201 This research will not examine developmental factors such as stages of faith or moral development, nor will it look at God images as a function of individual’s personalities. These would be thesis projects in their own right, and involve developmental psychology and the psychology of personality.


203 For a review of the way the term has been used, and a summary of the thoughts of a number of contemporary theologians on the subject, see Sandra M. Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?” *Horizons* 13 (1986): 253-274; and “Spirituality in the Academy,” 680-684.

204 Spirituality need not refer to Christian spirituality, although that is the focus of this thesis. Other world religions may also be referred to as having distinctive spiritualities, and there is rapid growth of Goddess-centred spirituality among post-Christian feminists. See, e.g., Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).
is about human relationship with and experience of God, a process of becoming which one must strive for (Schneiders)\(^{205}\) and a process of revelation (Carol Ochs)\(^{206}\).

While a sub-discipline of theology in the academic sense, spirituality in the personal sense is broader than theology. Anne Carr\(^{207}\) notes that it reaches beyond the cognitive to embrace feelings and convictions, thought patterns and behaviour. Others agree with this holistic view of spirituality as encompassing “the fullness of our relationships” (Judith Plaskow)\(^{208}\) connected to the world around us (Gregory Baum)\(^{209}\) suffusing all our actions (Elizabeth Liebert)\(^{210}\) and part of our integration and growth as human persons (Joann Wolski Conn)\(^{211}\).

Schneiders sees the academic discipline of spirituality as studying this spirituality of persons. She understands it as an autonomous discipline which functions in partnership with theology, but reaching beyond theology to other disciplines, especially to the social sciences, which provide resources for understanding and studying aspects of spirituality. The academic discipline of spirituality is “the study of the experiential interaction between humans and the divine,”\(^{212}\) “the field of study which attempts to investigate in an interdisciplinary way spiritual experience as such ... [it] must utilise whatever approaches are relevant to the reality being studied.”\(^{213}\)

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205 Sandra M. Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality,” 266.


Spirituality, while in origin a Christian term, is used more broadly today to describe "the lived experience or praxis within a particular religious or spiritual tradition." The discipline of spirituality has been discussed here solely within the Christian context, because the research itself is focused on those who are rooted within that context, and its findings will be interpreted in the context of the participants' and researcher's Catholic Christianity.

The development of God images, as will be seen in Chapters 4-7, is an evolving process, one involving persons in their relationships with others and their contexts, as well as with God - a wholly spiritual process. Thus the present research on God images situates itself in this emerging discipline of Christian spirituality. The research question is one that is at the very heart of that spirituality, because to seek to understand something of how women image God is to seek to understand something of the relationship or connection between persons and God. God images, their sources, their growth and evolution, and their implications are all part of that on-going process of relating, striving and becoming; of understanding God as human beings in given historical, geographical and sociopolitical contexts.

Having located this study of God images in the theological discipline of spirituality, it now remains to identify an appropriate qualitative research methodology. Researcher preference and the focus of the study on women's spirituality lead to the proposition that feminist theological methodology may be a good fit.

3.3 Feminist Theological Methodology

3.3.1 Situating Feminist Theological Methodology

There is some argument as to whether there are distinctively feminist methodologies or methods in all disciplines, but as the writing on feminist methodology becomes more

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215 I understand methodology as the underlying attitudes and perspectives which dictate the methods, which are the actual ways and means which one uses in the course of a study. For example, if my perspective (methodology) says that a deeper level of truth can best be gleaned when a researcher shares some level of relationship with a participant, then I am more likely to use methods such as face to face interviewing rather than mail-in questionnaires.
voluminous, it is evident that there is a consensus on some of the core attributes of a feminist methodology. Some of these attributes help situate feminist methodology among other postpositivist qualitative research methodologies.

The previous discussion of qualitative research (3.1) indicated that it had its roots in the broad postpositivist effort to make research more holistic and participative. Feminist educational researcher Patti Lather has defined, by means of a table (3-1), the methodological implications of various kinds of related postpositivist research, one of which is feminist research.

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<tr>
<th>Postpositivist Inquiry</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Predict</strong></td>
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<td>Positivism</td>
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<td>Naturalistic</td>
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Lather’s framework for defining research in this way is based on Habermas’ categories of intent or “human interests that underscore knowledge claims: prediction, understanding, emancipation.” She adds the “deconstruct” category. While each of the three kinds of postpositivist inquiry, which she refers to as distinct paradigms, “offers a different approach to generating and legitimating knowledge,” many aspects of each overlap. In addition, each one, while falling predominantly in one category according to Lather, may also utilise insights and methods - as well as the major intents - of the other categories. Thus, emancipatory feminist research may share with interpretive, hermeneutic or phenomenological research the desire to understand the meaning of something, and if it is postmodern, it also seeks to deconstruct existing theories of knowledge.

Feminist theory shares much in common with critical theory, which had its origins with a group of social researchers of the Frankfurt School who, after reflection on the

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218 Patti Lather, *Getting Smart*, 6-7.
injustices of the world including the Jewish holocaust and in dialogue with the
philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and others came to believe that a new way of
understanding and being in the world was needed. Postmodern philosopher Jacques
Derrida saw that totalitarianism was the result of an arrogance implicit in the claims of
reason: “The certainty of reason is a tyranny which can only be sustained by the evils of
repressing or excluding what is uncertain, what doesn’t fit in, what is different. Reason is
indifferent to the Other.” Likewise, historian Michael Foucault saw that the reason of
rationalism “requires - even creates - social categories of the mad, criminal and deviant
against which to define itself. It is thus sexist, racist, and imperialist in practice.”

Critical theory holds that because society legitimates certain ways of thinking which
can easily exclude groups of people and oppress them, it is a responsibility of writers to
question social structures as well as the systems of thought with which they are upheld.
Writing and research should be used as forms of social or cultural criticism, and such
criticism should begin with the researcher’s own awareness of ideologies and assumptions.
Research should not merely interpret, but should confront - should move individuals toward
emancipation and society toward transformation.

Feminist theory is allied with critical theory, taking as its most distinctive feature, that
social structures and the theories of knowledge which those structures have spawned - and
which likewise reinforce them - have been exclusive and oppressive of women because of
their sex, and of other groups of people set apart by “otherness” like class and race. It shares
with critical theory and postmodern theories a skepticism of beliefs about truth, knowledge,
power, self, and language that are taken for granted and serve as legitimation for western
culture.

The use of language is the major concern of poststructuralism. For poststructuralists,
language does not only reflect social reality, it creates it: “Language is seen as both carrier
and creator of a culture’s epistemological codes.” “Language is how social organisation

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221 Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt, Postmodernism for Beginners, 83.


223 Patti Lather, Getting Smart, 111.
and power are defined and contested and the place where our sense of selves, our subjectivity, is constructed." Thus, for example, feminists have struggled for the retirement of the generic use of "man" so that speakers are compelled to be clear about whom they are speaking. And so too have feminist theologians challenged the use of exclusively male language in speaking about God, as was seen in Chapter 2. For people to continue to call upon God only in male terms perpetuates the belief that only men are like God, and can therefore claim certain rights, powers and authority that are unavailable to women, both in society and in the churches.

Such concerns have demanded that feminism not only be a political ideology, but that it bring to light the hidden political positions of established institutions, one of which was that male human beings were the norm for all humanity, and that by default or design, females were other and lesser. Feminist theory thus shares with postmodernism an understanding that reality is socially, historically and politically constructed, that this reality (or the existing understanding of it) must be deconstructed because the understanding and interpretation of reality depends on the worldview and ideology of the one who has interpreted it. David Tracy comments that the methodological challenge which is the concern with social location in an analysis of political context "has linked gender studies to the emancipatory thrust of all critical theories, and has linked feminist theologies ... to the emergence, across the globe, of liberation movements and theologies." Patti Lather placed feminist theory predominantly in the emancipatory school (Table 3-1) because it understands its major work as the liberation of women. As Oakley explains,


225 "Feminism," says Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "is the startling concept that women are human beings," Dunedin Seminar, 1995. Social scientist Ann Oakley quotes 1913 writer Rebecca West: "Feminist: I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." "Some Problems of Scientific Method and Feminist Research Practice." Workshop report. (Medical Research Council of New Zealand, 1989), 13.

226 Many methodologists have compiled flow charts and tables in an attempt to explain the derivation of various schools of thought from positivism through postpositivism to multiple postmodern schools, noting the various attributes, understandings of knowledge, and approaches to research of each. Some of these can be found in: Egon G. Guba & Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," in Handbook of Qualitative Research. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1994), 105-117; Patti Lather, Getting Smart, especially 6-7, also 160-161; Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., Handbook of Qualitative Research, 13-14; and Renata Tesch, Qualitative Research, 72-73.

"a feminist is someone whose political analysis of women as an oppressed social group informs her understanding of the world, and who wishes to use this perspective on a policy level to improve women’s position."228

Feminist study, including feminist theology, began with a critical analysis of the ways in which existing social and political structures had oppressed women, and then attempted to put women 'back in the picture,' recovering women’s stories, perspectives and contributions. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s biblical hermeneutics, for example, is a hermeneutic of both suspicion and advocacy. It seeks to uncover and recover the contribution of women.229 Feminist theology, like feminist theory, questions outright the male-constructed social and political worldview or framework that made this recovery necessary. Elizabeth Johnson delineates three stages: deconstruction, recovery of lost traditions, and creative reconstruction.230 Pamela Dickey Young notes that deconstruction does not end as one stage which gives way to another: "Indeed, critique continues and must continue parallel to reconstruction."231 Connie Fiell-Mahony232 notes that the stages of critique and recovery/reconstruction parallel the elements of suspicion and recovery in hermeneutical theory as espoused by Paul Ricoeur, and that feminist methodology in religious studies follows, often implicitly, this hermeneutical theory.

Thus feminist theory, including feminist theology, is aligned with hermeneutical theory as well as critical theory. Feminist theologies can also be oriented toward praxis233 or action research234, and Mary Hunt and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argue that they should be. Anne Carr notes that feminist theology “is usually understood as a form of liberation


232 Fiell-Mahony uses the work of Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as examples. Daly uses but does not articulate a hermeneutic of suspicion while the latter two theologians “are consciously aware of their presuppositions and name these as a part of their hermeneutical approach.” Connie Fiell-Mahony, “Feminist Methodology in Religious Studies.” M.A. Thesis, University of Calgary, 1992.


theology, but in fact it employs a variety of different approaches within that broad rubric." Each individual feminist theologian, in fact, will have her/his own leanings toward related research methods, and borrow freely from them. Fiell-Mahony concludes that at present "one cannot finally outline one unchanging distinctive feminist method because the 'method' is 'no method.'" Citing Sandra Harding's work, she warns that "feminists must be clear about what method they are adopting, for it usually has some political strings attached."

No matter what the ideological leanings, feminist theory has always used women's experience as the distinguishing category from all other critical theories, despite conflict with the postmodern tenet that there are no 'universals' even among women. Feminist theologians have recently begun to see differences in culture, class, religion, values, etc. as a challenge because women's experience is, in fact, women's experiences. On one hand, feminist theologians struggle to maintain some universality for cohesiveness, and to further the liberation of women from engrained patriarchal attitudes. Schüssler Fiorenza stresses how important universality is, fearing "particularisation, fragmentation ... of the disenfranchised and oppressed." But the very differences in contexts of women may limit women's abilities to speak for the experiences of others. As Shawn Copeland notes, "truth is never independent of cultural, social and historical conditions."

Feminist theologians have now begun to use difference, acknowledging it and celebrating it as one of the distinguishing features of their methodology alongside women's experience. In this thesis, to be faithful to women's individual journeys, diversity or difference is a central avenue of exploration. Highlighting the unique experience of

individuals does not, however, preclude the identification of common threads which may also be significant for women and for church.

Having identified feminist theological methodology as appropriate for the study and having understood its relationship to feminist and related theories, what now are the specific aims to which such a methodology should aspire?

3.3.2 Aims of Feminist Theological Methodology and Criteria for Research Soundness

Feminist theology, like all feminist thought, requires a paradigm shift\(^\text{241}\) to a new lens or angle of vision\(^\text{242}\) with which to view the world. In theology, as in other disciplines, a paradigm shift entails the questioning and often turning upside down of all that has been thought of as authoritative and true. If feminism is “a comprehensive ideology, rooted in women’s experience of sexual oppression, which engages in a critique of patriarchy, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization,”\(^\text{243}\) then feminist theology is the part of feminism’s “quest for justice which is concerned with critical analysis and liberating retrieval of the meaning of religious traditions.”\(^\text{244}\)

For theology to make the shift from an androcentric to a feminist paradigm requires, in the words of Shawn Copeland, a thorough-going critical hermeneutical, epistemological and praxial commitment of theology to the radical liberation of women ... [Such theologies] entail certain common fundamentals: women’s experiences form the point of departure, ideology critique as well as critique of all forms of patriarchy, explicit

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\(^{244}\) Elizabeth Johnson et al., “Feminist Theology,” 327.
identification of hermeneutical location, social analysis and praxial resistance to kyriarchal oppressions.

A commitment to these principles is evidenced by a number of feminist theologians who have proposed frameworks for methodologies in the areas of religious studies, theology and spirituality. Table 3-2 (following page) summarises the major principles enunciated by each theologian, and categorises them in order to delineate the aims of feminist theological research methodology - in other words, the characteristics by which research in feminist theology and spirituality should be judged.

While recognising (Table 3-2) emancipation, women's experience, subjectivity and participation, an interdisciplinary nature and a concern for truth as major aims from a feminist theological perspective, social science methodology can also be drawn upon as both a validation and a check on those principles - which are really still in gestation.

Within the social sciences, however, there is a broad range of thinking about how to evaluate the trustworthiness of research. Traditional quantitative reliability and validity concepts have been replaced with a different language, but sometimes related criteria. Five criteria were evaluated for their appropriate use within feminist methodology, and this study in particular. Three of those were transferable to this research and two were judged

245 M. Shawn Copeland, "Difference as a Category," 141.

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>TABLE 3-2</strong></th>
<th>Methodological Frameworks for Feminist Theologies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fiell-Mahony:</strong> Feminist Religious Studies</td>
<td><strong>Schüssler Fiorenza:</strong> Feminist Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>challenge gender inequalities</strong></td>
<td>• conscientisation</td>
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<td>• justice as starting point</td>
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<td>• integrate praxis-research</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• women’s liberation is central focus</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>women’s experience taken into account</strong></td>
<td>• relate tradition to women’s reality</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• study history and context of women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>redefine self&lt;sup&gt;252&lt;/sup&gt;, God, traditional objectivity/subjectivity</strong></td>
<td>• participation and partiality, not objectivity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>interdisciplinary</strong></td>
<td>• different experience and formulations beneficial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>truth is context-dependent</strong></td>
<td>• truth dependent on potential for women’s emancipation</td>
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<sup>249</sup> Mary E. Hunt, “Roundtable Discussion: On Feminist Theology,” 85-86.

<sup>250</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality,” 267-269.


<sup>252</sup> Elizabeth Johnson also notes that “the power of language to constitute the self” is important to feminist reflection, and as will be seen, language and its function will be important in the present study. See Elizabeth Johnson *et al.*, “Feminist Theology,” 329.
Two of the three which were transferable—emancipation and credibility—are equivalent to emancipation and truth seeking aims from Table 3-2. The third, confirmability, requires reflexivity or self-reflection with regard to the influence of researcher bias on the research.

With theological and social science aims in mind, the present research aims to be:

1) **emancipatory.** The content of the present research is centred on an issue which is important to Catholic women’s liberation—the understanding of and giving voice to images of God which are life-giving. Social structures which may be obstacles to women’s freedom will also be explored, for example, traditions of the church with regard to naming God. The emancipation criterion also gauges whether the research promotes reflection, conscientisation, wholeness and freedom in participants, researcher or others. It can be demonstrated by study methods which are participatory, dialectic and respectful of the dignity, individuality and contexts of the participants; and by methods and presentation of findings which encourage self-reflection and give voice to participants and others.

2) **rooted in women’s experience** and will seek to understand women’s God images in their social, political, temporal, geographical contexts. As such, women, their stories and God images are expected to be different and celebrated as such. Common patterns will also be explored. The thesis began with the experiences of the researcher, and the research itself begins and concerns itself with the experiences of the participants. The researcher understands and uses their experience, as well as her own, as lenses through which to view images of God.

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253 Two common criteria in the literature were judged not to be fully relevant for this study. The first, applicability (also called transferability, external and construct validity) was suggested by criteria discussed in David Erlandson et al., *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry*, 132-160, drawing on Y.S. Lincoln and E.G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 333; and Patti Lather, *Getting Smart*, 67. It has to do with whether the study findings would be true in other contexts or with other participants in similar contexts. This criterion is more useful in quantitative studies or studies with larger numbers of participants. In this study, the women’s stories are considered unique (and feminist theology would underline their difference as critical), although the underlying factors in God image formation may very well be transferable to other contexts and other participants. God images may also be generalisable in some way, but it would take a much larger study to verify these things—and transferability for that kind of study would be important. The second criterion, consistency (dependability, reliability) was suggested by the criteria discussed in David Erlandson et al., *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry*, 132-160, drawing on Y.S. Lincoln and E.G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 333. It is concerned with whether research findings are repeatable with the same participants and if not, could the variance be explained. Some of the findings would not be repeatable given that God images are dynamic, and change with temporal and social context—but their variance may be able to be tracked and explained. Other findings such as past God images might be the same, or variance explained by differences in memory, experience and development over time. To design a study for consistency, the researcher would use less open questions and story techniques, and probably a simpler and more direct set of questions, but this would likely limit the breadth of responses. Use of more than one researcher to analyse the same information would also promote consistency.

254 Some qualitative researchers call this emancipation and others use the similar concept of catalytic validity. See Patti Lather, *Getting Smart*, 67; as well as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Roundtable Discussion,” 73.
3) subjective and participatory. Rather than a distant objective stance, subjectivity is a necessity in the "advance toward truth." Women will be involved with the researcher as participants and, at times, collaborators. A relationship is expected to develop between researcher and participants, and is deemed necessary in order for participants to trust the researcher with the gift of their lives in story, and to bring truth and depth to the research. While the researcher brings purpose and planning to interviews and analysis, the conversation with women and their stories is, to a large extent, mutual: a "hearing one another into speech." 

4) confirmable in that its interpretations and conclusions will be trackable to the participants' stories and responses to questions. Confirmability is seen as a balance to subjectivity in ensuring that findings are not purely the result of researcher bias. Liberal use of the participants' own words and participant life story checks will be used; and researcher self-criticism and supervisors relied on to challenge interpretations or unwarranted conclusions. Researcher bias arising from researcher social location (Appendix C) includes the valuing of women's equality, integrity, freedom and autonomy; mutuality in relationships with others including God; personal growth and awareness; breadth and depth in God imagery; feminine and gender neutral images of God; good self esteem; education; and environmental and social responsibility.

5) interdisciplinary in its content and methods. Spirituality, like feminist theology and feminism in general, involves the whole person. Many facets of the women's lives, particularly social and spiritual ones, are explored in this study. Research methods (3.4) are drawn from many schools of thought and subject areas within the social sciences.

6) concerned with seeking truth or credible. Several criteria for truth are presented by the three feminist theologians who address this issue (Table 3-2). The women's stories are to be understood as the truth of their understandings of their lives and God-images presented

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255 Bernard Lonergan, *The Subject.* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1968), 5. Lonergan argues that those in pursuit of objective truth forget the "conditions of its emergence" and suggests that present widespread alienation of Catholics from the dogmas of faith "is not unconnected with a previous one-sidedness that so insisted on the objectivity of truth as to leave subjects and their needs out of account." (pp 3-4). Lonergan advises: "it is only by close attention to the data of consciousness that one can discover insights ... so complex a matter will never be noticed as long as the subject is neglected." (p 9).


257 Also known (or formerly known as neutrality or objectivity), confirmability is suggested by David Erlandson et al., *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry,* 132-160, drawing on Y.S. Lincoln and E.G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry,* 333.

258 Also known as internal or face validity, this criterion is suggested by David A. Erlandson et al., 132-160, drawing on Y.S. Lincoln and E.G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry,* 333; and Patti Lather, *Getting Smart,* 67.
from their individual contexts and perspectives. The truth criterion is facilitated by the use of multiple data gathering methods (triangulation); trust in the researcher - participant relationship (including a number of interviews over time); and researcher knowledge of participants' contexts. That the researcher has faithfully given voice to women's truths is dependent upon careful recording and transcription of interviews, and interpretation of their understandings throughout the thesis. This truth is verifiable by participant checks of transcripts and manuscript; trust in the researcher - participant relationship and knowledge of context as mentioned above; and reader checks on whether interpretations fit the data.

These considerations, informed by feminist theological and related methodologies, constitute the basis of the methods used to investigate the questions (1.2) around the nature, development and implications of women's images of God.

3.4 Study Methods

The methods elucidated in this section are intended to reflect - and see accomplished in the present research - the aims of feminist theological methodology as outlined in 3.3.2.

3.4.1 Selection of Participants

Undertaking to learn about contemporary Catholic lay women's images of God in New Zealand required first answering the question, "Which Catholic lay women?" One could focus on Maori or pakeha, or any one of a number of different pakeha cultures within Aotearoa. One could choose, for example, women from a given geographical area, age, income level, educational level, social class, political party, or those with a given attitude toward church or society (e.g., feminist or not, liberal or conservative) or some combination of the above.

One of the factors that helped resolve this dilemma was the researcher's stance that qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with women was the best way to gain a reasonable understanding of each woman's life, faith, and more particularly, God images. It

259 Looking at some of the qualitative studies discussed in section 3.3, Martha Robbins' study (Midlife Women and Death of Mother, 16-23) served as a good guideline for what to expect. She interviewed ten women in two ninety minute interviews and these resulted in over 500 single-spaced pages of transcript which implied hundreds of hours of transcribing and then more hundreds of hours searching through the text of the interviews in the process of analysis.
was judged prudent to aim for a group of no more than ten to twelve women to interview, allowing for one or two who might be unable to complete the process.

With a small group, a cross-section of Catholic lay women would not be a possibility, so for whatever group was chosen, the findings would have to be carefully presented as the stories and God images of that particular group and, more importantly, of each particular woman within her own context. This, as has been seen, is in any case a tenet of feminist theological methodology, and of feminist and related methodologies: while findings can point in a given direction, they are not broadly generalisable, but rather are particular and contextual.

After considerable discussion between supervisor and researcher, the decision was made to invite volunteer participants from Christian Family Life Education (CFLE), a mainstream Catholic organisation which trains teachers/facilitators in the area of spirituality and sexuality. The group, due to its training, already had experience reflecting on and articulating some aspects of spirituality, and since the proposed research project would involve considerable articulation, that experience was judged to be a good thing.

Forty-three women were contacted by letter, and sixteen volunteered to participate. The original twelve participants were the first twelve who could be available for interviews. Eleven women completed all the interviews, seven of them over a period of approximately eighteen months. Another four women completed the remaining interview some four years later. The twelfth woman completed a portion of the first interview, but withdrew from the study due to other time commitments. Thus eleven women completed the study, and it is their stories which are the basis of the findings of this research.

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260 I raise this point, because for me and for many people, including most scientists and some social scientists, it is still automatic to expect that a “worthwhile” study will generate findings that are generalisable to a larger segment of the population. It is a matter of entering more fully into a paradigm that is nonpositivist to accept that the findings of a study are still valuable even though they express the truth and reality primarily of those who are direct participants in it. This is not to say that others who share some of the particularities of the participants’ contexts will not also share in some of the theologies that are expressed in the study findings. There will be similarities, and hopefully there will be similarities with a large number of people in some way, but nonetheless there can be no blanket claim to generalisability for all or even a given portion of the Roman Catholic women in this country. It is in the nature of feminist inquiry that difference be explored, as well as similarity.


262 Details of participant selection, including the letters of approach and initial survey, are found in Appendix D.
3.4.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in any study, but they are perhaps more conscious at all stages of a study which follows feminist methodology and attempts to engage with its participants in as mutual a way as possible. Hence, from the conception of the study - through the setting of interview questions; the approach and on-going dialogue with participants in interviews and subsequent text-checking with them by mail and email; the analysis of information; the presentation of their stories; and the distribution of results to them at the project's completion - each step was thought through in terms of respect for the participants as contributing partners in the research.264

3.4.3 Interviews and Transcription265

In determining how to conduct interviews with the participants in the study, one of the major tasks was setting the interview questions.266 This was done with constant reference to the research questions in 1.2. A pilot interview assisted in the ordering and wording of questions. All decisions, from how to ask questions, how best to contact participants at various stages of the study, what choices to offer them, how the interviews were organised, were considered with the aims of feminist theological methodology (3.3.2) in mind, as well as practicalities of time and place.

Before research questions were asked at the first interview, participants were reminded of their freedom not to answer a question if they chose not to, the confidentiality they could expect from the research, then invited to ask any questions they wished about the project. Participants were asked to offer a pseudonym for naming themselves in the thesis to respect their anonymity. Since the women were expecting research on God images, the interview then began with direct questions on God images, followed by the less cognitive...

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263 Description of the time frame is included with information on interviews and transcription in Appendix E.

264 The University of Otago had draft ethical guidelines at the time of the project's initiation (1995), primarily concerned with ensuring participants' knowledge and consent. The guidelines were fully adhered to and their specifications fit well within the requirements of feminist methodology. Further details of ethical considerations are included in Appendix F.

265 Details of the interview and transcription process, including rationale for methodological decisions and literature support, can be found in Appendix E.

266 Interview guides used in the first, second and third interviews are found in Appendix G.
exercise of writing a prayer, an adjective checklist for God, then the drawing and telling of their life stories.

The second interview finished the process of life story telling, used an adjective checklist for self, asked a number of theological questions, and usually ended with asking for comments on a number of visual images.

The third interview finished any remaining questions from the second interview, then asked a number of supplementary questions on theology, spirituality and background which were prompted by the women's stories or responses in earlier interviews. A series of interviews allowed the researcher to clarify meaning and deepen understanding, as well as giving an opportunity for researcher and participants to develop a relationship over an extended period of time.

Participants were given a choice of location, and most preferred to be interviewed in their own homes. The first and second interviews were about two to four hours each, and the third was about an hour, except in cases where the questions from earlier interviews needed to be finished. Interview questions were not followed rigidly: if content of later questions arose earlier in the interview, that train of thought was followed, and other questions returned to later.

Interview time was not all focused on the thesis project. Considerable time was spent, usually 30 to 90 minutes before, during and/or after each of the first two interviews over cups of tea or meals, getting to know one another. It was anticipated that in New Zealand culture, hospitality would play a role in the trust and relationship building process, and this proved to be true.

The whole process of interviewing, and the interactions that followed in corresponding about transcript changes, as well as later review of parts of the manuscript itself, was only possible because a basic relationship of trust had formed between researcher and participants. This reciprocal and collaborative relationship made possible a "dialogic enterprise" in which both participants and researcher spoke and listened, reflected and learned.267

Interviews were audio-taped, and in the following months after each interview the tapes were transcribed, and transcripts sent to the participants for any amendments they wished to make.

267 Patti Lather regards reciprocity as a critical part of emancipation research, contributing as it does to self-reflection on the parts of all involved. See Patti Lather, Getting Smart, 55-60.
3.4.4 Analysis and Interpretation of Information

Theoretical grounding for interpretive practices used in information analysis in this thesis is found in the aims of feminist theological methodology which conclude section 3.3.2. Actual methods for analysis and interpretation, like those for interviews, were partially borrowed from precursor studies (3.2) and partially stem from the researcher’s own creativity and judgement.

3.4.4.1 Tracing the Formation and Development of God Images in Each Woman’s Story

The first step in the analysis was to read each of the women’s entire transcripts through, and to extract the information which pertained to the formation of her God images over time. The women’s stories presented in Chapters 4-7 are the weaving together of the most relevant parts of each woman’s life, including who was important to her, what her joys and sadnesses were, and who God was for her at each stage of her life.

The major purposes of these chapters are to allow the women’s stories to be heard as much as possible in their own words and to paint the picture of the formation and change in each woman’s God images over the course of her life, with pointers toward the people and

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268 Most of this was in the narrative of life stories and the answers to questions which followed the drawing of life stories, though it was supplemented by other remarks throughout the interviews, by answers to direct questions on God-image at the beginning of the first interview and also by the prayers written by each woman during the first interview. This step of breaking down data according to categories of content occurs in many areas of qualitative research, and is similar to what is known as open coding. See, for example, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research, 61-74. It also corresponds to the first step of data analysis described by David A. Erlandson et al., Doing Naturalistic Inquiry, 116.

269 While open coding breaks down data, this step puts data back together, highlighting some of the context and conditions which gave rise to it (for example, people and events in life experience). It is like putting together pieces of a puzzle, or perhaps the better metaphor would be weaving together strands of life into a cloth whose strands can be traced even though intricately interwoven with other strands. This is similar to the axial coding described by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research, 96-115.

270 The questions about important people, joys and sufferings reflect my assumptions about what may be important in understanding how God images form and change. In pure postmodern qualitative research, it has been noted that one should not start, but end, with hypotheses. In reality, a curious researcher always has hypotheses, whether articulated or not. The important thing about having assumptions is to try to be aware of them and how they affect participants’ answers to questions and in the analysis to be aware not only whether assumptions have proven right or wrong, but open to themes and issues that one never even thought of.

271 Stages of life were partially delineated during the interviews themselves, when each participant was asked to talk about her life in whatever groupings of years was appropriate. In most cases, women used childhood and adolescence (sometimes in two stages), then early marriage, then one to three later stages. There was some variation, but for the ease of readers (and the analysis), the stages were standardised in four stages. Stages have
events which seem to have influenced those images. Preceding each story, some background is given as a personal context for the woman's story. A draft of each woman's story was sent to her for correction of any mistakes or removal of any identifying material: amendments were incorporated into the final draft.272

The presentation of the women's stories, overlaid by researcher interpretation, is intentionally contextualised, concrete and personal, as is critical in feminist methodology. The validation of the rewoven stories by the women whose lives were at the centre of them was important for continuation of the respect and reciprocity of the dialogical process begun at the interview and transcription stage.

3.4.4.2 God Image Formation Patterns and Links between God Images and Experience

The second step was to search for patterns273 in the formation and change of God images, and for links between women's God images and life experiences. While Chapters 4-7 focus on each woman's individual story, Chapters 8-9 also consider the women's perspectives comparatively and collectively.

Searching through the transcripts274 for images of God and factors which may be related to their development was done on paper in a cut and paste fashion, with assistance at times from the computer's word search facility. The shape of the analysis in Chapters 4-9 reflects the major questions (1.2) to which the study addresses itself.275

Having set out the study methods, it is appropriate to familiarise readers with the rich context of the study as a prelude to meeting the women in their stories.

been divided as follows: childhood covers birth to 12 years; adolescence covers 13 to approximately 19-22 years; early adulthood covers 19-22 to 34-36 years; and middle adulthood covers 34-36 through to 60 years.

272 Due to space constraints in the thesis, the stories which appear in Chapters 4-7 have been slightly shortened from those originally verified by the participants.

273 This largely inductive task of allowing of factors to emerge or drop away during analysis is akin to "emergent category designation" described by David A. Erlandson et al., Doing Naturalistic Inquiry, 116.


275 The questions in 1.2 are not exactly the same as the first questions the researcher intended to pursue, but were shaped by reading the existing research and as interviews and analysis pointed towards issues significant for participants - part of the dialogical, participatory process.
3.5 Study Context

3.5.1 Geographical Context

All the women who participated in this study had lived in New Zealand for at least thirty years; nine were born in the country; one immigrated as an adolescent and two came just after their marriages in their early twenties. Of the three who were born overseas, one was from Australia and the other two were from western Europe. All the women at the time of interviewing lived in or near urban or suburban areas in two of the nation's largest cities, although some of their work took them into nearby towns and rural areas, and many came from rural, small town or village backgrounds either in New Zealand or overseas.276

3.5.2 Social Context

The women in the study are all of European descent.277 The place of women in New Zealand as a whole has similarities with other western countries. The first country to grant women the right to vote (1893), New Zealand currently has a woman prime minister and women placed highly in all levels of government. Women are employed in most professions. Nonetheless, there are still underlying expectations, especially in towns and rural areas, that women will be the supportive stay-at-home partners in families.278

The women in the study have a range in education levels. All finished their high school certificates279 although two went on from there to business/clerical courses rather than staying to complete the remaining two years of high school. Most have teaching

276 The places the women have lived within the country or overseas have not been identified in order to protect their anonymity.


279 High school certificate was obtained upon successful completion of what is now year 11 of a 13 year primary/secondary programme.
diplomas\textsuperscript{280} or university degrees, including some with post-graduate study. Several began or returned to university as their children grew older. The levels of education are probably somewhat higher than the norm for women in their age group, though typical for contemporary middle class women.\textsuperscript{281} The higher level of education in this group is due to the pool of women in the CFLE programme,\textsuperscript{282} which by its nature attracted those with higher education levels.

All the women would be considered to be middle class economically, although there is variation between those who perhaps were or are struggling financially and those who were always more financially secure. All those whose children are grown have less financial stress than they did earlier on and less than others who still have children at home.

3.5.3 Political/ Historical Context

A number of events in the world and within New Zealand have been mentioned by the study participants as somehow formative in their lives. All of the women born overseas mentioned World War II as a factor in their childhoods. For all three women born overseas there was some dislocation, fear or more serious childhood event connected with the war. None of the New Zealand born women mentioned the war at all. The Vietnam War was mentioned by some of the women in connection with their involvement in protests against it. The war, which began in the 1960s and ended in 1973, involved New Zealand troops from 1965. There was involvement by some of the women in the anti-nuclear movement which involved protests over visiting nuclear warships during the period 1975-1984.\textsuperscript{283}

Of great significance in some of the women’s lives was the 1981 South African rugby tour through New Zealand, known as the ‘Springbok Tour.’ Because of apartheid, many

\textsuperscript{280} In the 1950s and 1960s, teaching required only a post-secondary diploma.

\textsuperscript{281} New Zealand, until the last two decades, had a system of free education, including university and other tertiary training. Despite the free university system in former years, New Zealand had a lower level of participation in post-secondary education than other western countries. Being a rural and relatively isolated country, the need for higher education was not perceived to be as great as it was in other western countries until recently with the advent of free trade and globalisation. Some of the women in this study indicated that their parents had not thought it important for women to have higher education, and of those women who did attend tertiary institutions immediately after high school, most were steered into ‘traditional’ teaching or at least questioned about their direction if it was other than traditional.

\textsuperscript{282} See 3.4.1 for information on the CFLE programme.

\textsuperscript{283} Allan Davidson, Christianity in Aotearoa: A History of Church and Society in New Zealand. (Wellington: New Zealand Education for Ministry, 1997), 175.
New Zealanders opposed joint sporting events with South Africa. During the tour, protests and violence broke out all over the country, and divisions over whether to support or oppose the tour split people in churches, neighbourhoods and families. In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi is considered to be the foundational document setting out relationships between Maori and the British Crown, ensuring land and resource rights for Maori. It was signed in 1840, although Maori - pakeha violence continued, and land confiscation undertaken by the pakeha colonists. Treaty issues continue to be debated because of the failure of the British and then New Zealand government to adequately protect Maori lives, land and resources. Some of the study participants mention or are actively engaged in these issues.

3.5.4 Religious Context

Until the mid-late twentieth century, New Zealand immigrants were largely from Great Britain and Ireland. The English brought with them the Anglican tradition, the Scots the Presbyterian tradition, and the Irish the Catholic tradition. It is thought that because most of the immigrants came from lower classes, a minority of them arrived with church-going habits. There was religious animosity and tension from colonial times. In the 1920s, the Catholic bishops refused to participate in setting up an ecumenical faculty of theology in Otago, and earlier campaigned against having the Bible taught in public schools, reasoning

284 In 1985, the government opposed all further sporting links with South Africa until the end of apartheid. Allan Davidson, Christianity in Aotearoa, 175.


286 Alan C. Webster and Paul E. Perry, The Religious Factor in New Zealand Society. (Palmerston North: Alpha Publications, 1989), 13. Although some immigrants may not have been church-goers, others were certainly church builders, judging from the numbers of very old churches still extant (albeit now ironically used as museums or antique shops) in the older New Zealand cities and towns. Further, the animosity between Catholics and Protestants (often between Irish and English) over religious matters indicates that whether church-goers or not, the population was vocal on religious issues.

287 When the first Catholic bishop of Dunedin died in 1895, a local paper commented, “outside of St Joseph’s [his cathedral] he was nothing to nobody.” New Zealand Heritage. 4 (Wellington: Paul Hamlyn Limited, 1972), 1285. In the 1920s, a charge of sedition was brought against one of the Catholic bishops who made an unfortunately unsavvy media statement about the Irish situation. E. R. Simmons, A Brief History of the Catholic Church in New Zealand. (Auckland: Catholic Publications Centre, 1978), 98-99.
that no religious influence was better than Protestant influence. In fact, a "parallel society" was created, with "Catholic libraries, Catholic dances, Catholic football clubs ... Catholic separate bodies of every sort."²⁸⁸

Throughout the childhoods of the study participants, there was still animosity and suspicion between Catholics and Protestants. The Catholics had been prohibited from certain jobs through the middle twentieth century, and maintained their own school system to the point where parents were threatened with ex-communication if they did not send their children to Catholic schools.²⁹⁰ Some of the women in the study felt religious antagonism as children,²⁹¹ but by the time they were adolescents, the hostilities and divisions had begun to melt away, and the ecumenical movement of the sixties was well underway.

The Catholic environment of the 1940s and 1950s, although it included some French religious orders, was predominantly Irish Catholic,²⁹² influenced by an Irish spirituality which encouraged reason over affect. One could live one's entire childhood and adolescence without leaving the Catholic 'ghetto' which provided for all one's social, spiritual, educational and recreational needs. It was safe, passive, and narrowly bounded: one was theoretically free to question, but one didn't because of the docility imposed by the environment. In any case, one was lucky to be in the 'one, true church.'²⁹³

For those study participants who grew up in New Zealand, the Children of Mary²⁹⁴ was the most popular devotional group for girls, one mentioned by a number of the women in this study. Many were also part of the Catholic Youth Movement, and later the Christian

²⁸⁸ E. R. Simmons, A Brief History, 87, 94-95, 101.
²⁹⁰ E. R. Simmons, A Brief History, 101.
²⁹² Donald Akesson has called the constituency of the Catholic Church in New Zealand 'overwhelmingly Irish' and estimates that even by 1945 the Pakeha membership of the Church was 95 percent Irish in origin." Michael King, God's Farthest Outpost, 14. See also Jane Tolerton, Convent Girls, 11-17.
²⁹³ Elisabeth Mackie, Personal communication, 1996.
²⁹⁴ E. R. Simmons, A Brief History, 107; and Mary Augustine McCarthy, Star in the South, 82. The Children of Mary aimed "to sanctify individuals, partly to do good works, and partly to provide a Catholic social life away from the temptations of secular society." Reading of romances and listening to romantic songs were warned against, as Catholic girls were to be "prayerful, ladylike and chaste and to model their lives on the Mother of Christ." Michael King, God's Farthest Outpost, 111, 146.
Family Movement, both of which were popular in the 1940s through the 1960s. These groups enabled young people and adults, respectively, to come together socially, and also provided for spiritual and educational formation in faith. A number of the women, along with their husbands, were leaders in one or both movements in various parts of the country.

The Second Vatican Council, without a doubt, was the single most important factor affecting the Catholic church during the lives of the women interviewed. Convened by Pope John XXIII for aggiornamento (updating), it met from 1962-1965, continuing through the early years of the pontificate of Pope Paul VI. The effects of the Council were felt from the late 1960s, and many of the visible changes occurred then and in the early 1970s, perhaps somewhat later in New Zealand than in other western countries. These years in the wake of the council were marked by openness, greater involvement, and increased faith formation and education for laity. Most of the women in this study were adolescents and young adults at this time, and so were spiritually formed to expect newness, change, and continuing growth and education in faith.

In 1968, the Vatican issued the encyclical Humane Vitae, which forbade the use of artificial means of birth control. Early speculation and more recent investigation into the process of its writing led to and confirmed respectively the fact that most of the theologians and lay people consulted prior to that date had urged the Vatican to take a more compassionate stance. Because the women in the study were at the start or the middle of their child-bearing years in 1968, the encyclical was cause for discussion, reflection and anguish for many of them.

By the early 1970s, the Pentecostal movement in the Protestant churches had reached the Catholic church via the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, or Charismatic Movement. From 1971-1979, ‘Life in the Spirit’ seminars were offered within Catholic, Anglican and other denominations. The seminars and the Charismatic Movement were evangelical in nature, and while urging the practice of Christian lifestyles, also promoted religious enthusiasm and the cultivation of ‘spiritual gifts’. A number of the women in the study were part of the

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294 Allan Davidson, Christianity in Aotearoa, 161; E. R. Simmons, A Brief History, 103, and Michael King, God’s Farthest Outpost, 165-169. King notes that this concept of lay apostolate was introduced in 1941, based on the movement begun by Belgian Joseph Cardign. The emphasis was on a gospel-based social critique with watchwords, ‘See, judge, act.’


296 Allan Davidson, Christianity in Aotearoa, 172.
movement, or were touched by it in some way through friends or family members. For one at least, it was an unfortunate experience: for others, it was an important stage in growth, having taught them about the Spirit, the scriptures, and introduced them to new ways of praying.

For some women, experience in particular dioceses within New Zealand was an important factor in their faith journeys and in their relationships with church. In one diocese in particular, women's activities within the church were severely curtailed, leading to feelings of oppression and unjust treatment. That experience was a factor in the conscientisation of some of the women, and led to further questioning and growth.

3.5.5 Temporal Context - Ages of Participants

The women in this study were all born in the 1940s and 1950s. They were not selected because they were in midlife at the time of interviewing, but the fact that they were of similar age gives opportunity for comment on why they volunteered, the similarities in their contexts, and the possible effects of a lack of a wider range of age groups on the study results.

When letters were sent to the pool of women from the CFLE programme (3.4.1), it was known that that pool comprised women from young to older adulthood, with the majority being in the young and middle adulthood ages. The fact that all of the women who volunteered were in middle adulthood rather than younger resulted in participants who had children who were at least teenagers or were grown, giving them sufficient time to reflect and to participate in the study. These women would also have had the time previously to reflect on their faith, and by this age would perhaps have more confidence in articulating it than women of a younger age.

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297 One participant in this thesis research was relentlessly pursued by a perhaps psychologically unwell person, who through involvement with the charismatic movement had been encouraged to see the devil in every corner, including in the woman participant. Another participant felt the movement discouraged her from taking responsibility for her own life through its encouragement of God dependency.

298 The term originated in liberation movements in Latin America. Paulo Freire describes it as a process in which the oppressed move from naïve to critical awareness, and are better able to meet and transform situations. See Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), or Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981).

299 Yvonne Fogarty, Personal communication, 1994.
The fact that no older women volunteered probably has much to do with the fact that it would have been mostly younger adult women who completed CFLE training, aimed as it was at those who would be available, in the years after their training, to give workshops and seminars in schools and parishes. At the time of their training, the now middle adult women would have probably have undertaken the training more readily because they perceived its value for their own young families - more so than older women whose children were already grown at that time.

The lack of older or younger women means that there will be no comparison in this study of how the God images of particular age cohorts might be affected by the same event, e.g., Vatican II. The lack of an older age group means that no information will be forthcoming on the God image changes which come with older adults. The relative similarity in ages will, however, provide a study of God images evolution in a group of midlife women at the turn of the millennium.
CHAPTER 4
GOD IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN, PART I:
GOD HAS ALWAYS BEEN LOVE/FRIEND

Insofar as possible, it is by the use of the participants' own words\footnote{Use of participants' words is an important means of presenting more of the reality of who each woman is in her context, and of being faithful to several of the aims of feminist theological methodology (3.3.2) - subjectivity, rootedness in women's experience and concern for truth. All quotes are taken from interview transcripts. Other information is from transcripts and written material provided by participants.} that their images of God throughout each stage\footnote{Use of participants' words is an important means of presenting more of the reality of who each woman is in her context, and of being faithful to several of the aims of feminist theological methodology (3.3.2) - subjectivity, rootedness in women's experience and concern for truth. All quotes are taken from interview transcripts. Other information is from transcripts and written material provided by participants.} in their lives are presented in Chapters 4 - 7. The formation and growth of their God images are traced, with attention to the important relationships and experiences which may have influenced their God images in each stage of their lives. The way in which each woman's images of God reflect the important people in her life is made evident by the interweaving of the God image development with her life story. The analysis is continued in Chapters 8 and 9 where persons and other life experiences affecting God image development are further explored. Each woman's story is prefaced by a brief outline of her individual context.

For ease of presentation, the stories of the eleven women are separated into Chapters 4 - 7 based on the way in which their images have evolved from childhood to middle adulthood. Chapter 4 presents God images and life stories of four women for whom God has always been love or friend. Their images have grown and intensified, but have always been positive and always had the same essential content.

4.1 Helen

4.1.1 Background

Helen was born in New Zealand in 1951, and has lived in four cities and towns all within about two hundred kilometres of each other. She was the youngest of three children, with two older brothers. Her parents were also New Zealand born, of English and Scottish ancestry. Helen was brought up as a Catholic: her mother was Catholic and her father was Presbyterian but became a Catholic when Helen was a child. She attended Catholic primary
and high schools, and trained at Teachers’ College as a Home Economics teacher. Helen is married with two daughters, both of whom were teenagers at the time she was interviewed. Helen has taught most of her life except when her children were young, and has been involved in church and community organisations concerned with relationships and drugs, respectively. Helen was in her early to middle forties at the times of her interviews.

4.1.2 Childhood

Helen’s childhood memory of God is a “man,” and “someone at church. He was someone important though, because my father was converted when I was seven, and it was a very important part in my mum’s life.” Helen also remembers God as the male statue at church - the statue of Jesus, and the male figure on the cross ... the trinity was very much impressed on us, whereas now I just think it’s all the one person. It was more split when I was little, and receiving the spirit for confirmation when I was ten.

Helen’s understanding of God has also always been of someone who “has the power to help us get through what is happening at the time ... perhaps strength or support more than power.” God was also “forgiving and understanding,” ideas she traces to her mother who was very “broad-minded.”

At primary school, Helen learned answers to the catechism questions about God, but doesn’t remember the answers. She says, “I don’t know whether it’s because I didn’t think they were significant enough ... [or] because I perhaps developed this relationship with God that he was my friend.” She remembers feeling guilty because at school she was told she ought to be saying the rosary every night: “It was very much the rituals that were impressed upon us, not God as friend.” But in her home,

the rituals were praying every night to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour and Mass every Sunday ... I do remember ... saying the rosary myself in bed, and ... reading the bible ... I don’t know at what stage I stopped saying the ritual prayers, the Hail Marys and the Our Fathers and started just to talk to God. I imagine it was the later teen years.

The most important person in her life was her mum. She felt she has received her values from her mum:

Mum was very much the strong person ... a very very caring woman, but not a demonstrative woman. Touch was a part of dad’s life, and I’ve learned that from

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301 Stages have been divided as follows: childhood - birth to 12 years; adolescence - 13 to approximately 19-22 years; early adulthood - 19-22 to 34-36 years; middle adulthood - 34-36 through to 60 years.
him ... Mum did have a very profound effect on me, because really in the 1960s women did not go out to work, and my mother went out to work. My mother always taught me that I was an equal ... She was never one for sitting down and analysing or telling you profound things, it was always by her action. Helen also saw things in her mother that she tried to reverse with her own children, for example, not being so protective of them: “She was always protecting.”

She did not get strong role modelling from the nuns who taught her in school, remembering with resentment how one of them “treated my friends with her sarcastic manner.” It has, however been a strong reverse learning in her own teaching.

God as a being doesn’t hold strong memories for Helen. She remembers the traditional prayers and sensory impressions, that is, the rosary, the statues in church, God as male. She remembers trying to say the prayers as she was supposed to, and this would have been reinforced in her by the values learned from her mother of “self-discipline [and] the way a person should be.” She is conscious that the friend model she has as an adult for God was not taught her as a child, but some notion of it may have begun to develop then, at least some idea that God was more than the words of the catechism which she cannot remember. Her mother’s caring and values are carried forward as her understanding of God becomes more consciously reflected on.

4.1.3 Adolescence

During early adolescence, Helen remembers God played “a major part because I was going to a Catholic school.” There were new inputs to her understanding of religion in general: “At high school I remember the bible started to become important, whereas before it wasn’t. I think that was because of Vatican II in the 60s.” Most of the time it was the family and school that took responsibility for how and when she would have contact with God. But in times of stress, Helen herself took initiative in seeking out God: “There were times like exams, I would get up and bike right over to the other side near where I went to school, go to Mass, come home and have breakfast and go to school. I can remember doing that because I wanted to get[302] my exams.” God was obviously someone who could bring about positive outcomes, and also “someone to talk to ... we say ‘he’ but I can never recall having a vision of God as a male standing there. He’s always been something that has encompassed everything, something superhuman.”

[302] “Get” is New Zealand idiom for “pass” in relation to exams.
Throughout high school and teachers' college, Helen's friends became most important to her. In high school she was allowed to have friends who were not Catholic and she feels that was formative: "The emphasis wasn't on Catholic, it was on people." Her closest friend was "a good friend, she was always there, she listened, we would have fights but we would come back together again. Someone you always depend on." Helen also recalls that God "started to become a friend to me when I left school and was on my own." She felt that at that point she had to learn to depend on herself, and on friends: "That's probably ... when I started in this evolution of God becoming my friend ... At times of crises, just being on my own ... you talk to God."

At teachers' college she was doing something she had always wanted to do. She enjoyed the new experiences and mixing with the opposite sex. When she started teaching, she met the man she would marry: "He was ... a loving and caring person."

It was hard for Helen to recall who God was at this time:

I know he was important ... because going to Mass every Sunday was important ... Perhaps the rituals that had been so ingrained in us as children was what kept me there, and so allowed that relationship with God to develop. Whereas now the rituals at certain times are important ... they are not important to me all the time now. It's the relationship.

There was also something about just being in a church that was important for Helen: "It's probably that ability to feel safe. There's something about if you're sad or whatever, you go into a church, even if no one is there I can feel the presence of God just that much more than I can somewhere else."

One of the things she started to question was the idea of confession, and this had to do with her understanding of God:

I imagine it was in my teenage years I probably started to think, if God is all forgiving, why then do I have to go to reconciliation? ... I would also say the influence of my mother had a profound [influence on] my thinking in that way too ... If she believed that she was doing something right that the church said was wrong, she would do it. So that's probably where my idea that God was so forgiving and understanding comes from ... I did not grow up in a Catholic home where everything was exactly as the pope and church said. I was allowed to think for myself. I think that's where a lot of what God is [came from].

Helen's memory of her adolescent understanding of God is one of various impressions rather than one prevailing image. God was someone who could make things turn out well, or help one do one's best: God was superhuman. God was someone one could talk to (rather than say memorised prayers to), a presence of safety, beginning to be like a friend who is always there. God was forgiving and understanding, and did not always function in everyday life the way the pope and church taught.
4.1.4 Early Adulthood

Married in her early twenties, Helen soon had two children, who along with her husband, her mother and women friends, were the important people in her life. While she had always had a good relationship with her mother, the fact that Helen had children of her own created a bond that made a “huge difference.” Her mother was now a close friend along with her other close friends who “never judge you and they’re always there. And if you haven’t seen them ... we can come together and sit down and talk ... as if we never parted. [There’s] never any stiltedness between you.”

Her mother’s home also became a haven for her when the children were little, because at one point she was almost at the stage of having a breakdown: “If I needed mum or I needed a break, she would come up to me or I would go down to her ... I’d come back revitalised really, a little haven.”

As well as being a friend to her, Helen’s mother also continued to shape the way Helen thought about God and church:

I remember her saying to me she wasn’t feeling well and didn’t think she would go to church ... and I was really shocked. And she said ‘I can’t pray, if I don’t feel like praying and don’t feel I’m praying properly, what’s the point in going?’ ... Then I started to think more about the relationship ... Is that ritual as important as my relationship with God? ... No, it’s not. But then again, if I’m grateful for something that’s happened, or I feel sad, I need that ritual, and I go straight for it.

Helen noticed that when she had her own children, she began to see God and church as more important, because

I believed it was so important that my children had that opportunity to build that relationship that I had when I was a child. And in any relationship you have your highs and your lows and your mids. And I suppose here I was ‘oh, he’s there’ but because life was flowing on very smoothly and I didn’t need him, which sounds terrible ... it’s not really until you start getting into your kids, deep relationships, that you seem to.

At that point, Helen became more involved in her parish and school than things directly dealing with her relationship to God. But she found that two parish priests lived what I see Christians as. One in particular, his thing was that what was important wasn’t the buildings, the gardens, the things, it was us, the people. He just oozed Christianity. You would never hear a cross word, if you wanted him he would be there ... The other one ... used to love little kids, [my daughter] used to run up and hold his legs.

During these years, Helen found God’s presence largely in the people around her, and through their actions which she identified as God-like or “Christian,” from the friends
and mother who were her havens and there when she needed them, to the priests who were there for their people.

4.1.5 Middle Adulthood

In her middle thirties, Helen found that involvement with CFLE helped her to put what she had begun to feel about God into words:

I always knew that you could go out and sit in a paddock and you could always feel the presence of God, but as a group of people, the God-like experiences that happened in those liturgies I've hardly ever experienced them in church...
[CFLE] analysed and put in perspective a lot of the things I was feeling but never understood, and opened my mind to a lot of things.

Helen felt that her life to this point had never had many sad times, but now "they've happened." It began with the involvement of her husband in a serious car accident. Shortly after that, Helen's mother and uncle battled with cancer and died within a year of each other. A nephew also died. The following year her mother's sister died, and then Helen's cousin died of AIDS. Helen went through grief time after time, represented on her life drawing, Figure 4-1, as the years in black. She remembers sitting at the last funeral thinking 'why, why is all this happening?' She felt that "my own faith has been questioned and tested so much through that time, because I had lost one of my best friends in my mother, you got to a stage where you said how much more can we take as a family? [yet still] ... you get that strength from God." Helen feels that her mother's death "changed me a lot as a person ... and I suppose in fact that it has changed my relationship with God,303 because a lot of what I said to mum, I say to him."

During the period her mother struggled with cancer, Helen remembers what it was like to try to pray:

I realised how powerful other people's prayers are around you. I remember sitting in the church ... but I couldn't pray, but there was a sense that there were plenty of other people doing it for me. The act that I can't say, 'take this pain away' ... I've often said that to other people since ... 'Go to church, kneel there, and you'll feel it around you. Don't worry that you can't pray.' There's a tranquility there that other people give you, and that was what came through to me very strongly through those times. That because of the pain I couldn't express but someone else was doing it for me.

That experience in itself was a learning about a different way of relating to God, a being still'

303 The relationship between God and suffering is explored in 9.4.
Figure 4-1
Helen's Life Story Drawing
in the face of not being able to do anything else, and letting God work: “it’s a form of letting go ... of the situation.” She also discovered God in the others who meet to pray as community, and in her friends, and in God as a friend:

Sometimes I say ‘I can’t pray,’ to God, ‘but you know I’m here’. That was all I could say ... My girlfriend ... wouldn’t ring me everyday, because she’d say ‘I don’t need to ring you every day, it’s only an added hassle to you ... but you know I am here.’ Now that’s the way I feel about God too. I know that he’s there, he knows that I’m here. He knows what I’m going through and so [like] a good friend ... you know that they’re there.

Helen also compared her friendship with her mother to her friendship with God:

that’s the relationship that I feel that I have with God. Just being there. Even though at times you can go on for ages and feel that you haven’t been the friend that you should be, there’s just a real comfort to know that he’s there. You can’t explain it ... You just know it’s there.

She found that church for her became something of what her mother’s home was for her since the time her children were born: “Home had always been my safe haven, and I suppose that’s why church became more of a safe haven where I could just go and sit.”

Five years on from her mother’s death, with recent deaths of other friends and family, Helen faces more change in life:

my job is part of it, our home, my dad, our relationship ... menopause ... kids, family. There’s no front that’s consistent except God. And God is that one person who’s always there and never changes, no matter what happens ... God allows me to change. God’s probably one ... person that doesn’t hold you back from change. Whereas ... your husband and children at times hold you back from a change that you can feel you might want to move into.

At this time for Helen,

God is a being, someone that’s there to protect me, to talk to, to help. He ... this is the great difficulty ... I suppose it is the great hangover from when we were children, God was always referred to as he. But I don’t think of God as a male or as a female. I see God as both, encompassing the whole sexuality of both sexes ... God is everywhere. There are a lot of incidents that happen to you in everyday life that you feel that someone is protecting you, and I put that down to being God ... it’s not anyone else.

For Helen, God has no gender, but is a being, and she feels she has a strong relationship with God. God is, as God has been for her since her adolescent years, “someone to talk to.” God is like a friend, but unlike any other person because “God’s someone that knows everything about me ... I can hide things from my husband, my children, everybody. But God’s the one person that I can’t hide anything from ... that knows me completely from conception right through.”

Helen doesn’t have an image of a God who exercises power (see 9.2). She does think of God as powerful, and that God has “the power to help me if I need it,” but she sees God
more as "strength or support." One of her favourite hymns is "The Lord is my Shepherd," which reflects a God who refreshes, sustains and strengthens.

Helen's primary image of God is God as friend. Although Helen's mother and children have been especially important family to her, Helen sees the primary and most important bond in all cases as one of friendship: "I place a lot of emphasis on being a friend, and that's why I think of God as my friend." Her model of friendship is based both on friends and on her mother, and many of the things she appreciates in these important people she has also used to describe God: always there, someone to talk to, has long-term knowledge of her, strong, protects her.

She hopes that if and when she has grandchildren, they too will know God as a friend - someone who is always there who you can talk to, won't talk you down, someone that you also see around you, you can experience in nature ... in plants and flowers and animals, in scenic beauty. You can experience God in so many ways ... Give them a love of nature. Just to experience beauty and to understand that that beauty has been given to us to treasure, to use, to leave for the next generation, the generations to come.

4.1.6 Synthesis

Helen's mother, friends, husband, children and parish priests are the people who have influenced the formation of Helen's God images, which have always been positive and developed early in life in the direction of God as friend. Other life experiences which helped form her images include her father's conversion to Catholicism, Christian art, experience of living on her own, the ritual of the Mass, CFLE, the deaths of her mother and significant others, and nature.
4.2 Marie

4.2.1 Background

Marie was born in New Zealand in 1948, the second child in a family of three children. Her father was Catholic, with Irish roots, and her mother non-practising Presbyterian, with Scottish and English roots. Marie has been Catholic from birth, attending Catholic primary school, including three years in a boarding school during her middle school years (see Figure 4-2). Her parents divorced when she was entering her teenage years. She attended a state high school for three years, followed by a year in commercial college. She is married with five children, some of whom were still living at home during the time she participated in the study. Marie has combined family, work and involvement in church and community organisations throughout her married life, and lived in several different cities in New Zealand. She was in her late forties at the time of the interviews.

4.2.2 Childhood

Marie has no memory of God before she went to school, but was taken to Mass by her father each Sunday. From school, her memories are of traditional Catholic devotions:

We didn’t have access to books, except for lives of the saints. We always used to say the rosary and make novenas, and had devotion to Our Lady, and had special days when we prayed heaps, plenary indulgences, and trying to see how many we could say. I always remember that I spent time in chapel. I’ve always done formal prayer, but you could just go and pay a visit.

Marie feels that she has known from childhood that God can help, God cares, and God knows what one is going through. She always “liked going to Mass, and I used to get up at six o’clock every morning and go to Mass, and just remember that that was quite a happy time.”

The happy time at Mass was in contrast to her life at home, which was unhappy from an early age. Her parents had made a tragic mistake in marrying, and there was constant discord, some of which related to the difference in religion. Thus prayer and talk about God was not something that could happen at home. Marie remembers her mother as always being unhappy, and her father as a kind person, but “at that stage my parents were separating and it was not possible to have a relationship with either of them, and so I didn’t have parents I could talk to.” God became the person she could talk to: “I suppose in a way I
used God as a parent substitute ... When I was in trouble ... the only person I would have been able to tell was [God]."

When Marie was ten, she was sent to boarding school:

It was an incredibly lonely place, a sterile life ... quite cruel. It's incredible to think now how I survived the lifestyle. Most of our time was spent in silence, and I don't ever remember talking to anyone all the time I was there, and so probably at that stage, God would have been the only person I ever had to talk to, and I don't think I would have survived if it wouldn't have been for that ... believing in God was the only constant factor that I had.

Despite the cruelty of the school - "You learnt by being strapped ... we did have a lot of strappings, you can kind of take those ... but I remember the psychological traumas that they used and that was much worse" - Marie says that the nuns did not leave her with a distorted image of God:

They taught us to pray, and miraculously they obviously didn't teach us about a wrathful God, which was a wonder. We didn't get that impression because learning our faith, I don't remember any kindness from them but they obviously portrayed a God that wasn't a punishing God.

There were few positive role models for Marie as a child, except for perhaps her father. With other relations "there were tensions because they always belonged to one side or another." Her sisters were trying to cope with the same situation, and they were separated in boarding school so did not have any contact. The situation at home was such that there were no friends in to visit, and the nuns at school lived such an austere and unnatural life that they were unable to pass much wholesomeness on to their students.

The tension in her family caused Marie to be careful of not telling anyone anything, because of the fear of how it might be misconstrued: "I didn't talk to anybody ... I just relied on myself because there wasn't anybody else. I know there wasn't anybody I talked to, and so the effects are that it is very hard to trust people because you'd learnt not to." Instead she kept everything to herself,304 and turned to God as the one person she could trust.

4.2.3 Adolescence

Marie attended three years at a state high school, which was a big change: "The culture shock was unbelievable ... I was the only Catholic in a school of well over six hundred, whereas all of our life had revolved around religion." Marie felt pressured by her

304 Even Marie's life drawing, done nearly forty years on from her childhood, seems to reflect the influences of the sterility, extreme introversion, loneliness and unhappiness of her early years (see Figure 4-2).
mother to succeed, and it made her anxious about her exams. When she finished school certificate at fifteen, she decided to leave and attend commercial college.

Her high school years finally brought her a best friend: "I often wondered why she was always friendly with me, but we did everything together." There was also a teacher who took an interest in her, and Marie was "really amazed because I didn't think anybody would have really noticed me." Marie's older sister "had a lot of influence" on her. After her parents divorced, "it was just too difficult to see two parents, and I just took the easiest option." She lived with her father, but "it would have been impossible for him to share feelings about anything. He coped by not talking."

So once again, God filled the gap:

God was someone to talk to, someone I knew I could trust. I could always say things and I never needed to worry that there was any problem, I could always say how I felt, you could ask for help if you needed it - basically someone to talk to, could trust, and basically the only person.

After a short time working after college, Marie left the city where her family lived and worked in other places for several years. She felt her positions had some responsibility and "started to really believe in myself as a person. I gained some identity."

At this point in her life, her late teens, Marie joined the Catholic Youth Movement and made friends among that group, whom she found very supportive. The group studied scripture and had various activities. She served a term as president, and became friends with the man who later became her husband.

Marie recalls her relationship with God at that point in time:

Probably because they were a lot happier years, I definitely wouldn't have lost touch. I certainly always went to Mass, religion wasn't any less important ... But I think that I probably wasn't, not less close, but I wasn't relying on God, I had someone else ... I probably didn't pray as much at that stage.

Marie's involvement with a group of people opened up a new avenue of learning about God for her: "It was the first time I was able to share, to talk about it with other people ... It was an amazing experience that we could sit down and talk about our religion because in all those years at boarding school you never talked to anyone else about your faith."

Her late adolescence was a time of gradual reduction in the pain of her childhood, gradual opening up of herself to the wider world of friends, gaining a sense of trust in others and new confidence in herself. Her understanding of God was the same as in her childhood, but she was learning to rely on others and communicate with others as well as God.
4.2.4 Early Adulthood

Married in her early twenties, Marie and her husband had five children over a ten year period. Her children and their growth and activities were a major delight, and Marie also made close friends that have become lifelong friends even though they no longer live in the same place:

We were very close and we could always talk about whatever we were doing or whatever was happening, a relationship where we both trusted each other ... We shared everyday life, and you had children at the same time, we're all going through the same things at the same time. We're still just as close now.

Marie and her husband taught their children prayers and were involved in their sacramental preparation, and when Marie gave talks in church groups, “that made us really think about our own faith and what we believed in.” Some of the families in their street used to meet once a week to pray the rosary, and spontaneously supported one another during illnesses or other crises. Marie’s experience of God at this point was largely through the caring of that community, but she says that she does not always associate “the parish community with my faith, or with God.” She remembers “a lot of people giving up their faith because they didn’t like what had happened [after Vatican II].” Marie “never associated the changes in the church with my relationship with God, and I still don’t ... whatever is happening in the parish community doesn’t change the relationship that I have with God.”

4.2.5 Middle Adulthood

In her mid-thirties, Marie and her family moved back to the city of her teenage years, where her father and sister once again became important people in her life. Her growing children took up most of her time, along with part-time work, and so she felt she had little time to make friends to the same level that she had in early adulthood. She devoted herself to family and also continued to stay involved with church and service groups. Watching the children grow and thrive, and seeing their values develop, especially the way they treated other people, was a source of delight for her.

Her father died during this time, and “it was hard to come to terms with because I would have just given anything to have been able to say goodbye.” A year later, her husband’s father died as well, and the whole family found it difficult to lose two grandparents so close together.
For Marie, who God was for her was interconnected with going to Mass, involvement with the children's religious education and sacraments, as well as personal prayer. She did take time out to study the Enneagram, and "found it made a huge difference in the understanding of me."

A prayer she wrote expresses the importance for her of God's involvement with her life and her family:

Dear God
Please take care of my family.
Please watch over my children in their relationships and the important decisions they make or are faced with each day.
Please help me to love my family.
Please take care of my husband and help us to make the right choices for the future.
Please help me to make our home a happy and caring place.

Marie's prayer reveals to her that what's important to me [about God is] that I'd like God to be involved in our lives ... that our lives were involved in God, that we were all living lives that reflected Christian values, and that ... what I've been entrusted with is very important ... so important that I wouldn't do it without prayer.

Marie's deeply felt desire is for a permeating connection of God in her life and that of her family. She has worked to deepen this connection through prayer, Mass, upholding values, and ensuring careful religious and sacramental preparation for her children. That desire for connection does not, however, extend to things "happening in the parish" or "changes in the church." Marie's relationship with church is largely through a relationship with the sacraments of the church, through which she derives relationship with God: other aspects of church life she does not perceive as important to her relationship with God.

Marie felt lucky in past years "to always make a visit to church every morning." Her cherished quiet time in prayer from childhood has remained with her. Her understanding of God remains:

the person who is always there for me, a person that I wouldn't like to think of not being there, a friend, someone that I can always talk to, and someone that I would share things with or go to for help, someone that I share concerns with, be able to always trust, know was always there.

Marie also thinks of God as "love ... father, and part of the Trinity." When she prays though, "I would often perhaps pray through Mary, and I would think of God as her son."

As the interviews finished, Marie was adjusting to a move to another city and another job. Finding herself at midlife with her children leaving home for university and jobs, she knows that this is an opportunity for her to turn her focus from her family's well-being to her own growth. She has encouragement from her children: "They were most anxious for me to
build a life of my own." She feels that further growth in herself and in her understanding
of God are "something that I've still got to develop ... I'm quite sure it's something I haven't
done, in either respect ... I think I've been very aware of it because of what I found out as a
result of the Enneagram."

Meanwhile, Marie feels
terribly lucky to have that kind of relationship with God that I don't have any
doubts. I just know that God's there ... I think sometimes ... when you're totally
distracted and you get totally caught up in the world ... this terrible feeling and
you think there isn't anything, and you get a glimpse of what it would be like
without faith. I'd hate to live in life without faith. If you do have a faith, there is
some point in everything ... It's something that I'd like to develop and spend
more time with, and doing something about.

4.2.6 Synthesis

Marie's image of God as ever present helper and friend, always positive despite her
eyear traumas, has been shaped and supported by her father, friends, her husband and her
children. Other aspects of life which seem to have influenced her God images include her
early home and school environments, time spent at Mass, her inner disposition toward quiet
and 'making visits', and the Enneagram. These factors in Marie's God image formation will
be compared with those influencing other women's images in Chapter 8, and links between
her self and God images will be explored in Chapter 9.

4.3 Mary

4.3.1 Background

Mary grew up in rural New Zealand, born in 1943 as the third of eight children, and
moved to the city to study after high school. Both her parents were New Zealand born of
British ancestry; her mother's family were immigrants. Her mother was Methodist and her
father was Presbyterian; Mary was baptised and brought up in the Methodist tradition and
educated in state schools. She was trained and worked for a short time as a teacher before
marrying, at which time she came into the Catholic church. While bringing up three
children, Mary returned to university for a degree in the social services field in which she
now works. She has been involved in many community, civic, and sport organisations and
church activities throughout her life. Her children are now grown, and Mary was in her early fifties at the time of the study.

4.3.2 Childhood

The first picture that comes to mind of God for Mary is “gentle Jesus, meek and mild, with his brown beard.” God was “a friendly kind of God, a loving God,” a “person in a white nightie with a beard and a kind face ... We were involved in Sunday school with the Methodist church, and ... God was a Jesus-type figure, a loving presence really.”

Mary recalls that although the whole family “lived out those Christian values about loving and caring,” it was mum who was mostly behind bringing up the children to be church-going and taught them about God. Her mother was somebody I could talk about things to. She was intelligent. She was very involved [in church and civic organisations and] spent a lot of time being pregnant and mothering ... She was the business head in our family, the administrator ... [a] hard worker. She used to sigh a lot.

Being the third in the family, Mary was “quite responsible” looking after the younger children, and “that has always been a constant theme in my life.”

Mary’s father was also “hard working.” He was a very peaceful and non-violent man ... very happy with what he was doing, a very honest man ... My father, from my earliest memories, was never embarrassed about any tears in his eyes ... He was always the heart and the feeling person and mother was the head and the organiser.

But her father also was involved with politics, and “anything that had a committee and needed organising, dad was there.” Mary felt “I could always say things to dad. We had a really nice relationship.”

Mary loved reading, school, music, friends, and family concerts. Her childhood is full of good memories: “We had lots of laughs, we used to love telling jokes.” Her life drawing (Figure 4-3) is full of the people and experiences which were important to her.

Her childhood concept of God was informed by teachings about God, but also formed from her birth by the love and stability of her family. Her early memories of Jesus and God were, like those of her parents, gentle, kind, friendly and loving.
Figure 4-3a
Mary’s Life Story Drawing
Figure 4-3b

Mary’s Life Story Drawing
4.3.3 Adolescence

In her high school years, succeeding at school was a real source of enjoyment, as well as boyfriends, a part-time job, sports, music, and going to dances. She made good friends, some of whom are still good friends. Several teachers also influenced her: “The ones who were significant in my life were ones who enjoyed learning and encouraged you to learn, were very generous in their encouragement of you and loved to see you coming on.”

The other person - or rather, ‘experience’ - who influenced her was Billy Graham: “I was about fourteen-ish and ready for a spiritual kind of experience and they really knew how to evangelise. It was a slick production ... and it drew on those kinds of feelings.”

At that time,

God started becoming a more complex idea ... you had to read your Bible, whereas up until then ... you didn’t really have to put a lot of effort in ... The person who ran the Crusaders [a Christian high school group] ... inferred that being a Christian was sort of hard work, and you had to ... be kind of staunch. Dancing and carrying on and boyfriends ... maybe wasn’t all that Christian and God-like. We went to a few Crusader camps and enjoyed the social connection ... I suppose I was aware that there were more faces to God, and depending on who was telling you about it, you would get a different impression ... I liked church because you sang, it was kind of solemn, they used important-sounding words, and I’ve always been into words. It was a natural part of existence really.

In late adolescence, Mary moved to the city to do teacher training. Coming from a large family, although she had good friends, Mary had not needed to make close friends, because her sisters had filled that role for her. Away at school, she met one friend who became particularly close. But it was and still is family who were closest: “You shared similar things and you understood ... I still regard my family as my best friends.”

A number of anxieties surfaced in those years, one of which was that she might die, and this worry continued and became more pronounced after she married and had children. When asked if she ever took any of these anxieties to God, Mary said,

I didn’t have a very active prayer life. I never questioned whether there was a God or not but he didn’t seem particularly relevant at the time. If there was something I was really anxious about, I might have prayed about it ... About dying, I remember being anxious from time to time and that ‘s when God was a pretty handy person to have around ... after I had [our second child] and what would [my husband] and the children do, and then certainly God was very reassuring.

In preparation for marriage, Mary decided to become a Catholic because her fiancé was a Catholic, and she felt it was important that they were both of the same denomination. Her husband was a recent European immigrant from a strongly Catholic area, so she knew that if one of them was going to change denominational affiliations, it would have to be her.
Mary found that although religion had become a little more complicated in her early teenage years, it became even more complicated at this point: “There’s a whole lot more to it than I’d ever thought about ... And I always had a feeling that things were made a lot more complicated than they needed to be.” Overall, she felt that “becoming a Catholic really didn’t change me very much. It was like choosing to play another type of sport, but the advantage of the sport and the enjoyment of the sport and the whole lot to do with it are still there, you just have slightly different rules.”

Through adolescence, God was present for Mary, but not particularly relevant to her life. God was convenient to have around when one needed reassuring, but predominantly as background support. In addition, she found as an adolescent that the earthly institutions connected with God seemed to complicate life, perhaps unnecessarily.

4.3.4 Early Adulthood

Mary married at age twenty and, after a miscarriage, had three children. Church community and activities were important, and now these were Catholic, rather than Protestant. With her husband, Mary became involved in the leadership of parish groups, and found them an “excellent forum” to talk about the many changes after the Second Vatican Council. She developed an awareness of social justice and was involved in protests against the Vietnam War.

One of the people she met at that time was a priest who was also involved with social justice issues: “He was a man with vision.” Other friends were valued for “warmth and her humour, loyalty,” and “integrity, intelligent, caring, loyal, strong family background.” Whether family or friends, Mary valued people as special when “our lives have paralleled in many ways ... there are so many things that we share that there is a closeness and the bonding has to grow stronger.” Another woman, a religious sister, was influential during the time when Mary’s children were babies and “your world becomes much smaller.” This sister “acknowledged my gifts and my ability and gave me opportunity to use them. She trusted, she was affirming of me as a person with things of value to offer ... She listened and I knew that she cared about me.” This woman was “the face of the church for me.”

Although there were anxieties around her miscarriage and some pregnancy difficulties, births of her children were, for Mary, “a huge sacramental experience ... the wonder of it all ... really God’s love in the world.” In fact, Mary says that
when the family came along ... that is when I sorted out what my concept of God is, that God is love, and that wherever there is love, God is there, and that my eternal life is through my children and through what I build in this world, because it will go on.

Although Mary was deeply involved with family and church organisations, she avoided church politics:

My concept of it all was about people, and God being present in people, and I never bothered to get caught up in the politics of the church, because I think that that hasn't got a lot to do with being Christian ... I really just got on with things ... so my Christianity and my relationship with God stayed pretty simple. I still try not to have it contaminated by the church.305

In her early thirties, Mary returned to university to complete her degree and begin post-graduate work. At the same time she began to work with organisations that offered counselling services to families. Her study and work brought her into contact with “interesting women” with “good minds,” who “were also Catholic women.”

During this time, Mary met a woman who became a very special friend:

We're still soul-mates, when you meet after eight years we just begin where we left off ... she loved to talk as much as I did about important things. She was like an older sister, a real helping person ... she was always there to rely on. We also shared interests ... I think the main thing was I never had any doubt that she respected my opinion. I felt valued by her and I certainly valued her ... There's just a sense of loving each other.

Two major anxieties marked Mary's life in her thirties: concern that her new interests were putting distance between her and her husband, and a diagnosis of cancer:

My career and my direction and my interests began to diverge more from [my husband's] and very often he didn't understand that, or didn't want to understand ... was frightened by the prospect of me doing my thing and drawing further away from him ... But the big one was discovering that I had cancer ... I needed all the support at that time, faced up to my mortality, and was very grateful, for my background in learning helped me to understand and also gave me a lot of resources, not only spiritual but people resources ... that I could take in to help me get over those times.

The struggle with cancer also brought more reflection about God:

I used to ask for a lot of help. I used to get it too, because God in action was the people who were there for me. I think the whole experience made me more human too ... I was very capable and on a roll really, and all of a sudden I needed help, and it was really special having people being so pleased to help. God certainly at this stage was the love, and I was literally enveloped in it, my family and my friends. It was a really special time if you can think of a special time as a scary awful one ... I just had a sense of reaffirming the concept that seemed right for me in those earlier days ... that God is love.

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305 The women's relationships to God and church will be taken up in 9.7.
God as love is the predominant image of God for Mary in this stage of her life. God is present to her through family and friends, in their loyalty, sharing and caring for one another. She turned to God as she turned to the important people in her life when she needed support through difficult times. God and others showed their care, reaffirmed her value for them, and loved her.

4.3.5 Middle Adulthood

This latest stage of life has seen Mary finishing post-graduate study and working in a high school context. Two women have been particularly important for Mary there, one a mentor, and one a friend. The mentor, a religious sister, “exhibits the real Christian way of being ... a genuine enthusiasm for others, an absolute willingness to forgive and forget, a real caring about others, a positiveness.” About the other significant person, Mary says:

I feel that I’ve been able to encourage her and support her along the way in the same way that she has supported me. Because of the fact that we both converted to Catholicism, there’s a depth of understanding and a depth of support there, that others who have not shared that can’t really understand.

Joys and anxieties have been centred mostly on family; the joys of the children growing up and succeeding at education, worries about their relationships, anxieties about the health of elderly parents, and about Mary’s own health problems. The anxieties have produced in Mary a valuing of peace and harmony. There has also been travel, bush tramping, success in her new career, and “being thankful [for] living to see it happen, because after the trauma of cancer you don’t ever take your life for granted anymore.”

At this point in her life, Mary understands God as a comfortable friend ... God to me is love, and anytime I come in contact with love, that’s my contact with God. So it’s a comfortable presence ... rather than a friend - which personifies it. God is love, so I truly believe that whenever love is being expressed, that’s God in action.

Mary has felt God’s presence strongly on significant occasions in her life: “They’re sacramental occasions ... times like childbirth, and marriage, and death.” There is a “huge sense of the presence of God with the Eucharist” connected particularly with “being together with people.” Other times, she feels the presence of God in music, the beauty of nature, candles and the idea of light in darkness, the cross, the Madonna and child. But “probably the most significant times involve people, and I’m thinking of my own family, and my feelings about my parents and my siblings.”
Mary says "if I'm asked to write a prayer, I would give thanks," and in a prayer she wrote during her interviews, she did indeed give thanks - for all the people in her life, her family, friends, husband, children and herself. Her predominant image of God as love, she reflects, began with "the love that was there with my parents, which they shared with their children, and which enabled us together to feel loved and to share that love with others, so it's like an ever widening circle with God at the centre."

Mary addressed her prayer "Dear Lord," and was asked afterwards who she was thinking of when she used the term "Lord."

There was a clear decision on my part not to say 'dear God,' because I don't talk to God. But Jesus is more a child-like concept ... Lord is kind of in between. It sounds right. It has some sort of dignity. I was going to talk about something ... special, whereas Jesus would be more everyday kind of stuff ... I was going to say authority, a little more substance than Jesus perhaps. Like when I said Jesus was more a child's [word].

Mary uses the title "Lord" to give more authority to what in some sense she perceives as a child-like understanding of Jesus. "God," the authority figure, is more remote, and for her: the use of "Lord" helped make God feel nearer, an "in-between" bridge between God and Jesus. For Mary, "God is like the more authority figure that I associate with the church. Jesus is more that loving presence that I can relate to." When Mary was working through an adjective list, she drew the distinction, "God is kind of like church, but the Jesus bit is more the teacher."

The connection Mary noted between God as authority and church will be discussed more fully in Chapter 9, but the connection is important. She says that when she is speaking of God, "God somehow gets caught up in church for me. Whereas ... God in terms of love doesn't have that same kind of church link." She finds that church leaders often demand respect and obedience simply because of the "authority vested in their role, and that gets right up my nose, and I'm sure God wouldn't be like that." She says further, "I can't equate the hurt that is done to people, and often it's women, with a loving God." She has, in her adult life, perhaps beginning with her teenage years, but surely in early adulthood, drawn a distinction between God and church as far as their perceived characteristics and actions.

For Mary, God is more a presence than a being, and she avoids over-personifying God. For most of her life, God has been "like a masculine personage," and she feels that links up with the feelings she had for her own father, "a great deal of respect and love. And he's a very caring kind of person so the idea of father, God, male ... isn't a problem really. I can see why it's important that God is an androgynous term ... not female, not male. I probably feel happier with that."
Mary reflects that over her life,
from a very simple external God who is given to you by your family ... I think
God became internalised for me in my late teens and certainly in my late twenties
when I was busy having babies and involved with [church organisations], and
the concept of God as being love, and experience of having been enveloped in
that love from other people, which is God and the way that God works, is
something that I have experienced, and have a great deal of assurance.

God, for Mary, is the centre of a circle of love which enfolds friends and family. God is a
loving presence, but when personified, is caring, can be relied upon, and is always there.
God, when addressed as such, feels remote and an authority - with connections to the church
which over-uses its authority - but when understood in the context of people, is the source of
and substance of all love.

4.3.6 Synthesis

Mary’s predominant God image is love, which was rooted in the love of her parents
and siblings, but also shaped by her close friends, mentors and children. Factors other than
people which seem to have directly influenced her God image are church and her fight with
cancer. These factors are discussed in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9.

4.4 Annie

4.4.1 Background

Annie was born at the beginning of the war years (1940) in Australia. She was an
only child and was brought up in the Methodist tradition. She attended various Christian
and state primary schools, then a Methodist girls’ school during her high school years. She
lived both in the country and in the city. She completed a tertiary degree in arts, married,
and moved with her husband to New Zealand, becoming a Catholic within the first years of
their marriage. They had seven children, and have lived in four places in this country.
Annie trained as a teacher as her children were growing up, and has taught high school since
that time. She has been involved in a number of school, civic, women’s and church
organisations. Her children are grown, and she was in her middle fifties at the times of the
initial interviews.
4.4.2 Childhood

Annie didn’t have an idea of ‘God’ in her early years:

A picture of God in my mind, no, would be Jesus, because my grandmother was a Methodist. She would read me Bible stories. I went to Sunday school: I was immersed in her church-going and involvement. And so Jesus was a friend for the children, was a human. Every night, prayers: ‘Jesus tender shepherd, hear me; bless thy little lamb tonight in the darkness’ ... She sat on the bed, said these prayers to me, read these stories.

Annie’s grandmother was the one in the family who taught her about God (Jesus), and “whatever I knew of God and Jesus ... was about loving, caring, tender, nurturing ideas.”

The important people in Annie’s early life were her parents and her grandmother. She was the only grandchild, and “I must have been everything to [grandmother] ... I was her precious little pet, and I think she doted on me.” Her mother was a retiring, quiet kind of person. She loved me tremendously. I now know that she was quite a strong person, but like most children, I thought that I was teaching her everything. She wasn’t a forceful outstanding kind of a person ... she wasn’t a very effervescent or demonstrative or lively kind of person ... more retiring and suppressed.

Annie’s father “was a chap, he didn’t show [his feelings] ... he was repressed ... He didn’t ever tell me that he thought I was wonderful. I had to work that out ... He didn’t show it ... he just came from a family of people who pretty much didn’t show what they feel.”

Annie delighted in “building cubby houses in the grass, playing in gardens ... explored things on my own.” Her anxieties involved “war sorts of things” - fears of escaped Japanese prisoners of war and huge planes going over - and being always “frightened of the dark, terrified of the dark.”

In the drawing of her life story (Figure 4-4), Annie coloured her childhood “that golden colour because I ... look back on my childhood as a very happy time. The picture of Jesus as tender, loving, caring and nurturing, fits in well with Annie’s memories of home life and the family that surrounded her.

4.4.3 Adolescence

Just as Annie was moving into adolescence, her mother lost a baby, and later that same year her grandmother died. Annie says “I wasn’t really old enough to take the intensity of that on board ... I was too busy with my own life ...”
Figure 4-4
Annies’s Life Story Drawing
In her high school years, there were a few teachers who Annie felt were important to her, and with each one it was because they recognised and encouraged the talent they saw in her, whether it was in writing or in music. But it was Annie’s friends who were most important for her then, both girls and boys: “Because I was an only child, I needed security and friendship a lot. So I always needed to have a best friend, and I always seemed to manage to have a boyfriend.” She remembers doing things with her friends, including going to Christian camps and being “converted”: “Quite a legitimate way [of seeing boys] ... Billy Graham and camps ... were part of my social life, part of teenage growing up.” In terms of an understanding of God, Annie says she “doesn’t remember God or Jesus being a huge bit or important part.”

University years were “scary” for Annie. She loved socialising, discovering freedom and flatting so much that she failed her first year, and had to “knuckle down the second year.” She fought self-image problems: “I’ve ... often felt inferior to anybody in terms of height, looks, ability, brains, whatever,” but found that this was a time the world broadened out for her, including meeting her future husband:

He was also a huge player [of life], but he also managed to fit being a good Catholic in there too, seemed a bit of a contradiction ... No matter what incredible party or mischief he’d been getting into on Saturday night, he’d always go to church on Sunday. So that was a vital part of his life, and I hadn’t done a great deal of thinking of whether religion had any part in my life ... I was being introduced to a totally different way of being and thinking religiously.

Was God important for Annie at this stage? “Forget God here for a while ... there was a kind of a fascination with [Catholicism], because I didn’t know anything about how Catholics operated.”

4.4.4 Early Adulthood

When she married in her early twenties, Annie moved to New Zealand, with her husband who was a New Zealander. They found themselves first in a small town which warmly embraced them, surrounded by Catholic families and a Catholic community. It was a major change for Annie, who had to adjust to a new culture, being away from her family, and living in a small town rather than a big city.

Annie also had a battle with herself over whether to become Catholic or not. She was “struggling to say ... I’m OK too, but not having the skills or the theories or the ideas that have been made available since through feminist thought ... [I only had] impotent answers
... it was only that way and my way wasn’t any good.” Despite her feelings that “Catholic equalled God equalled hierarchy equalled male domination,” she decided to become Catholic to be able to participate with her husband and her children as they continued to come along.

Did Annie have a concept of God at that time?

I suppose I did, but my thinking about what is God and what God’s about have been mainly focused in ... later years ... I would have said the things that I’d had from my grandmother. I would have always thought that God was loving rather than fearsome, angry, paternalistic, hierarchical ... but I didn’t give it a lot of thought.

As the children got older, there were beginnings of feminist awareness of “male-female relationships and me-church relationships and me-God ideas,” which were the seeds of Annie’s later interest in feminist theology and thirst for greater knowledge about God.

Her husband and children were naturally the important people in her life at this time. In each of the communities they lived in, they found families who “adopted” them and befriended them. She delighted in relationships of all kinds, including visits with the children’s grandparents and other family members. She was sometimes anxious about whether with so many children she had the time to give each of them the attention they needed, and there was also “the on-going anxiety about being pregnant yet again, which was, of course, influenced by the church.”

4.4.5 Middle Adulthood

In her late thirties, with the demands of providing for seven children, Annie entered the workforce, eventually getting her teaching certificate and obtaining a teaching position at a Catholic high school. It was a new experience for her “going out in the world of work [where] people are different ... they think differently ... [wondering] how do you cope, but also enjoying the challenge.” In her second year teaching, she was asked to teach religious education, and because she had never done any religious study, she did the Walk by Faith (NCRS)306 and CFLE courses: “I had to know as much as I could. Then I became much more aware of the real meaning of religion, God, life.”

Then there was a period marked by three deaths:

306 NCRS is the National Council for Religious Studies. It sponsors a two year education-in-faith programme called ‘Walk by Faith’ for adults who want to further explore their Catholic faith and spirituality.
My mother died while we were away overseas and then the following year a son was killed, and then the following year a granddaughter died. When you brush with death you learn so much about life and what it means ... It was a revelation to me really, my experience of death. I knew that these issues that I hadn’t thought on terribly seriously before were very important.

She spent as much time as she could centred on learning and thinking about religious issues. At that time too, she was “coming into touch with feminist theology,” and realised that she wanted to give her students a way of looking at life differently.

On her life story drawing (Figure 4-4), Annie “coded the time in black ... because of the death, but in fact there was a huge growth which is what makes sense out of death ... It was being in touch with that whole birth, death, regrowth cycle that was very important for me in my life.”

In the school environment, Annie was exposed to a wide range of people, and was especially influenced by one of the sisters, who had a real “vision of Christianity.” She combined a “compassionate outlook on life” with professionalism. The whole “environment [at the school] has been enormously influential.” Outside the school, Annie and her husband also began to experience richer relationships, and she feels “we’ll go into our old age and our retirement with a much smaller, tighter but more meaningful group of friends.”

Her sources of enjoyment remain people and relationships, now including grandchildren:

The most enduring delight as a mother is to see your children become independent ... To allow them to go and to allow them to be themselves ... And that’s led to a hugely rewarding deepening of [my husband’s] and my relationship. And so that’s a source of delight and freedom, the ability to realise some of my dreams like travel ... to have learned a lot more about art has been a delight to me, to be able to go and see some of the things that I’ve taught about, expanding horizons, freedoms, deepening relationships.

The pain has come with the deaths in her family and the breakdown of a marriage of one of her children. Through all this:

I’ve been fortunate enough to learn about the amazing goodness of people ... I’ve walked past these pains in my life and thought, aren’t people wonderful. God in everybody ... the love that people can pour onto people that are having terrible things happen to them. I’ve been so fortunate. I know some people don’t come out of death with that realisation ... I was never angry with God about it, never. None of us have ever said, ‘God why’d you do that to us?’ Somehow it wasn’t like that, because in the taking away of [my son] we were given so much in all sorts of ways. It’s a mystery.

God has not really changed for Annie, but her early ideas “intensified ... that idea of God being love and that love being in people.” Annie recalls a character in a book [The Color Purple] saying, “I found God inside myself and I loved her deeply”: 
What I think currently is that God is the absolute intrinsic centre of every human being, and because it’s there in ... absolutely everybody ... it’s universal, and that is mysterious. Sometimes I’m in danger of simplifying, but I think it’s huger than I even grasp ... It’s the inner yearning, ability to love inside everybody ... and this sounds horrendous, but I think I’m part of God. So I’ve got this indivisibility, unification of some description between God and me, and God in you, and God in everybody ... There’s that link of complex humility and arrogance ... That’s where the revelation of God will be, in relating with other people ... intensely personal, more so than in meditation or prayer.

Annie’s images of God still go back to her grandmother, the concepts of God as “love, growth, nurture, nourishing, watering, blossoming.” Her metaphors reach into “plant growing,” and she explains:

It’s like the idea of the well within you, you’re touching the depths of your inner spirituality. Those metaphors of being - of reeding water and moisture in order to blossom and grow ... there’s another biblical parallel, to be able to grow, otherwise you dry up and shrivel away. And so it is necessary to have this ability to love, and to others and through others to express [that love], that’s the way God nourishes and nurtures the world, through people’s ability to love and go out to each other.

When asked about hymns or scripture which have significance for her, Annie said, I’m totally hung up on, to the extent that the [students] sigh ... ‘Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you,’ and Jesus saying ‘God is love’ ... The idea of service for/to others is where we transmit God. We can’t just keep God to ourselves. I think there’s damn all use in a God that’s just kept private for my own purposes. I don’t always act this way, of course ... the ideal way.

Annie’s understanding is of God in and between people, God in the inner being of each person, God who is the well inside which provides the water (love) needed to keep us alive, God not just for ourselves, but to share with others.

Annie was asked to write a prayer, and as she looked down at her paper and the table, she saw “I waz here” scratched into the surface of the wood. Part of her prayer was

I wonder who that person was. I’ll never know, but what I do know is that just as thinking of you linked me to that other through seeing that claim for recognition scratched into the table, so I am spiritually linked to that person through you, because you link me to my brothers and sisters everywhere.

Annie says, “there again God was showing herself to me in someone else ... the idea that if that person was here, so was God.”

Annie’s journey with God was marked by simplicity and straightforwardness in her early years. She found loving and caring in the Jesus she was introduced to, and in the people around her. During adolescence and early adulthood, that understanding of God carried her through and was sufficient. By middle adulthood, Annie’s life circumstances - her job, her colleagues, changes in family life - gave her a yearning to know more about this God who had been with her but about whom she realised there was a lot more to know.
What she has found has reinforced her early understanding of God, but also broadened and deepened it, giving her new metaphors or ways of speaking about God. Her life experience has provided her with insights into God, and her study has offered her ways of reflecting on and articulating that experience.

4.4.6 Synthesis

Annie’s lifelong image of God as love in people has been shaped by people: particularly by her grandmother and mother, teachers, friends, husband, extended family, and a mentor. Other life experiences which have influenced Annie’s God image are feminism; entering the workforce and the atmosphere at the Catholic high school where she teaches; NCRS and CFLE courses; and the deaths of three close family members. These factors will be picked up in comparison with factors shaping other women’s God images in Chapters 8 and 9.

For Helen, Marie, Mary and Annie, God has been a given, a constant, and a God closely involved with their lives: from childhood to middle adulthood, God has been friend or love. For the other seven women in this study, God’s history in their lives has been more chequered, as Chapters 5, 6 and 7 will reveal.
CHAPTER 5
GOD IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN, PART II:
GOD IMAGES IN RESTLESS TRANSITION

This chapter holds the stories of two women whose God images have been complex and sometimes convoluted from childhood. Both have different images from one another, but each of their constellations of God images have gone through a number of evolutions. Both women find in middle adulthood that they struggle in different ways with their relationships with God, and also with themselves.

5.1 Susie

5.1.1 Background

Susie’s family of origin included two girls and four boys; she is the fourth child of the six, born in 1952. Her family has always lived in New Zealand, with Irish and English cultural roots. Both parents were practising Roman Catholics. Susie attended Catholic primary school, mostly state secondary school, except for her last two years at a Catholic girls’ college. She has tertiary training in teaching and has been a teacher, homemaker and artist. She has lived in four cities in New Zealand during her life and spent two years travelling in Europe, North America and in the Pacific. She has been deeply involved with many organisations within the Catholic church and also with her children’s school. She lives with her husband and three teenaged children. She was in her mid-forties at the time of her participation in the study.

5.1.2 Childhood

As a child, Susie thought of God as “a guy with a beard on top of a cloud who was a bit fearful, and he was mixed up in all our wee statues ... He was a huge person.” She remembered God “looking down” on the crucifixion from a mural in a childhood church. He was “up there in the sky, powerful, always watching you even when your parents weren’t.” God was “a presence slightly threatening ... we’ll (persons of the Trinity) get you
if you don’t [toe the line], there was an awful guilt there.” But also since childhood she has had “the idea of God as unconditional love … even as a wee child, God was the all-doing.”

She learned about God, even before she went to school, mostly from her mother, whom she remembers as a very holy woman, waking them up at 6:30 am to go to daily Mass, and making the rosary a family ritual. Her mother also taught the children to say prayers: the ritual communicating with God each day, connecting with him every morning and night … there was this fear if you didn’t, there was a lot of guilt … ‘If you can’t do it for me, do it for God.’ There were things we did for God left right and centre, and Lent was seriously taken into storing lollies and God knows what [might happen] if you broke your fast.

Susie describes her mother as “nurturing, I don’t think I’ve heard her raise her voice,” and says she relied on her very much. Susie’ own children say that Susie’s mother “could be a saint.” Susie says she was good and virtuous: “She was very holy, she just lived for her family.” Guilt also played a part in what they were asked to do by their mother, associated sometimes with what they were being asked to do for God.

Susie looked up to her father, “but he was a real authoritarian. You will do this, you will do that … we were a weenie bit scared … But there was respect there and I quite enjoyed him.” When the children’s behaviour “got too heavy” for her mother, “father only had to [say] ‘now look, lass’ and then you’d end up in tears. He didn’t actually belt us very much but he … just had this look … He set himself very high standards and morals.”

The only other person Susie mentioned as having an influence on her during her childhood was her first teacher, who got right up my nose because I am left handed and … she tied my left hand behind my back, to the chair, and said ‘now you will write with your right hand,’ and I said ‘I’m not writing that way’ … So the first couple of years I was very miserable, and I remember feeling very inferior because I didn’t pick up reading very well, I couldn’t spell, for some reason there was a kind of a block … a slow developer probably, and feeling that sort of inadequacy … So I don’t remember feeling that chuffed at school.

Within her family, however,Susie had an overall feeling of well-being: “It was a really secure family.”

The God Susie came to know in her childhood can be seen as a composite of what she learned about God in words and actions from those around her and how she reacted to them. She learned from parents and church art that God was male (a guy with a beard) and a fearful and threatening presence. He was a “huge” person, somehow above - on a cloud, looking down, in the sky. God was someone to be communicated with daily through
prayers, rosary and Mass, and one whom you did things for, especially during Lent. Fear and guilt were connected with not fulfilling those obligations.

Some of the fear and guilt Susie identifies as coming through her mother’s teaching about prayer and Lenten obligations. Her idea of God as fearful and powerful mirrors both her mother’s teaching and her experience of her father as authoritarian. These experiences, as well as the cruel treatment by a teacher, contribute to her mixed relationship with God in the next stages of her life.

Nonetheless, Susie’s overall childhood environment was one which left lasting positive feelings as well. She experienced her mother as nurturing and soft-spoken and her father as enjoyable. She remembers her with an overall sense of security. Her understanding from childhood of God as unconditional love, as well as of an unfair God, can be seen to stem from this experience of family.

5.1.3 Adolescence

Susie’s remembrance of God in her high school years is a “bit blank”; “I didn’t think much about him really.” She attributes her lack of thinking about God much to the fact that her parents sent her to a state school, and her major memory is going to church every third Sunday to the convent in blue capes and white veils with the other “Children of Mary.” Because she and two others went to the state school instead of the Catholic school, they were ridiculed as “Prottie Catholics” by two of the nuns, inducing resentment and anger. She felt like saying “Stuff you, lady,” and remembered going home and saying “Mum, I’m not going to Children of Mary again, bugger it.” Nonetheless she “didn’t have enough nerve to say I’m not going, and also there was at the background [the idea that] you’ve got to go even when you feel dry ... So I went dutifully.”

After high school, she spent three years at Teacher’s College, during which time God didn’t feature very much except that I did go to the monastery just up the hill, the Redemptorists, because I used to quite like the hellfire and brimstone. And then I used to go to [another church] - for the music and organ - totally the wrong reasons, you see, but I still went.

She couldn’t put any words on who God was then, “he didn’t register at all. But there was this duty to go.”

Susie remembers her adolescent years overall as pretty stormy teenage years. I didn’t really like most people. There was a teacher who was like a mentor ... I could say things to her I wouldn’t dare say to
mum and dad, or mum would say 'now listen, you can't do this and you shouldn't think that.' ... So you could [go to this teacher] and talk to her and sound out your ideas ... whether she accepted them or not personally.

There was also an art teacher who encouraged Susie's artistic talent, a gift Susie herself hadn't yet recognised, and was also very accepting, a way of being Susie really needed at that time: “She encouraged [my art] ... She was quite accepting ... I was the only pupil doing 6th form art, and it must have mattered, because I most enjoyed going ... I don't remember much of a relationship except we did talk a lot about art.” These two teachers, says Susie, “helped me with my self-esteem ... belief in myself ... not that I don't think my parents didn't do that, but ... perhaps I didn't accept it from them.” Her parents did leave her with “a sense of duty - I sort of say that and sigh - a sense of trust in people, faith in [people], family bonding, acceptance of family, warts and all.”

In her teenage years, Susie's main source of anxiety, fear and hurt was in not finding herself accepted for who she was by those who had been closest to her, or by her peers. She says she lacked self-confidence, and her body image was poor. She was full of self-doubt and feelings of inferiority. Part of her answer was to withdraw from the pain of being around people, and spend “untold hours up in the paddock.” The horses “accepted me for what I was.”

In her last years of high school, Susie's parents sent her to live with family friends in another city: “These people were wonderful. [My parents and I] were incredibly angry with each other at that stage ... This family I stayed with, they were wonderful in that they trusted me ... There was this lovely acceptance from [them].”

Her Teacher's College years Susie remembers as traumatic, partly due to an unhappy romantic relationship and partly due to her sister's leaving:

My sister and I were actually very very close, and she finished her nursing and then she went overseas and that was devastating for me because we got on very well together ... [It felt] like my right arm had been cut off. I did have some tremendous flatmates, one was a special lady.

Adolescence brought Susie a certain amount of estrangement from her parents. They had mediated God to her in her childhood, but seemed now to be associated with confrontation, duty, 'can'ts' and 'shouldn'ts'. Estrangement from God also occurred when she was ridiculed by convent sisters who, as representatives of 'church,' and therefore God, offered her only alienation and rejection. Her involvement in an unhappy relationship compounded her feeling of low self-worth, and the departure of her sister was a deep loss. Susie sought out the fire and brimstone preaching of the Redemptorists during this time.
Despite the acceptance she longed for - and had experienced from a few high school teachers, her temporary 'surrogate' parents, and her solace in the paddocks - the recent loss, rejection and mistreatment by people coupled with the guilt and fear latent from her childhood images of God would have led her to feel that God 'himself' was rejecting her for some unknown or only partially understood reasons. She felt as if she 'deserved' everything she heard at the monastery: the God of her childhood had watched her, and her misery was her punishment.

5.1.4 Early Adulthood

Unlike in adolescence, Susie can trace something more of who God was for her during her early adulthood, when she was twenty to thirty-three. It was the period in her life when she met the man who would become her husband, began her teaching career, travelled overseas, established a home and had three children.

When Susie married in her early twenties, she “had a strong spiritual revival,” having had a good priest supervising her marriage preparation: “I had this huge desire ... that the wedding ceremony was meaningful and correct, the whole ritual of matrimony and the Catholic sacrament.” Especially important for Susie was the idea of “binding two families” because her husband’s family was not Catholic. The importance of family bonds, linked in her childhood with well-being and Catholic upbringing, would have influenced her thinking in this.

Susie felt God “kind of hovered around in the background” during those early years. She prayed “God give me strength” because she suffered doubts: “I sort of forced the issue. I said if you don’t want to get married, fine, but I’m going overseas if we don’t get married.”

[It was me] more or less telling him that we are going to get married ... It just seemed the right thing to do. He’s the person I felt comfortable with, I hadn’t felt with anybody else. You could be disagreeable, you could be nice, you could do anything and he would totally accept me. There was an unconditional acceptance.

Susie had found someone at last who could accept her, and she uses the phrase “unconditional acceptance,” merging the acceptance she had longed for as an adolescent with the concept of unconditional love which she had associated with God from early in her childhood.

307 Her talent is evident in her life story drawings, found on the five pages of Figure 5-1.
Figure 5-1a

Susie’s Life Story Drawing
Figure 5-1b

Susie’s Life Story Drawing
Figure 5-1c

Susie’s Life Story Drawing
Figure 5-1d

Susie’s Life Story Drawing
Figure 5-1e

Susie's Life Story Drawing
She describes her early marriage relationship as one of learning to rely on one another, and testing each other to see where the boundaries were between self and other.

At [an overseas city] we had a dingdong argument and [I thought] 'stuff you', and I got so far down the street and thought, 'I'll just have to go back, I can't even speak the lingo. I am reliant on being with this guy, it's just got to work. So there was, through thick or thin, this bonding which I think was really quite wonderful. Because there was this awkwardness about each other … It came out in the oddest ways. [He would say] 'I put that picture on the wall, I don't know if you quite like it there, but I have.' [Then he would wonder] 'Now is she going to reject it there, is she going to say this is a stupid picture?'

God was, during these early marriage years, someone to turn to for help. Susie feels she was "demanding, 'I need your help.' But he didn't figure largely." Her descriptions of her relationship with her husband, her understanding of having "forced the issue" of marriage, and the testing or challenging of one another's boundaries, seem similar to the demands she makes on God for help, and will also be seen to have parallels with her later relationship with God.

Meanwhile her parents once again became much closer once she started having children. "Once we had our own baby, there was this kind of mystical acceptance. And where I'd been at loggerheads with my parents as a teenager, suddenly they were my very ... good friends."

But in the midst of having children and living contentedly, Susie's husband had a serious accident which left him unconscious for a few weeks, with no memory for months, and in recovery for two years. She was pregnant with their second child at the time:

[He] was out of his tree, couldn’t remember what you said ... lost his memory .... he denied all the way through when I was pregnant that we were having this baby, and he couldn't remember. He'd say 'you never came to see me,' he was adamant. We got back to the house and he said, 'do we live in this house?' ... I went to pieces ... about six months after the baby was born. I remember bawling my eyes out at the doctor and saying I am going mad. I have three little children, two plus husband ... All I remember is just feeling terribly terribly tired, my head in the nappy bucket and this zombie-like husband.

In all this, Susie remembers thinking:

This isn’t the guy I married. Lord, if you don’t help me accept this guy, I think I'm going to go out of my tree. For better or worse, sickness and health, and these kids were colicky horrible children ... [and for my husband] there was long term healing of the old head and trying to cope with it all. And in all of that there was this sort of strange presence coming through.

This presence manifested itself as physically felt and heard just after the second baby was born:

I was peeling potatoes, and I turned because someone said 'I am here,' and I shot round. I'm the only one in the kitchen, and I thought 'OK, yeah, I'm OK, all
right. I thought well, maybe I'm so dull in my aspect that I have to have these concrete reinforcements. But ... that day comes back to me at times when things are really kind of heavy. There is this peacefulness that comes and says 'look, it's not going to be the end of the world, and I am here.' So I find that really comfortable, but it is a kind of a presence.

God was becoming what Susie describes as a "personal mentor ... it was very much the beginning of this all-encompassing, ever-present presence, this huge comfort." The time after the accident was "a realisation time, and I think working in the garden and getting back to nature was this wonderment at God, the creation of children, 'why have you let this guy live, he shouldn't be walking around like everybody else.'"

The births of the children and the accident were an "awakening time" to the presence of a God who was always there. Susie also belonged to a prayer group which helped her and the others to "blossom in our belief in God and our acceptance of ourselves as women. I am a person in my own right."

By the end of 'early adulthood', Susie had felt God's presence in a new and 'all-encompassing' way. The new understanding was clearly precipitated by the life situation she found herself in, dealing with her husband and children after the accident and her experience of the presence of God. Despite her demands on God, God was there for her ("I am here"), and that presence brought her peace and comfort. That feeling of God's presence may rest partly on the early childhood security Susie felt with her parents, especially the nurturing presence of her mother, which had been restored to her during this period, those attributes becoming part of her composite picture of God. As her husband recovered and her children grew, Susie began to rediscover God in nature (as she had known but not articulated in her childhood outdoor experiences, and from teenage years in the paddock), and to discover for the first time God in both her children and in herself as human person and woman.

5.1.5 Middle Adulthood

For Susie, this period is from about ages thirty-four to forty-four, her age when the interviews were completed. She has developed a relationship with God over this period which involved a lot of communication, both talking and listening to God. The relationship is sometimes one Susie describes as bargaining or challenging: "I'm bargaining all the time ... I say, 'well look, I don't know whether I have to accept that or not.'" Susie dates this challenging in the relationship from the time of her husband's accident, the unfairness of it,
and her anger with God about it. Susie understands God working through her thoughts, guiding her, but she doesn’t always agree with the direction she seems to get, or answers to her questions:

You can argue and say, this isn’t right, and look, God, you’ve got to be able to give me a hand here and I think this is so unfair, but somewhere [you feel] you are being terribly unreasonable. To me that is God calling you to order no matter what you think ... so I talk quite angrily to him at times ... Sometimes we’re on really good terms and sometimes I think he doesn’t listen at all. There’s such a humanness, you’ve asked for something quite reasonably ... there’s no response, there’s no action, in fact it seems to get worse, and he’s obviously gone out for the day ... or perhaps he doesn’t have to be at your beck and call all the time.

Her relationship with God has an openness about it, a banter, and as she says, a “humanness.” She feels she can talk to God, in whom she has found an acceptance which transcends any anger or accusations she could possibly hurl. In some ways, she has now found the acceptance from God that she found earlier in her husband. Just as the attributes of the important people in her childhood (her father’s fearful disposition overlaid on the otherwise secure feeling from her parents) became part of who God was, so does this total and unconditional acceptance which she experienced from her husband.

Susie says she describes God to her children like “a friend ... he’s always beside you, you walk hand in hand with him. This presence is an awareness, a surrounding all the time.” God is like a friend because “you could tell a friend anything (vocal emphasis), actually exposing [yourself],” but “this friend also has wisdom.” Susie’s friends, her mother among them, at this point in her life are ones with whom she can talk about God: “Sooner or later conversations seem to get around to faith, God, different things ... that we want to share, on spirituality. They don’t set out that way, but that’s how it happens. And we do kind of gravitate towards each other for that reason.” Susie is drawn to friends who know God, and she is drawn to a God to with whom she can share intimacies like a friend.

Another aspect of Susie’s growing understanding of God is that sometimes it appears that God has “gone out for the day ... or perhaps he doesn’t have to be at your beck and call all the time.” This follows an awareness in Susie’s own life that she had been, like her mother, living “for the family,” but in the process, wearing herself out. After her husband’s accident and recovery, he built up a business while Susie home schooled two of their children. Then the business failed, they lost their house, and her father died. Susie returned to teaching, but found that all the housework was still waiting for her when she came home. She felt resentful and angry that no one else would make a change, so she made one for herself, deciding not to teach full time, but to work on her art. With her children teenagers,
she felt it was time not always to be at their beck and call, a relationship which seems to mirror the one she sees God has with her.

In the tragedies the years have brought, Susie has always said that there "were wonderful people there. It was a time they helped us through." She feels now that "there is still this great presence, there are a wonderful amount of people that I deal with."

At the same time, Susie struggles with trying to control her life - or at least the things that go wrong - and challenges God. There is an element of the child wanting the parent to look after her, but in a more thought-out way in which she realises that she still has responsibilities to do what is humanly possible:

I blame him, you see. I've got certain control over what I [do] ... You can't complain God's [making messes] in life, you make them yourself sometimes. It's crazy to sort of hit him, probably give up or cop out, say 'I can't deal with this' - you'll have to. And when things ... resolve or when they're not as bad as you first imagined, there is this 'Well, I knew you were going to look after us, I just wanted to tell you so you didn't forget' ... perhaps I test his trust all the time.

Susie also mentions God as a "bright light" and her attraction to the hymn "Be still and know", because for her it is very hard to be still.

Susie wrote a prayer which seems to bring together the paradoxical relationship she has with God, its confidence and its doubts, complete with God's reply:

Your presence has cloaked me completely.
I doubt, but you don't forget me.
Why do I doubt?
I see you in the eyes of the children,
In the worry and pain of [my husband].
I look for you in my family and in the people I meet.
I seem to doubt you when 'my will is not done.'
But you just keep reminding me - calling me to order - daily with your unconditional love.
I am made in God's image.
Just lighten up, Susie!

Susie's understanding of God as presence, both mysterious and in others, is evident. She continues to tussle with God when she disagrees with what happens in her life, but feels called to a greater trust in the face of God's unconditional love. Her penultimate line is a tribute to growth in her own self, the assertion that despite her doubts she is made of divine thread. Her final thought is one both humanly and divinely inspired, God's gentle and humorous reminder to "lighten up." Susie comments on her prayer, "That kind of guilt spills out, you know, I doubt him all the time. And yet deep down I know he won't abandon, but I challenge that all the time ... My human frailties all come through ... He is
there - she - he is there, he’s really there.” Despite what she sees as her inability to totally trust God and her guilt about that, God “is ... an all encompassing presence, just there. He’s just around - she’s just around me. She’s just with me all the time.”

5.1.6 Synthesis

Susie’s God images show the influences of her parents, teachers, sister, surrogate parents, husband, children, friends, and the women in her prayer and reflection groups. In addition to people, other influences include nature, the events surrounding her husband’s accident, feminism and art. The roles of people and experiences in the evolution of Susie’s God images are taken further in Chapters 8 and 9.

5.2 Clare

5.2.1 Background

Clare has lived in New Zealand all her life, as did her parents, who had Irish and Scottish ancestry. Clare was born in 1941, the first of four children: she lived in seven towns and cities during her childhood and adolescence, and one city for most of her adult life. She has always been a Catholic. Her primary schooling was in the state system, followed by a year at a Catholic boarding school and three years at a local Catholic school. After completing school certificate she did secretarial work for several years before marrying. She has seven children, one of whom was still living at home during the study. Recently she completed a degree in social work and is engaged in that field of work at present. She has been active in numerous church and community organisations over the years. Clare was in her mid-late fifties when interviewed.

A fuller discussion of links between God-image and self-image is found in 9.5.
5.2.2 Childhood

Clare says that as a child she “always thought of God as the image of Michaelangelo’s old man.” She describes what this old man was like:

I remember the image of God as being this authoritarian person who you can’t get away from. I remember quite distinctly in bed one night thinking where could you go to get away from God and there was nowhere ... I felt like a prisoner. He could see everything, he could hear everything, he knew what I was thinking, and that worried me. You’d have to be really good because he was watching you all the time and you could never get away.

Clare thinks it would have been her mum and dad who taught her those ideas. In her home, “being good was fairly important.” God was also “very much the father figure, the authority, order ... My life was very ordered, mum was very neat, tidy, organised, everything went according to clockwork ... And dad, he made the decisions. So my idea of God was very much an authority figure.” In her life drawing, Figure 5-2, Clare parallels what was happening in her life with notations of her God images at the time.

Clare saw her mother as very talented, “but she devoted her life to keeping the house clean and looking after us,” and in later years felt that her mother both “was like a slave to people” and “enslaved the people she was working for.” Although Clare’s father had been authoritarian, Clare’s mother “ruled dad’s life,” so both were projected as God images in Clare’s young mind. She saw her parents as decision makers - authoritarian, orderly and expecting her to be good, and these were the same ideas she grew to have about God: “I regarded my parents as being God’s representatives for me and I had to be obedient to them so I would not sin against God.”

Clare’s family said the rosary together every night after dinner, and Clare remembers it as an unnecessary chore: “it was a quarter hour because there were always the trimmings, part of them took longer than the rosary. You were wanting to go out ... it became a real burden, and ... a real nuisance, having to say the rosary and being late.” As a child, Clare “always prayed through Mary. Mary was our sort of mediator to God. God was sort of this being that was quite removed and we needed to go through Mary.” If God was authoritarian as well as removed, it probably felt safer to go through Mary.

Clare also remembers daily as well as Sunday Masses as part of what was expected in the family’s spiritual discipline: “We made first Saturdays a thousand times and first Fridays a thousand times, and during Lent we went to Mass every morning at 6 am, and end of Lent we’d be just so tired, but I wouldn’t dream of staying in bed.”
Figure 5-2

Clare's Life Story Drawing
Life revolved around parents, brothers and sister. Clare enjoyed reading more than anything, and sports. She remembers being restricted in what she could do, but it was part of family life, and not something she would have questioned at that time.

5.2.3 Adolescence

In her high school years, Clare most enjoyed music and singing, and sports as well. She made friends easily, but never close ones, for the family was always shifting, and that made maintaining friendships difficult. In retrospect, Clare also feels that the shifts contributed to a low self-esteem: as a teenager, being thrust into new situations all the time made her feel like an outsider. To be accepted and not seen as above everyone, she always managed to come in second or third in her class rather than the first she was capable of.

She also felt that because her parents made all her decisions for her, she didn't learn to make them herself. When she started high school, her parents, who themselves had only a few years of secondary education and not a good understanding of the academic subjects offered, decided what Clare would be trained in. Her father told her, "if you learn shorthand and typing you could work ... with me' ... and when I got there I wished I had done more exciting things." Her father even used to write essays for her: "He loved it, he'd ... just about write the essay, and I'd sort of change it around and put it in my own words." To her, "he was really my ideal, my father," but ultimately the experience contributed to a lack of confidence in her own ability to do things for herself. She would have loved to have done music for school certificate, but it would have been hard to arrange. Clare reflects, "I wasn't really able to stand up for myself at all in those days. I just took what mum and dad said or the teacher said, and they were the ones that knew best, so they made all those decisions for me, and I was perfectly happy to accept them."

Clare's memory in early adolescence was of a God mediated through Mary:

Mary was the centre of my religion, and the rosary was very important to me. I guess we always just prayed to God through Mary. But also just my rosary beads - I used to carry them around, and they were a comfort ... And I just loved, at boarding school, the chapel, it was beautiful, and the incense, and the mystery.

Clare also remembers doing a project about Mary:

I remember doing a Mary book, and I got first prize or something, and I had all these little pictures of Mary, and all these prayers about Mary, and I was just really fascinated by Mary, this wonderful perfect woman who was all white and gorgeous and she was my ideal woman. Then of course we always said three
Hail Mary’s for holy purity and I had no idea what holy purity was, but it was something really special that made you like Mary, I think. Mary represented the perfect woman that Clare had been brought up to strive to be. Mary was obviously close to God, so praying to her would also be to solidify the ties between Clare and the important adults in her life who represented God for her.

At seventeen, Clare began working in banks and shops doing secretarial work because that was all she felt she could do, even though she would have loved to have been a teacher. So she felt a constant underlying sense of frustration through these years, and again later when she had a family and went back to such work. Until her early twenties, she worked, made a number of girlfriends, enjoyed dancing and sports, and became involved with the Catholic Youth Movement.

Her involvement with other young Catholics was an eye-opener for Clare. She became part of a group who learned about the changing church and world: it gave me a whole new idea of life. It was very much a left wing sort of movement of looking at social justice. I hadn’t ever really thought much about it before ... and I think my parents were a bit concerned ... it was looking at poverty, worker’s rights, ... putting ... Christ back into Christmas ... I got to know a lot more people and got more confident. It was really good years for me. And that’s where I met [my husband].

The group also had an influence on her understanding of God:

I started to be much more aware of poverty, people who were much less fortunate than me, lots of problems in the world. And I recognised God as a passionate and merciful God. Yes, he wasn’t just an authoritarian person who had to tell me what to do or check up on me. And also I started ... seeing Jesus in others, so that but for the grace of God there goes me, so that I could be Jesus to others.

Clare remembers that at this time she had a spiritual director, and “read meditations every day. I tried so hard, God was probably quite the centre of my life when I look back on it.” This time was one of new insights and awareness, but Clare was still “trying hard” to do what she was expected to do.

As Clare’s relationship with her future husband progressed, her uneasiness increased. She was attracted to him because “he was a nice gentle kind fellow who I could always trust. I never had to be fearful of him.” Everyone, including her parents, seemed to expect that they would get married. Clare, however, had dreams of perhaps becoming a missionary, maybe a nun. She went on a retreat, talked with a nun and two different priests at various times, and the last one told her to get married, and sooner than she had planned. As in her childhood, she felt

I didn’t seem to be able to escape. I didn’t really want to get married, but it seemed to me that, just like shifting, you did it, so I did it. But I remember the
day I got engaged, and I came out in this terrible rash ... I was just so stressed out, and I didn’t know whether I wanted this.

5.2.4 Early Adulthood

Despite her hesitations about marriage, Clare and her husband had four children in five years. She loved babies, and enjoyed socialising. But there were major stresses. Her husband worked long hours and it was not in his family experience to take any responsibility for the children. They spent five months in Australia at one point and when they returned, Clare’s father died, several friends shifted away, and Clare went into a depression. Her husband considered his work “terribly important” and resented the suggestion from Clare’s doctor to spend more time with the family. Instead, says Clare, he got involved in the charismatic renewal and she “thought it was dreadful. It was just another means of taking him away from me, he spent more time praying with all these other people instead of me, and that caused a lot more stress.”

In the early years of their marriage, they had both been involved in parish and social justice activities. There were discussions of liberation theology and apartheid. Once the discussion came around to parenting teenagers and someone made a comment that “kids get to the stage of being teenagers and start to think for themselves and start to make their own decisions and no longer think that their parents’ decisions are right.” Clare remembers saying, “‘well, I still regard my parents’ decisions as right’ ... And here I was in my early thirties and that’s when it really started to hit me, and I thought am I really still a teenager, I haven’t even got to that stage. And then I read books like Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* and started to know myself and see life differently.”

While their family was young, Clare felt that she was “still seeing God from a child’s point of view.” She first tried as she had in late adolescence to see God in the image of having concern for people. Then she and her husband attempted “to say the rosary ... trying to say the night prayers that we had done as kids but they just seemed meaningless to us ... so we sort of gave up for a while, didn’t say any family prayers at all.”

Eventually Clare joined her husband for a time in the charismatic movement, and she found that it helped her look at Jesus and see him in a social justice light … he brought the good news to the poor, set the prisoners free. I began to see that what I was getting from the church was not necessarily the centre of Christianity. And so there was more to it than on Sunday … I found when I read the Bible that sometimes they missed
bits out in the Mass readings, and it was interesting to catch up the bits they missed out.

Clare began to see Jesus as “the way to God, and then began to understand his attitudes, especially towards women. I began to realise that the church’s interpretation was not always what I was beginning to see for myself.”

With nearly all her four children in school, Clare began to think a little of what she wanted to do with her time: she thought “maybe there’s more to life than just having kids, and maybe I’ll get involved in some other things ...” The vestiges of her lack of opportunity to make decisions for herself still hung about her, however:

I guess that I looked to God to answer the question, it was probably ... wanting someone else to make the decisions ... my parents weren’t there to make the decisions, or I didn’t want them to make them ... So I prayed to God to make decisions, that was very much the charismatic renewal way. Then you [were supposed to] get an inspiration from God.

For her, the charismatic renewal both delayed her making her own decisions about her life but also opened up the idea of God. It also helped her and her husband make a new start at their marriage. In the next few years they had three more children and her husband became much more involved with them: with “the last three children he became a wonderful father ... I think the charismatic renewal helped him to understand that fatherhood was terribly important.”

5.2.5 Middle Adulthood

As Clare had the last three of her children in her mid-late thirties, she also became increasingly more involved in church and community organisations, especially those which involved giving support to mothers, children and families. One group that supported her was a parish women’s singing group, which not only sang, but whose families were there for one another when needed:

Community is always very important to me, building community ... putting support systems in place ... The body of Christ is ... a body of people ministering to each other, giving the love to each other, healing the hurts, doing - being what Jesus is, being the hands and feet of Jesus, but I don’t think people can do it in isolation. It needs to be a group as far as I can see.

Clare’s experiences helped her recognise the importance of community and to see it as part of what being Christ in the world was all about.

The support she received was especially important because at the time she felt judged by others for having seven children:
People really looked sideways at me. How dare I overpopulate the world ...? I felt quite nervous about it, but I just thought, 'well, if I bring these kids into the world that are happy and well-adjusted people, I didn't feel that that was a bad thing at all.'

Clare also felt continual stress “trying to keep the house tidy, mainly because my mother doesn’t approve,” another residual worry from her childhood.

At this time, Clare “did every course the church ever ran” on spirituality and environment and women, many of them run by women who Clare perceived as strong, wonderful and inspiring. This exposure, together with her work in community organisations brought back her “thirst for learning ... I realised how much I’d missed out on, the fact that I hadn’t been to varsity.”

Clare also received support on Sundays:

A lot of people ... I probably don’t see ... more often than just a Mass on Sunday ... I hate missing that ten o’clock Mass for a catch-up with everybody. We have an hour in Mass and an hour at morning tea, and ... that social hour is really important.

Clare recognises that the most important part of her Sunday Mass experience is not that which takes place in the hour of ritual and prayer, but in the community gathering and sharing their lives afterwards.

Clare’s relationship with God has parallels with her relationships with friends: “I don’t think I’m any closer to knowing God, I think I’ve moved away ... I’m sort of at the stage where I want to know myself.” At mid-life, she is realising that she hasn’t “made the effort to really develop strong friendships” nor does she feel she has a deep understanding of God or of herself.

This realisation as well as a recently rediscovered thirst for learning, the inspiration of a Catholic women’s group of whom she says “they’re always searching for God,” and the support of other women her age who also “realised that we all had good brains on us, so why weren’t we doing something with them,” brought her to the point where she completed a diploma in social work.

Over the past few years there have been sufferings: worries about grown children’s illnesses, a tragic family death - which has been one of the hardest things she’s had to bear, watching the heartbreak of one of her children and not being able to do anything.

Who is God for Clare at this point in time?

God is the meaning of life for me ... I think of God as love and God as the meaning of my existence, the seasons, nature, and the whole universe are so organised, and I think that there must be some force that’s keeping everything in order ... I look on God as being all-loving, and the love is available there for us but very often we don’t accept it. We aren’t in touch with it, that life force is not
coming through to us. And I think it's up to us to allow God's love in us. 
And I guess that for me, I feel that love through my family, my husband and my 
children, sort of everyday things, and also in the beauty of nature. I guess that's 
really love too, because of the beauty, there must be a God to create this 
perfection.

There are elements of the God of Clare's childhood in her present understanding: force, 
organisation, order, perfection. She realises that it is her choice to accept the love that God 
offers, and has surely felt that through her family and through creation. There is also a 
recognition that "we aren't in touch with" all of God's love and life force, and particularly, 
that she has been missing something and needs to get in touch with it, just as she had missed 
something by not having an education, and then sought that out. She also touches on the 
beauty of creation, and knows that that is part of her understanding of God:

I feel at certain times like up in the mountains ... when I'm in those places it is 
very awe-inspiring, and I just feel the presence of God very very strongly ... 
there's just the awe of the power of nature, but that's the power of God too. So I 
do get times when I feel that presence of God. And the sea too, the sea and rocky 
coastlines and those sorts of things.

When asked what came to mind when she thought of God, she said: "A very peaceful 
being, somebody who's at peace, and I think of some of the films that depict Jesus in the 
ancient times, with the barren land of Israel and the countryside, the peaceful figure of Jesus, 
who never seemed to be phased by things."

By contrast, she herself feels harried:

I'm always telling myself that I must spend more time alone, meditating, reading 
the Bible, just finding my inner self. I'm sort of on this treadmill, rushing from 
one thing to the next ... still wanting to get to that stage where I can feel more at 
peace with myself, and an understanding of who God really is. Whether you 
ever get to that I don't know ... I do think of God as a peaceful being, and 
somewhere to focus, the stillness, a real rock.

It is significant that when asked if there was a particular scripture passage which spoke to 
she of God, she said immediately "be still and know that I am God."

Clare wrote a prayer which was full of gratitude for her womanhood and her 
motherhood, for the privilege of watching her children grow and thrive, for being "part of 
the cycle of creation." When reflecting on it, she realised that since working as a social 
worker she has seen much suffering, and in comparison, she has many things to be thankful 
for. She also recognised that the fact that she and her husband "were trying to do the right 
thing always" - something with echoes of her childhood lament in it - had actually been used 
to produce the fruits of her marriage. She specifically addressed her prayer to "Lord God," a 
title she understood as "Lord master, the creator, the overall." She understands that "as a 
woman I'm part of creation, and I think that is a tremendous gift, that I can give birth to a
baby and be part of the meaning of life and the cycle of creation.” She sees a “cycle of love” through her family and hopes that the faith and love in their family will carry on to future generations. She understands herself as participating in God, being part of creating, in her role as parent.

Clare recalled the verse in the Bible, “unless you become as little children,” and understands it this way:

Children have such faith and trust in us ... they just expect that our love will always be there for them, and so that is how I see God too, that he’ll be there. God’s love is there, but sometimes I move away from it. Sometimes, the kids are doing their own thing ... that’s the growing up ... I think that all we need to do is just keep the channels open and keep the love always there ... The relationship between us and our children is similar to the relationship between God and us, that love is there and it’s available, but we don’t force it on them, and I think the kids have to be free ... I feel that being a parent, it’s a giving thing ... and I think that God is like that, the love of God. It’s available and free for all of us ... and we’ve got that free will ... to accept it or not accept it.

Clare’s concept of God as parent comes clearly from her own experience of parenting, and from her own experience of knowing God’s presence in many ways even though she feels she has not fully taken up God’s offer of relationship. She feels she is in a transition in her understanding and relationship with God. Having developed her insights as she has matured, she thinks of God primarily as peace, a force in nature, as parent/ on-going creator of new life, and particularly as ‘God is love’ in relationships and in community.

5.2.6 Synthesis

The people who appear to have directly influenced Clare’s images of God are her parents, husband and children. Other life experiences which influenced God images include CYM; Clare’s experience of motherhood; charismatic renewal; her reading; involvement in and learning from parish groups; the community and support she experienced and gave, particularly in her singing group; involvement with a Catholic women’s group; and her experience as a social worker.

Unlike the women in chapter 4, Susie and Clare’s early God images were less than benign and loving. They both have struggled to go beyond those images in their search for a truer God. Although some images are still tinged with phantoms of the past, both have found a God revealed in new ways as well: for Susie a God in people, as friend and as encompassing presence; and for Clare a God who is love in the people of the Body of Christ,
the love of a parent/ co-creator, and God present in the stillness of nature. Their search for God - and for peace in themselves - continues.
CHAPTER 6
GOD IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN, PART III:
GOD OF INFINITE IMAGERY

In Chapter 6 are the narratives of two women with very different backgrounds. Both women, however, began life with distinctly negative images of God. Life with its infinite turns has utterly transformed and multiplied the ways in which they have come to understand God by midlife.

6.1 Miriam

6.1.1 Background

Miriam was born in Europe in 1944, a year before the war ended - a middle child with an older sister and a younger brother. Although her family was historically Catholic, clashes with church rules caused her grandparents and parents to be alienated from the Catholic church, and she grew up in an anti-Catholic household. Through extended family and friends, there were both Catholic and Protestant influences on her spirituality. The family emigrated to New Zealand in Miriam’s adolescence, where she married and had four children. She became Catholic within a few years of her marriage, suffered through a divorce, and began studying toward a tertiary degree while she raised her children. She finished her degree and began working in the health sector, and has been involved with many community and church organisations. Her children are now grown. Miriam was in her early to middle fifties at the times she was interviewed.

6.1.2 Childhood

Catholicism was in Miriam’s family, but her parents were estranged from God and church for various reasons. One grandfather had been involved with a political party the church didn’t approve of, and “was told to leave the church.” Miriam’s parents were strongly anti-Catholic, and even anti-God, but allowed her to attend Catholic services with relatives at Christmas and Easter, and Protestant services regularly with friends.
Miriam was not baptised as a child, and she remembers an overall “constant anti-God feeling from the home.” When asked if her parents talked to her at all about God, she said, “Yes, [they said] ‘if there was a God who was a loving God, then these kinds of things like war and diseases and people going hungry would not happen.’ Therefore there could not be a God.” She was also taught that God was a crutch that some “people needed to get on in life.”

Miriam also heard about God from her church experiences: in bible school in the Protestant tradition, God was a “judge”; and in the Catholic Mass, God was “a mystery, the ringing of the bell,” and “awesome, mystical and non-approachable”:

God had always been someone who was like a big judge and I had the impression that I needed to strive in order to be in God’s good books by doing the right things at the right times, and going to church, and saying my prayers, as well as being law-abiding. And if I did that and I was a good girl, then God favoured me ... [but to my parents] God just didn’t exist.

God was the “one who had to be obeyed. God was awesome and God ... would put me in my place should I put a foot wrong.” God was stern and a father God.

As far as important people in her life, Miriam’s father, sister and mother seemed to be the most prominent, followed by an auntie and her brother. A grandfather was also important to her. Miriam says, “He used to have these huge statues on top of the cupboard, Jesus with the Sacred Heart, hands up - huge statues. It always had a mighty impression on me.”

Miriam describes her father and mother:

I always felt that I could talk to him far better than my mother. She had very much the attitude, ‘listen and do your job,’ and you had to obey your parents. Obedience was very important ... With dad, I used to be able to go for walks and bike rides, but mum was always busy ... There was this enormous gap between us. Dad and I loved music ... we were both interested in art, therefore we had a lot of things in common. And that was missing with mum. She was always busy doing housework, but she had a big heart.

Further, her mother made her feel guilty for doing things she liked to do. Miriam remembers having to read a history book with a torch under her blankets, so excited to find “all this knowledge,” because “whenever I used to sit down with a book, my mother used to say to me have you finished your chores, because then you can sit down.” Miriam said it was “like having a sin.” But Miriam also remembers her mother as the one to get organised when things needed doing, whether it was neighbourhood child care or giving assistance to the poverty-stricken after the war.
Miriam’s sister was twelve years older than she was, and says that she herself and others regarded her sister as her ‘second mum.’ When Miriam was seven, her sister left to come to New Zealand:

It was a very devastating time, because I lost a very important person in my life. It was interesting that both my father and I got sick. Mum had to nurse us both. Why did I become sick? The experts reckoned that the war had such a profound effect on me, and my sister going away, that it took its toll.

Although the war had ended several years previously, the post-war poverty, military presence, and stories of the horror of concentration camps, hiding a Jewish friend in their home, an uncle being shot for being in the underground, the family having to hide from the Germans toward the end of the war formed part of the background of fear during Miriam’s childhood. The loss of her sister on top of that was more than she - and apparently her father - could bear. Miriam drew these influences on her life: see Figure 6-1.

There were, however, enjoyable things about her childhood: Miriam loved music and art, and Sunday was a family day, even if there was not a God. She loved being able to go to the Catholic church during Christmas and Easter times. She also loved studying - “I’ve always had a thirst for knowledge.”

By the end of her childhood, Miriam had experienced the aftermath of war, the loss of a significant person in her life, and an illness which caused her to lose a year of school. She had a close relationship with her father; and although she had a distant and somewhat guilt-ridden relationship with her mother, she also admired the ways in which her mother seemed to be able to know and minister to the needs around them.

God was someone who, if he existed, her parents didn’t seem to want her to know and, through those who could tell her, Miriam understood God as someone awesome and non-approachable, who had to be obeyed. In some of these ways, God was much like Miriam’s mother, for whom obedience was all-important, who would exercise judgement when one was found not keeping rules, who was busy elsewhere and not easily approachable to talk to.

6.1.3 Adolescence

At the age of fifteen, Miriam emigrated to New Zealand with her family to join her sister.

Coming to New Zealand meant that I had lost my culture, my language, my friends, my roots. It was an incredible loss ... I searched for a sense of belonging
Figure 6-1b

Miriam’s Life Story Drawing
and identity. I’m sure that is why I was attracted to the man I married ...
when you’ve lost something, it’s not unusual to look for it somewhere else.

When she came to New Zealand, “we became one family again. My sister was important
again, and was married with a family.” Miriam went to an all-girls school, and missed the
culture and environment she had grown up in. The move was the biggest wrench, but she
also felt anxiety about her high school courses: “To fail would have been terrible ... anxious,
yes, you didn’t dare fail ... you succeed. It still has an influence on me now. But I did fail
my exams and I felt a dreadful failure, which was with me for years.”

Miriam’s friends, especially those she left behind in Europe, were important to her at
this stage. About one friend she now muses, “it is really interesting how we can pick up at
any time, and as the years pass, they don’t matter.” The friendships carry on over the years,
and what seems to be important is “we’re able to communicate well with each other, and like
being in each others’ company.”

Miriam remembers being angry with her father, because when others got to do bible
study at high school, she was made to do maths:
The others got to listen to these wonderful stories. I had to do maths. I got very
angry with my father, how dare he take away my rights. It made no difference.
That was that. As he said, ‘you can decide later what you want to do, but until
that time, there’s no way I want you influenced.’

God, for Miriam, remained much the same as in her childhood: “You had to obey
God, awesome, strength, all that kind of guff.” On one hand, the losses she had so far
sustained in her life must have given credence to her parents’ arguments that “a loving God”
wouldn’t allow all those things to happen. On the other, she was obviously drawn to
something in both the Protestant and Catholic churches she attended. The struggle to
understand these notions of God was paralleled by the seemingly conflicting behaviour of
her father, who allowed her to attend church but not bible study.

6.1.4 Early Adulthood

Miriam met and married her husband as a young adult. She was attracted to him,
among other things, for his belief in himself and his self assurance, things that Miriam
valued, having left some of her own assurance and security behind in the move from Europe.
Her parents-in-law became important to her, in addition to her parents and sister, and
eventually, her own four children. There were few friends at this stage, because in fifteen
years, the family made almost as many shifts. The shifts and other demands of her
husband’s job meant that she was alone with the children, and “loathed” the lack of family time. She enjoyed the children and being involved with their activities, and also began attending university lectures as an interest, which she felt guilty about - an echo of childhood messages.

Since coming to New Zealand, Miriam had attended the Presbyterian church, but several years into her marriage, she felt there was something missing:

The richness and depth I was searching for wasn’t there. The Catholic way expressed it in many various ways - liturgy, rosary ... [The Catholic church] had all this negativity, as a kid. I was going to find out for myself. I took instruction, explored Catholicism, and said ‘yes, this is for me, this is what I need to become involved in.’

While she found in Catholicism a way of prayer and worship that felt right for her, Miriam’s understanding of God had not changed significantly at this time: “Where was God? Well, it was kind of a mechanical thing, you said your prayers and attended church, abided by the commandments and everything should be all right. It was still not the God that I know now. God was far away. God was still untouchable.”

But despite the abiding by the commandments, everything was not all right: “Everything went wrong because I went through a broken marriage. I didn’t really want to know very much about God then. Also it goes back to war times ... It wasn’t a very loving God I was seeing.”

With the end of her marriage, and struggling to bring up four children on her own, Miriam concluded that maybe her parents were right about God: “I threw God out the window ... I thought, I don’t really know where God is anymore, if there is a God ... I was in an awful space, kind of hanging in there.” She had played by the rules, but God had not done the same, so maybe there wasn’t a God after all.

6.1.5 Middle Adulthood

In the midst of her struggles, with family around her but few friends, Miriam was without warning, given an experience which changed her life:

I had a massive encounter with the presence of God ... like a mini - St Paul experience, which turned my life upside down and inside out. This presence that came was so loving and so accepting ... that there was nothing that could convince me that God didn’t exist. I had encountered a living being. No longer it was [sic] God - awesome, way up there, can’t be reached. This was a personal God, this was a personal relationship for me, and nothing would ever change that.
Miriam had been taught as a child that there was not a God, but if there was, God was stern and judging. Her conversion to Catholicism had not immediately changed her God image, merely reinforced the framework of the law and the rules that once had to be followed to be a good girl, and now had to be followed to be a good Catholic. Like St Paul's encounter with the person Jesus, Miriam met a personal and loving God; and like Paul's conversion which caused him to view the law differently, Miriam's religious experience took the law and "blew it all out the window."

A religious sister became "a special friend to me, a very wise lady, accepting me where I was at," and a spiritual guide:

I don't know if there are any weeping women in the Bible, but I became one. I just kept crying. The waterfalls kept coming. Every time I went ... there would be buckets. She was there supporting me, being there ... a lot of people - sisters, other women ... taught me about God's love and taught me about women, about being strong, giving me a different perspective. Like ... let's wipe the frost off the window ... and you've got this glorious view.'

Miriam found nature again, having loved it as a child, and it as well as solitude was part of the environment that healed her spiritually, physically and emotionally. She became involved in the charismatic renewal, which encouraged prayer and healing. She also found that rather than being confined to a nuclear family with few friends, now she was "involved with the family of God, and all of a sudden we had this incredible family around us ... who were able to support me."

I needed that space, that freedom, away from the demands of being a solo parent. This was my time to recharge my batteries. [Sister] walked that road with me, she knew about the struggles I was having ... Two of the children were rebellious at that stage, and having been scooped up into an incredibly prayerful family - that was something that was new to me too.

There were also health worries, which Miriam described in the symbols she drew in portraying her life/faith story (Figure 6-1):

I've got a cup there, communion, the altar ... there was a stage when communion really blew me away. On one of those occasions, I had a complete healing - 'Only say the word and I shall be healed.' The words just leapt out at me, and I KNEW (verbal emphasis) I was going to be healed. Some cells in my body were changing and they were moving toward becoming cancer cells ... The next test showed that they were completely normal ... several healings took place in the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual areas. So, I know that God is alive and is a God who heals, who loves and cares.

Despite, and perhaps because of, her newly found confidence in God, Miriam struggled with how much trust she could have in God with regard to her children.

I felt God saying, hand over the children to me, and I thought, 'dear God, I've just left, moved out of my marriage, I've lost my country x number of years ago, lost my marriage, now I'm going to lose my kids.' So that was an incredibly
fearful time for me ... it was a struggle with God, handing the kids over, and finally when I had done it ... here was an incredible peace ... Instead of being anxious ... about the children ... God was saying 'give them to me ... and you'll find things are going to be different' ... in 'losing' them, I actually found that they returned in a different way ... When [a priest] came, that was the start of the change. I could not go up for prayer unless I had forgiven my ex-husband and the woman he had married ... I thought that I would rather throw rotten tomatoes at them ... For me it was an enormous struggle to let go ... [It meant] I'd let go of anger, of judgement ... But eventually I'd let go. God took over ... I was trusting God more deeply than before. And having experienced several losses in my life, trust was an incredible thing because it had been severed so many times.

The early years of Miriam's middle adulthood were saturated with new learnings, of allowing God to reveal God's self to her, opening up every part of her life to the working of God. The struggle was allowing God into each situation so that healing was possible, and with that healing, trust. Miriam was fearful and resistant, but gradually came to a recognition that trust in God brought her peace and freedom from fear.

That freedom also allowed Miriam a greater confidence in herself. She was able to continue her tertiary studies and begin a career.

What was happening was actually a greater belief in me as well. Along the journey in life I met all these wonderful people who all journeyed along with me ... The fear ... because of the past of not succeeding, left me ... Slowly the changes started for me, becoming more sure of myself, the acceptance of myself, and believing in myself. I started passing exams, obtained qualifications, and became involved with the health sector.

Miriam also became aware that the God who provided surety in her life was a "bigger" God:

Who is God for me? ... Presence. Creation. People. Power. Being. My pal, my trusting friend, my identity ... I really don't think I can describe God as just one thing, such as God as father. God is bigger than that, beyond that ... There's a book written about God as the sea, and there is this wonderful quantity of water, and all life is contained in that. It gives life, and brings life at the same time ... We're all interconnected as waves ... Water can be soothing, can be nourishing, can be refreshing, can be destructive ... God can be the most wonderful, soothing, nourishing being, but can also be awesome, scary. Don't underestimate God's influence or God's power, God's being.

'God as sea' recalls the closeness Miriam felt to nature as a child, and the coming home feeling she had in the natural environment where she had her 'St Paul' experience. God as overall creator is also important for her, but not just as creator of the natural world:

Creator has got massive connotations for me. It contains the whole areas of male/female issues and equity and justice issues ... I stand very strong on Genesis: God created us in God's image ... We are the co-creators ... of the words we utter, of the interactions we have with others ... [we are] partners, participants, we're not just passive bystanders ... we've got the God within us ...
Miriam has no limits on God's domain as creator, and no illusions that God is going to do all the work of creation. Her image of God as creator has direct implications for human responsibility not only to the earth but to other people.

Many of Miriam's images of God relate to Christ/Jesus: "God as light ... Light gives us guidance ... a sense of identity ... it shows the way ... Christ said 'I am the light of the world' and it's a wonderful powerful image ... Christ said 'I am' and God said 'I am - I am.'"

Other scripture texts which captured how Miriam understood God included:

'I am the vine, you are the branches.' It's also Jesus lifting up women ... in society, Mary who came storming in the door to anoint his feet, and he didn't say 'dear Lord, you've come into a man's gathering, you better get out' ... the woman at the well.

Miriam connects again the "I am" statements of Jesus in John's gospel with God, and also looks at Jesus' actions as examples of who God is, especially with regard to women.

Recently Miriam faced the terminal illness of one of her adult children, struggling between hope and trust, despair and prayer. Overall she felt powerless and vulnerable:

I stand at the foot of the cross - simply being, and let God be God, maybe the hardest thing I have to do. I discover time and time again that this God of ours fills my hands with wonderful gifts, the best one of all being love. At other times I feel despair, sometimes aloneness.

In middle adulthood, Miriam's understanding of God has changed enormously. God is perhaps still awesome, as in her childhood, but not in a fearful way. Rather, God has the power to release people from fear, and to empower them to work as co-creators in the world. Rather than an exacting judge, God asked her too to let go of judgement, and offered her self-acceptance. God is no longer distant or unapproachable, but a close friend like the Jesus who took special interest in women. For Miriam, the struggle and the key to understanding God was to learn to trust through despair, and that learning has opened the doors to freedom.

6.1.6 Synthesis

The people who influenced Miriam's image of God include her parents and extended family, her friends, and later her women friends and mentor. Experiences which seem to be reflected in Miriam's God images are her early experiences of Protestant and Catholic churches; her loves of nature and knowledge; the failure of her marriage and experience of
6.2 Rose

6.2.1 Background

Rose was born in 1940, the oldest child in a family of four girls and three boys. Her family was Catholic as far back as she can trace, and has lived in New Zealand for several generations, with Irish, English and Scottish roots. She attended Catholic schools, including boarding school from the age of twelve. She holds a university degree, has done research and lecturing, and also been a community worker and facilitator. She grew up in rural parts of New Zealand, but has lived in cities since boarding school. She spent a year in North America, and has also travelled in the Pacific, to Europe and Asia. She has worked extensively both within Catholic church organisations and a number of community service organisations. Rose is married with four grown children and was in her mid-fifties with one child still at home at the time of the interviews.

6.2.2 Childhood

In Rose’s childhood, God was a “bearded man” and king, someone who:

if I asked God hard enough, he would answer my prayers, but then Mary was in there strongly too. If I asked her, I knew that she would get him to answer prayers, because that was the theology of the time. So I’m praying like mad, the Memorare and ... we prayed the rosary every night. But prayer was very much following the recipe ... God [was] the distant figure and Mary was the mediator.

Rose learned to pray both at home and at school, and was taught the answers to catechism questions about God. Later in childhood, Rose felt that God was “a string-pulling God, someone who could organise things the way I wanted, help me pass my exams. That’s the memory I have, frantically praying to get the scholarship or pass an exam.”

Given her adult association with God in nature, and asked how far back that might have gone, she said, “the love of nature I always had from my father. As a little girl he used to take me on his horse, so where I put the two together, I can’t remember.” Rose’s father was a major influence in her childhood. He did things with the children, was kind, and it
was through him Rose learned a respect for people: “More than respect for people, every person matters.”

What she enjoyed most were “swimming, picnics, it was also being out in the rain, the smell of new lambs ... the smell of a wool shed ... and all the participating, when I was a small child, being able to do it, whatever it was.”

Rose also remembers a young aunt who was particularly important for her. In Rose’s memory, her mother was always busy with babies: “Mother was, I say on reflection, really tired. She was very much the disciplinarian ... But there was another side of her which I probably didn’t appreciate then: she was determined that her daughters be educated.”

Rose primarily remembers God as a distant figure whom one had to pray to through Mary. The distance Rose felt from her mother and the perception of her as a disciplinarian have parallels with how she understands God during her childhood. As she grew up, these and other aspects her childhood continue to surface in her understanding of God.

6.2.3 Adolescence

Rose comments that, at this stage, “God was still a bearded man.” “He was distant,” he had “to be hounded so that he would respond to my prayers.” “I think God was fairly rigid. Yes, I’m not sure that I felt at that stage of my life that God could be anything different than the traditional image.”

Interspersed among her comments about God were musings, “Who was God?,” “I have no particular memory of what God was,” and “Don’t know, can’t remember.” Her life drawing (Figure 6-2) shows all other stages dappled in brilliant colours, but this stage was coloured grey. Rose comments: “I didn’t dislike it ... I think I just buttoned down. I was a good student and I behaved myself. I was never in trouble ... but I didn’t develop either. My person didn’t. My brain did.”

This time at boarding school was good for the mind but not for the emotional self: “Any form of intimacy was [not encouraged] ... the worst thing you could do was talk to someone in the dormitory at night.” “There was pining always, it was about affection ... it was a longing. But apart from that my feelings were suppressed during that period.”

We were supposed to get up and go to Mass every morning. I didn’t always ... Part of it is I’m not a morning person, but another part of it ... was if I was still lying in my bed, somebody would come and shake me, and it was actually a need for human contact ... just needing hugs ... which [was] totally out of the lifestyle.
God was probably hard to remember because in some part of herself, God was associated with the part of Rose's emotional life which she no longer had access to. She wasn’t with the family who could give her hugs, the father who sat her on his horse, the family outings or the beauty of the farm.

There was a distant relationship with God, which was maintained by prayer: “We did lots of prayer things. We were part of all the ceremonies.” “We did everything singing, we’d come down to breakfast singing ‘Soul of My Saviour’ ... every hour was regimented.”

There were two teachers who were important to Rose during high school, both nuns. One she had a rapport with because they shared the same subject interests, and because she was both challenged and supported by this teacher, despite some rather peculiar behaviour: “She was wild and wiry and screamed ... and then you’d catch her afterwards laughing about it.” The other teacher was “quite a good role model. And when I’m thinking of her particularly, probably the most significant thing in my school days in terms of my relationship with God was I learnt to question, to ask why and what.”

Her late adolescence was spent in the freedom of the university, where the joys of the companionship with friends could be shared openly and without restriction, “playing cards all night” and returning to the outdoor pursuits she loved, “going tramping, ice skating.”

Rose recalls that “there was an evolution going on during that period.” She studied and read, and began to take at least an intellectual interest in what was going on in the church: “I’m catching glimpses of having been at adult education courses ... so I think I was searching.”

6.2.4 Early Adulthood

Rose’s graduation from university and move into a career in another city coincided with the beginning of the Vatican Council: “I think it’s there that maybe my image of God was starting to expand, as the stuff came out from Vatican II ... I was exploring and talking to people. As much as anything, [my idea of God] was that God can be a lot more.”

The rest of the world opened further too, and Rose continued to delight in “the lack of rigidity” that contrasted with her adolescence. She enjoyed her friends, her work, and the fact that her male employer treated her as an equal and respected her academically.

In her late twenties, Rose found someone with whom she had common values - “it wasn’t drink and rugby like most.” She describes their relationship as:
very much a marriage of equals. We both worked together, we’d both been flatting, and we were in our late twenties ... There’ve been times when a course would come up that I knew more about, and [he] would stay home with the kids and I’d go and do it ... there was a lot of mutuality in it.

In the first few years of marriage, however, they lost their first two babies, and “the world fell apart. It just hadn’t occurred to me that could happen. And so that was a major turning point.”

The turning point was twofold. First, Rose realised that even though she wanted children, she also needed intellectual stimulation in her life. Second, there was a divergence in her understandings of God and church. At that time,

God was there, certainly. God was a parent, I think. God was to be talked to, searched to make sense out of what was happening, was certainly wider than the church and my experience of church at that time. In fact I had some incredibly bad experiences of church over that whole period.

Her second baby was baptised in the hospital, but she wasn’t told why. Then a priest confirmed the baby and she wasn’t consulted. She finally realised herself that the baby was dying. After the death, she received no visit from the priests, and the nuns kept their distance.

In the pain of this experience, she had hoped that the church would be there for her; she expected God to be with her through the clergy and religious. But she did not find God there at that time or “in fact probably all the way through. There were places where I found God in church, there’ve been a lot of places where I haven’t. But God was still there ... I questioned God a lot at that time, talked to him. He was still him then.” From this time on, Rose knew that she might find God in church, but that God was wider than, and outside the church. Her search for God would necessarily be expanded.

In her early thirties, Rose had three babies who survived, and in between the second and third, spent the better part of a year overseas with her family. “The important thing was that that took me out of my context and set me looking and searching and reflecting.” She found different church environments, one in particular that was welcoming, where she could join in, and where she was inspired by a woman doing a kind of community service work that Rose hoped she could bring back to New Zealand.

Early adulthood was a period of opening up the world and God for exploration. Rigidity was thrown off, and so was the idea that the church was where one would always find God or where one would turn first to find God. She experienced suffering and loss, the joy of her children, and opportunities that exposed her to new people and new ideas.
6.2.5 Middle Adulthood

Returning from overseas, Rose’s third child was born, and she began working with an organisation which assisted pregnant women. Rose remembered the isolation she had felt being pregnant and a young mother, and she decided to help other women during this important time in their lives. She connected what she was doing with her Christianity:

It was my real focus at this point, and I had a sense of mission about it, that somehow or other this was my task. I prayed a lot at that time, and I started going to daily Mass with the kids ... there are a lot of hurdles and conflicts involved in setting up an organisation ... so it wasn’t an easy time.

In the midst of this, Rose suffered the loss of a third baby, and then of her father:

Those two pregnancies I lost shaped a lot of my understanding for pregnant women who are unhappy, but also this one did too. One thing to say in your head, ‘yes it’s fine to be pregnant,’ but it’s another thing to actually go through the reality of it. Part of it will have been, I never had a funeral for that child ... and then my father died quite closely, so the grief process was still going on.

Rose and her husband nonetheless made the decision that they could be open to another pregnancy. But when it became a reality, Rose’s past experiences with lost babies overwhelmed her: “Basically ... I just could not hope that I could have a healthy child.” The love, presence and prayer of two close friends helped her find that hope: “What was happening was I was holding on to the previous pregnancy and I couldn’t get on with being pregnant with the one I was with, and so they prayed with me.”

This experience and all of her experiences of pain and anxiety around birth and death shaped Rose in many ways:

I’m sure now that I gained a lot out of that pain, but there’s no way you can tell ... anybody that or even know it at the time. And yet I’m sure that’s shaped a lot of how I’m able to work with pregnant women ... Had I never had that pain, I may never have understood the pain.

Together with friends of like mind, Rose continued to work with pregnant women, and also began running retreats on sexuality and spirituality. Her experiences contributed to her evolving understanding of God:

I grew and I learned through suffering ... I can’t believe in a God who puts a child there to die so that I could learn ... that’s crazy stuff ... I don’t see God as manipulating [suffering], I just see God as being there with it ... not the controller God.

It was to this stage in life that Rose traces her shift in thinking about God and gender: CFLE is about God and sexuality and spirituality, and so that was a point where I started to bring those things together ... He was he initially, because that’s how we were taught. But I think it was partly dropping the he - I was repelling some of the male attributes in terms of power and that sort of thing ... I hadn’t really looked at the feminine until that point.
Now in middle mid-life, Rose has had more than another decade to grow in her understanding of God. As her children have grown, there was more time to go camping and tramping, as she had done in her childhood. She had more time to start walking the hills on her own, which has "always been a joy. So I often go out and meditate." Friendships, travel, achieving things she didn’t know she could achieve - all these have been important for her.

Who is God for Rose now?

I’m actively rejecting God as being a person, because that feels limiting. So I guess I see God in situations ... If I get out: in the hills and see the sunsets, I feel I experience God there. I experience God with people, in relationships, friendships ... I think God is giving birth all the time, to new and wondrous things, which are ideas and people, situations. I think God is wonderful ... I’ve been known to curse and swear at HIM too ... But she’s female when she takes the mickey out of people who put women down. But I suspect that’s more about me than God.

God is changing. But God is always there. I think God is paradox, so you can say contradictory things about God ... God doesn’t have to be limited by what humans put on her or him ... God is very real, and in communication. So God is out there but God is here ... Again, that’s this paradox ... And I think God is in pain as well as joy.

The concept of God has exploded for Rose in recent years. From a distant, controlling and rigid God of her early years, through a period of searching, God is now unlimited in presence in all situations. God is not only not controlling, but cannot be confined; not rigid, but paradox; not distant but real, here in joy and pain, nature and friendships, able to be communicated with.

Rose also knows a God with a sense of humour. Having prayed long about whether to go to a conference, she went, only to find that when she got there, she lost her voice: “I always reckoned that’s the sense of humour of the Holy Spirit, to send me off into the conference and all I could do was listen.”

When Rose thinks about God now, what comes to mind are images which have been developing in her throughout her life, for example, “Birthgiver, painter of sunsets ... I think they’re sort of the grandiose bit of God, nurturer, friend. I was going to say guide, but ... creator of opportunity rather than guide. I don’t see God there as pulling a string.”

The most important of these images at present are Birthgiver and creator of opportunity. I suppose it’s because of my experience ... That is where I see God ... when I’m there to respond to someone ... even though it wasn’t my plan to be there or to respond. And in those situations I know I have to respond because that’s what [the opportunity] is there for.

Rose has learned that just as God “doesn’t have a stopwatch,” God doesn’t want her to have one either. She is to be there for others just as God is there for her, without measuring the time or cost. God creates opportunities through situations, sometimes
through pain, for human beings to be more closely transformed toward God. God doesn’t control or pull strings, but rather creates choices, and empowers people to choose among them.

I react against the string-pulling ... I see it more as a journey. And at any point in the journey there are possibilities, and sometimes the possibilities rise out of awful situations ... And if I’ve gone off in that direction it doesn’t mean I can’t ever get back on, or that might be an alternative route ... I don’t believe God has any shut doors. Where the opportunity is, is from now, wherever I am.

Even the birthgiver image, so much the rich fruit of Rose’s experience of both God and herself giving life - even through pain, and with pain sometimes resulting - has the element of creator of opportunity within it:

Birthgiver, giving birth, has been important in my life for various reasons. The image of God as birthgiver is a very feminine image, and that’s probably why it’s important. It’s also a very empowering image, because in birth it’s actually the child that controls the process ... the mother is doing all the bloody hard work, but the child controls the process and the woman cannot control it ... so I see God saying, ‘here you are, I’ve given it to you, but you have to do it, it’s your opportunity’ ... that’s part of why I see God as an empowering God rather than a powerful God, and I think that the giving birth image more than any other, to me, portrays that ... I had seven pregnancies and four live children. So giving birth had a mixture of joy and sorrow. And I think that’s an aspect of God too. And I’ve worked with pregnant women for twenty years, so I guess that’s why I see God as giving birth.

Another early association with God for Rose was creation, and this too, returns in her image of God as painter of sunsets. Sunsets, for Rose, are

that wonderful colour and variety and changing thing ... and that’s what talks to me of God, that this is beyond human, and it’s just wonderful. Sunsets I guess are the most dramatic, but a deep blue lake, a still sea, a raging sea - in nature there is all of that, that you can extend it all around, even the fact that there’s snow on the hills today.

Nurturer is another way in which Rose understands God:

Nurturer. There are some wonderful nurturing images of God in the Old Testament. Isaiah, the Psalms, very much the image of God as a nurturer ... I see this as God-like action, where you nurture people to grow within the family ... I have been nurtured by men as well as ... by women ... it’s the empowering, it’s the opposite of the pulling the strings, pushing, poking. It leaves them free ... a God who nurtures people to freedom ... as you do with your kids, as best you can.

The issue of nurturing is also one which had its beginning in Rose’s childhood: she felt her relationship with her mother was a disciplining one, and felt distant from her. During her adolescence, the need for affection, closeness and nurture was great, but was not met in the boarding school environment. As an adult, Rose was able to both be nurtured by those she
was close to, and to nurture her children and others in turn. She identifies nurturing specifically as a "God-like action."

Among many poems Rose writes is one which describes how she understands God slowly moving humans toward God-like action, toward becoming more like/part of God. It begins though, in her contemplation of nature.

```
I saw you God today
In the waterfall
    Beautiful, powerful
Hollowing out a channel
    Smooth through resisting rock
        Changing the rock shape
            Infinitesimally yet irreversibly
There's plenty of time
    Just as you change us
        Little by little
    As You mould us to Yourself.
```

In a prayer she wrote during the interviews, Rose wrote, in part,

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God be with me in this place I'm in
this place of transition ...
God teach me to wait.
To deal with my fears
of failure to complete
or emptiness beyond
    God wait with me.
```

Her prayer spoke to her of God as security, constancy and companion in times of transition: "It tells me that God will understand my dilemma, and that I rely on God to help me out ... I don't actually expect God to solve it for me. But I expect God understands." Her image of God as God involved in the process of birth (waiting, place of transition) is evident here, as well as "the God of being beside ... it's different from companion. But it's sort of being with. God's there, I can talk to God about it."

For Rose in mid-life, God is birthgiver, painter of sunsets, creator of opportunity, nurturer, and the God of being beside. God is also changing and paradoxical. God can be seen in people and situations. God is in one's deepest pain or greatest joy. God can be talked to or shouted to. God is beyond what is merely human, but is paradoxically in the heart of the relationships, sexuality, life, loss, and love that are most intimately human.
People in Rose's life who influenced her God images were her parents, some teachers, an employer, her husband, children and friends. Major life experiences or events which have shaped her God image seem to have been her contact with nature; boarding school; Vatican II; the deaths of three children and her father; her mixed experience with church; the opportunity for new experience of church and community organisation which travel provided; responsibility for setting up a community organisation; and involvement with CFLE and other faith learning/reflecting or community groups.

Miriam and Rose acquired negative images of God during their childhoods, and had differing but difficult adolescences. They experienced many kinds of suffering in adult life. Though on different paths, each of them has now found understandings of God which are fireworks displays of diverse and creative images. Some of the difficulties of early life have given way to more freeing attitudes and opportunities, and their relationships with God and with themselves are more accepting and life-giving.
Catherine began life with discomforting God images, Anne and Diane with a mix of authoritarianism and love. As with Miriam and Rose in Chapter 6, their adult images of God are rich and deep, but with a difference. The women whose stories are told in Chapter 7 have now met a God who is cloaked in mystery, a God who is less visible than the one they knew before.

7.1 Catherine

7.1.1 Background

Catherine was born in 1941, the first of four children. She has lived in one city in New Zealand all her life, except for one year before she was married. Her parents were New Zealanders of English and Scottish ancestry. She has been Catholic from birth, as was her father. Her mother had been a non-practising Presbyterian, but converted to Catholicism at the time of her marriage to Catherine's father. Catherine was educated at Catholic primary and secondary schools, then trained as a secondary teacher. She has taught in one form or another for much of her life. She is married and has five grown children. She has travelled in North America and the Pacific, and has been deeply involved in a number of community and church activities over the years. She was in her middle fifties at the time of the initial interviews.

7.1.2 Childhood

From before she went to school, Catherine had a picture in her mind of God as an "old, distant gentleman on a high brass throne." At school, a rather grim picture of faith was presented:

We were given the God of fear and duty, and there were all sorts of holy statues that we were supposed to have or we were ashamed of our faith ... There was a 'lovely' prayer we were to say as we went to sleep: 'I must die, I know not how
nor when nor where, but if I die in mortal sin I am lost forever. Jesus have mercy on me.’ [There] was a clock with a pendulum that said ‘Always damned never saved.’ And you certainly weren’t allowed to touch the sacred host or it would be a mortal sin.

Her family said the rosary every day at home, and there were many other kinds of prayers:

The prayers were multitudinous and very boring. I could say the whole Mass in Latin off by heart, and much good it did me. As far as Mass went, that was completely boring, as far as the rosary went, I used to play games with my beads to try to make it go faster. At school I dutifully sang many hymns ... One I particularly hated, ‘Sweet Sacrament Divine,’ it had a dreadful tune and was always on Thursdays just before essays and I hated writing essays so it was part of the misery of Thursdays ... It was your duty to pray to God, and I did the duty, but that’s all it possibly could have been.

Catherine sums up, “I really don’t think I had a personal relationship with God.”

She was closest to her parents and one sister. As would be expected, “I depended on my mother and father being there, and they were (emphasis recorded in written form by participant) reliably there: in that I have been fortunate.” She remembers having a recurring dream in which there was a row of “fearsome figures” at the end of which were her parents: “I would run to them and they would turn into one of the monsters. I think looking back now I wasn’t happy.” Her mother was a life and soul of the party type, very up and down I suppose. She did everything for the house, but before she was married she had lots of boyfriends and would have been very social ... and extravagant, although she was forced into being very economical because we didn’t have much money ... She was angry quite often, and we weren’t allowed to be angry. Negative emotions were not acceptable.

Catherine remembers that her father found it difficult to show affection or to talk much to the children. Catherine says she “would have liked an affectionate relationship with dad, but I never got one.” Her father made them toys, however, and “taught us all to be very capable of many things.” She reflects that “the notion of God as father was a problem to me for a long time because I didn’t know what a loving father would be. I realised later that he did love us, but showed it by making us things and teaching us, but not through hugs.”

One of Catherine’s childhood delights was sleeping in the same room with her sister, and making up “long absolutely hilarious plays with our teddies at night ... and there would be a thunderous knocking at the door, ‘stop that noise,’ yes, it was greatly delightful. I suppose I liked outings, going to the beach, games of imagination, drawing.” She traces her love of writing, camping and outdoors, and doing practical household crafts to her childhood.
The other person she remembers was one of the nuns at school, who was important in that “I felt accepted and recognised by her.”

Her general impression of her childhood, however, is of sadness ... I can’t remember finding life amazingly fun. I suppose most of my fears had to do with not being liked ... We didn’t really mix with others. We didn’t go to school where we lived because we had to go to a Catholic school. Life seemed to be full of fear. I might have been a bit of a dreamer, and I seemed often to get things wrong, and I just remember not being very adequate.

Catherine’s first impressions of God were fairly dismal, and the important relationships in her life, except for her sister and perhaps one teacher, did little to provide deep love or affection. She felt that “love was conditional. I concentrated mostly on ‘being good’ for approval.” Fear, no security of affection, and duty were associated with God, just as they were with home life. Catherine chronicled her attitudes, life events and God images in her life drawing, part of which is reproduced in Figure 7-1.

7.1.3 Adolescence

Catherine went to a Catholic high school but feels that “the nuns were important in a negative way, I’m afraid. I learnt out of duty and fear.” There was, she remembers, a strong push to be nuns. I remember being told, ‘you don’t have to want to, you know, it’s a sacrifice you make for God,’

and I was overcome with horror at the thought that I might have to be shut up with all those old bats. I had met [my husband] at that time ... and I remember thinking that the only way it could possibly be tolerable was if I had him in a big box under the bed and could bring him out whenever I wanted to. So I think it was clear I didn’t have a vocation.

In high school, Catherine knew a “God who is just waiting for me to commit a mortal sin to send me to hell.” There was, however,

this wonderful priest, and he seemed to be the only sane adult around that place ... He was a very significant person in my life at that time ... he listened to you, he treated you as a person, not just a child cr somebody to be told off or someone who was being obedient. In my childhood I was praised for being obedient and for passing things, my exams. I certainly don’t remember being enjoyed for myself, not at all ... And he was very good and very sensible.

Nonetheless, Catherine says “I don’t remember getting any pleasure out of God. Retreats were boring ... I would have rather done anything than that dreadful spiritual reading we had.” God was still the God of her childhood,

except with the fear of mortal sin and this impurity. And I don’t think I would have had the slightest idea how to commit a proper sin of impurity but it was
Figures 7-1a and 7-1b

Catherine’s Life Story Drawing
definitely to be feared ... you might think the word bosoms, and that might be terrible. This seems to be something the nuns taught a lot about, impurity, but they never defined what it was, so people imagined it was all sorts of things.

There were also prayers and hymns:

All the songs we were taught, they [had] other people’s piety ... inviting Jesus into my sinful heart didn’t ring a bell for me ... they had nothing to do with the real me. Nobody helped you bring out what you were - I don’t think anybody knew themselves, I think they were all caught up in duties too.

Catherine remembers her mother trying to get dispensed from fasting from liquids before Sunday Mass while nursing, and an Irish priest told her she couldn’t have anything: “‘Just offer it up, dear’ and that was that. So it would have been pretty hard to think that [the institutional church] had anything to offer us. It was pretty awful.”

The good thing about adolescence was that Catherine had friends for the first time, partially because they “banded together against the establishment.” Some of these friends have become life-long, including her husband: “He accepted me for who I was ... I often think of him as my rock, drives me mad sometimes because he’s so rock-like.”

Catherine’s other friendships were also close, and have become closer over the years; “we can speak for eight hours and never tire ... it’s just a meeting of souls, it’s wonderful.” What is true of friendships that were important then, as now, for Catherine, is that these people “accept me as I am, that I am free to be myself, and they’re free to be themselves with me. There are parts of various friends that I know that I admire tremendously because I see bits of God in them.” Catherine says that “different friends have sometimes challenged me on things, or somehow brought out what is good in me. That, I think, that’s God working, isn’t it?”

After high school, Catherine trained as a teacher and taught for a year before she was married at age twenty-two. She doesn’t remember making a conscious decision about what she wanted to do: “My parents and a relative who was a teacher suggested it would be a good thing for me ... but in fact it just shows how God looks after you in a way sometimes ... It just happened that it was right for me.” It was a real growing time in terms of adjusting to her responsibilities in the schools and living on her own and with others.

Her future husband was the most important person in her life at this time, and the priest who had mentored her through high school continued to be important. And God:

God wasn’t anything, I didn’t think about God very much. I was away from secondary school where there was this thunderous God. I certainly went to Mass. I suppose I prayed to God as one who would look after people and make things right. But I can’t remember much depth. I was much too busy getting on with things.
From childhood and early adolescence, where God was to be feared, where any deviation might send one to hell, where there were nebulous sins of impurity floating in the air waiting to attach themselves - in late adolescence those voices about God were stilled. Though she remembers being “too busy getting on with things,” adolescence was a time when other unrealised or articulated ways of understanding God could begin to take root - the meaning of friendship and caring, learning to acknowledge and use personal gifts, and enjoying the delights of God’s wider world.

7.1.4 Early Adulthood

The early years of marriage were marked by the joys and anxieties that accompany caring for children. Her husband, the children and both sets of grandparents were the important people for her in these years of her early twenties to early-mid thirties. In the first year of the marriage she lost two children at birth, an “important experience of real grief,” and was not treated sensitively or well by those caring for her. The first four of her living children were born during these years, and Catherine delighted in their development: “I used to follow [a crawling baby] around the house ... and I thought ... ‘Isn’t this fascinating? I wonder what he’s trying to find out?’” She “had a constant anxiety about being a parent ... I was always wringing my hands over something or another.”

Life moved beyond the family too: Catherine became involved in child care centres, and not only “learned a tremendous amount about children and their development,” but also “how to run [the committee], how to do all sorts of things.” She also taught family planning in the church community. Looking back she feels “some discomfort now to realise that I was a part of this black and whiteness” - the rightness and wrongness of things according to the church.

Catherine thinks that:

God began to change for me at this stage simply because we were ... supposed to be instructing our children for first communion ... I suppose what was coming through to me in all those blotchy childish little drawings was that we were in God’s family ... Once in a group I said something about ‘do I have to believe that, when I go to Mass, the sacrifice of Calvary is being repeated there, a bloody sacrifice, and Jesus is getting killed again?’ And there was one woman from the Irish community and she turned around to me with enormous hostility and said, ‘I’m afraid YOU DO (verbal emphasis)’ ... And I realised at the time that the Dutch community did not think like that, and I was always more at home with the Dutch, because they didn’t have the hidebound views that the Irish who had
educated me had been putting across. So I suppose some of my views were getting changed.

At the time of the post-Vatican Council changes in the early seventies, the priests in her parish also encouraged openness and questioning among the laity. When one priest said something about “the church being so full of its own importance,” it “rang a bell with me,” and “I was secretly delighted.”

Another priest imparted the most earth shattering news, saying that he didn’t think the sixth and ninth commandments were necessarily the most serious ones to break. And I remember feeling liberated after all these years. And he was talking about the sin of gossip and unforgiveness.

Other than that, “life just went on, things like getting everybody to Mass on Sunday and everybody properly dressed.”

7.1.5 Middle Adulthood

During these approximately twenty years, there are perhaps three different blocks of time: the first marked by anxieties; the second by children leaving home; the last by more of a stillness.

The first years began with the years of illness and then death of Catherine’s father, during which time her mother was in a state of anxiety and grief, and also hostility with the grief, and sometimes that was turned on other people. At one stage she would ring me five times a day, and at that time my stomach would sort of screw up in a ball when I was talking with her. There was nothing you could say right unless you agreed with all the hateful things she was saying ... That is what it was like for three years.

Catherine realised at some stage that her mother had been put on a drug used to treat mental illness, and it “was an enormous thing for me to accept that label for my mother.” In the same years, her last child was born, who proved more difficult than the others. Her husband’s father had a bad accident and was also becoming senile. Catherine “got sick at that time because of all the stress ... flu about seven times in one year ... it was just too much.”

Life, of course, went on, and the children were her major delight. Other delights were two older women, who throughout most of her marriage, were “always there, always friendly, always encouraging, always positive about the children. It was just this wisdom and nurturing and welcoming and generosity and that’s what they offered us. I feel looking back that God provided them to mother me to a degree.”
Catherine’s child care centre involvements had brought her a new circle of friends, and one couple was Open Brethren: “They were wonderful people ... and I realised that they were so much better than we were in being responsible for others in their Christianity. We were still saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and doing our duty, and they were running groups ... In general, life got a lot bigger.”

Catherine had trouble remembering what or where God was during this time. She recalls that she “just started reading and reading and reading.” This partially had to do with coping with her mother’s illness, and partially with the children being adolescent and in a questioning stage.

I started questioning life, and ... my own existence ... I suppose it was the beginning of mid-life for me ... friendships I had and what they meant and were they real ... I think I’ve got written at the top there [on her life drawing, Figure 7-1] ‘who is God for me?’

She doesn’t remember turning to God in all her anxiety:

No, not the way I would turn now ... obviously I must have been going to Mass on Sunday and everything. I’m sure I must have been beginning to turn to God because after all, dad had died and I must have been beginning to think of those life and death issues. I was so desperately busy. I think that God probably prepares the way by life’s events, and maybe we think about them and what has happened later ... I think at that stage I began to read Simon Tugwell ... and ... School for Prayer. I began to look at that stage.

In the second block of time, Catherine’s children were beginning to leave home, a big part of her energy was now directed at other people and endeavours, and her reflection on God intensified.

Among Catherine’s friends at this time were a number who were involved in the charismatic movement, and some of them urged her to join them. Catherine was not tempted to join them, but felt increasingly disturbed about the challenges she was being thrown. Her friends wanted me to become charismatic you see, to get the gift of tongues, wave one’s hands in the air, and I was so angry. I used to get [them] out of the house and ... do my housework with a great head of steam on while thinking furiously over all the challenges [they] had thrown to me about our way of life.

The situation came to a head when, after “a weak moment” in which Catherine had allowed herself be prayed over, someone else decided she had become possessed by the devil rather than the spirit. After being “utterly terrified” for a time, Catherine decided to search in a different place “for some path of authentic relationship with God.” She began attending seminars and courses on a number of aspects of the Catholic faith and spirituality, and became more involved in the parish.
On her life story drawing, she wrote “people all the time” because a number of families and people seemed to use her home as a drop-in centre. She took on the one-to-one teaching of a disabled child throughout primary school, and joint responsibility for the ongoing resettlement needs of a group of refugees for seven years. The children went various directions and care for her husband’s parents also became necessary.

The group of people who were important to her expanded to include a priest she calls “one of my wise ones ... I feel that he has a prophetic vision for the church, things that a lot of people are still afraid about.” The child she taught, also taught her. The experience taught me a whole lot more about a depth of friendship that I probably wouldn’t have experienced otherwise. It’s forced me to look really hard at what I believe because I have done this religious education ... It’s certainly been the most wonderful opportunity to be a kid and to be as silly as I like, because often that’s the best way to teach ... It certainly loosened up my art again.

Her contact with the refugees was like going on a journey. And the journey was that I was cut off from the community here, and I circulated almost entirely with the [refugee] community ... it was a real experience of stretching into areas that I had never been in before. Going to social welfare, going to court ... communicating in a different culture and language. Also realising what amazing people these were, and that they had been through such horrendous circumstances, and how trivial our crises were by comparison ... Being with [the disabled child] and being with the [refugees] ... I was delighted at the chance to experience life free from the usual social conventions.

In these years she asked herself who God was, and lots of other questions. I think one of the things there was I had a pretty low opinion of myself. I think there was healing needed in there. I had quite a load of bad things from home, from school ... and I suddenly realised that I was carrying some stuff that I hadn’t realised before ... I went to a retreat and ... I realised that God had an individual love for me ... Yes, I had been looking for God, but then ... I realised that God cared about me ... God was what gave me joy and delight.

In the last few years, there has been time for much more stillness and self-reflection in Catherine’s life, and a health problem has contributed to restricting her activity as well. She has had to deal with family mental illnesses and her own depression over childhood issues. She at various times has found outlets in her art and writing. She has found friends important, especially the “soul mates” with whom she can talk for hours, then “come home and process the conversation for the next week.” What draws them together is their “journey towards God. And the fact that we understand each other’s journey towards good. They both have a sense of humour, they’re both wise. They’re both enormously interesting, they have good minds ... They’re both really caring people, they care for me.”
Catherine’s joys are in increasing work with art, being more confident if she runs groups or takes leadership roles, or simply enjoying a sunny day and finding “God’s at the clothesline” as she hangs out the wash. She found it hard leaving teaching, in that much of her identity had been in her teaching role. A family member recently ‘came out’ and she has been working with a support group for gays and lesbians, both of which have challenged her relationship with church, and moved her to see differences in the church’s attitude toward sexuality issues and people involved in them - and the way she understands God as more accepting and inclusive.309

For Catherine,

God has to be mystery at this stage. And God varies ... I know that if I make something, [it] is somehow an expression of me, so I suppose God must be reflected in creation, and in every kind of person, so the motherliness, the fatherliness, the greatness, the order ... God is a rock, the rock which is solid and won’t move, and also the hollow in the rock where you take shelter. [God is also] my friend, but also is creator and bigger than anything I can really understand ... that gives me confidence that all kinds of things that I don’t understand and can’t cope with can be all right. I love that line of Julian of Norwich, ‘All will be well and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well’ ... Images of God - light, truth - very much truth, love. And all-knowing and all powerful just as we were taught when we were young, but now that means something, it’s not just the catechism.

An important image for Catherine is “the God of love and forgiveness, mercy.” It became important as Catherine moved out of the childhood/adolescent image she had of God as a “God of fear, God of duty, very remote,” and solidified in middle adulthood when she went through the period of grief and turmoil where “life got beyond my control.” She also recalls a story told by Julian of Norwich about a servant, who in the course of carrying out the Lord’s business, “hurries off, absolutely delighted to be asked, bumbles off into the distance, and falls into the ditch.” He’s miserable, frightened, dirty and sore, and in the end the Lord has nothing but compassion for him. Catherine says “it’s a wonderful illustration of the way God would regard our mistakes.”

In a prayer she wrote, Catherine says,

Lord, thank you for this quiet place in all the storms that have been life for me lately. Help me to be truly as a child, knowing how helpless I am to change my inner reactions to things.
I’m sure it’s good for me - but I hate the experience of not coping.
Thank you for loving me in spite of it all.

In reflecting on her prayer, Catherine says, “The unconditional love of God ... if I am a child, I suppose it must mean that God is in a more powerful place than me - and who can help me.
God must be a friend if I can say my human feelings, which is 'I hate the experience of not coping.' That God's accepting." When reflecting on this notion of God as friend, Catherine reasons that it's part of the relationship, but with God she expects even more than acceptance and listening:

I would tell a friend if I was feeling bad, but I wouldn't expect a friend to work in some completely unexpected and mysterious ways with my inner workings. I could share with a friend, but a friend, well they would have enormous power to help me, but not the same as God ... that friend is not God, they may be shedding some of God's attributes into my life, but they are not God.

Catherine recently wrote: “Remember that God is God, give everything over into his power, even the most hard and disturbing things. Give other people to God, not keeping them to worry about, recognise that they're in God's hands, just pray for them.” In the end sometimes, “God can be the God that I weep to.” After crying, one can put the tissues in a bundle and say to God, “you deal with it.”

Catherine’s journey with God has brought her a long way. Beginning with a God who was rather like parents and teachers, requiring one do one's duty and who threatened hell if one stepped out of line, Catherine moved to gentler waters. As she grew up, she found friends and mentors who were accepting and encouraging of who she was, she realised that she had many talents and could exercise them surprisingly well. She understood that whatever she wasn’t was okay too, because God is a God of mercy and compassion. God is also a rock, a friend, a creator she expects to work in unexpected and mysterious ways, a hazy God within, and mystery.

7.1.6 Synthesis

Catherine's God images have been shaped by parents, teachers, friends, husband, children, priests, a disabled student, and refugees. Other life experiences which seem to have influenced her God images are church, school, reading (prompted by many life events including loss of children, family illness, children's developmental stages), involvement in courses and parish (prompted partly by charismatic encounters), a retreat, her own capacity self-reflection, and her art and writing. These factors in God image formation are further explored in comparison with those of the ten other women in Chapters 8 and 9.

Further discussion of the issues involving divergence in understanding of church and God is in 9.7.
7.2 Anne

7.2.1 Background

Born in 1947, Anne has lived all her life in one city in New Zealand. Brought up as a Catholic with both parents Catholic, her father was from Ireland and her mother was a New Zealander with Irish roots some generations back. An only child, she attended Catholic primary and secondary schools, leaving secondary school at age sixteen after school certificate. She has worked as a secretary for a number of organisations throughout her life. Anne is married with two grown children; one was living at home at the time of the interviews. She has travelled at various times to Europe, North America, Asia and the Pacific, and has been deeply involved over the years in church and community organisations, both in education and social change. Anne was in her late forties at the time she was interviewed.

7.2.2 Childhood

To Anne as a child, God was the ultimate supreme father figure, and the judge, because there was always that sense that God was keeping score. But because I had a very happy childhood, there was never any reason for me to think about God as other than forgiving and merciful. Even if God were keeping score - and God was he - he was benevolent and would be quite kind.

The “keeping score” part of God was about an “impression that I had of God being perfect, and I was never going to make it no matter how hard I tried.”

Anne also remembers God as always being an “eternal giver” and “creator.” About the image of God as creator, she says, “I think it’s always been there, but often overshadowed by other images that weren’t so positive. When I think about my childhood, my images of God were very secure and very set, and creator was certainly one of them.” In addition to God, however, there were other figures which were all part of the heavenly “hierarchy”:

There’s also Mary and the saints ... this ... group that all together makes up God sort of like a pyramid. I don’t remember isolating God particularly. God was always there in relationship to all of these other people. God was involved and connected, but always above, of course. I can remember having a great devotion to Mary, and I suppose she almost became like my grandmother as a child, if I
wanted something ... rather than go directly to God, I'd go to Mary. So Mary was the way through. For me she sort of filled that place of haven and refuge.

The church and God were “always featured” in everyday life: “The house was full of holy pictures and so on, and there was never ever getting away from the church” (see, for example, the cross overshadowing home in Anne’s life story drawing, Figure 7-2). The constancy of home and church and school being Catholic meant that there was a great sense of solidarity and of solidness about my life, and certainty, and surety, and it was all bound up in the church, who I was, who our family were, the traditions because of the Irish Catholic for centuries, and all of that was very much set. So I sort of knew exactly where I was going and what was expected of me.

Her parents were in middle adulthood when they married, and Anne felt “certain expectations” as an only child.

I remember always being expected to always do the right thing, say the right thing, do well in school, give my parents a reason to be proud of me, and I carried a lot of that around. Not that it was a huge burden, but I was always aware of it. And not wanting to let them down. And if I did, mum would let me know in no uncertain terms.

Her father had his own expectations: he was pleased when his daughter received the Christian doctrine prize at school. Anne herself thought “it’s not as good, but then I thought I mustn’t think like that, it’s got to be better [than the academic prizes] ... my primary school days sort of hinged on success at the end of the year as to which prizes I got.” Anne realised as she got older that her father had had a traumatic life in Ireland, and that he coped with things in his life by praying. He certainly lived a very devout and faithful life, and that had an impact on me because his faith never seemed to waver in any way ... I suppose he just assumed that [things in life were] God’s will and didn’t question things ... I think he was quite a sensitive, almost contemplative person ... but he was so dogmatic about this and this, and this is what the church [taught, and] he wasn’t prepared to actually debate it.

Anne’s mother had a stronger relationship with her, was “a dominant personality” and also had “her expectations of me as a daughter.” When Anne disagreed with her mother, her mother “was really disappointed, she never accepted it really ... my views had to coincide with hers or else there was something wrong with them and I’d have to change ... Mum and I were always close, despite that.”

Although Anne’s maternal grandmother died when she was six, she has strong and warm memories of her:

She was a very quiet and gentle woman, and I felt she was compassionate because my mother and I had quite a volatile relationship because of our personalities. My grandmother was a refuge for me when my mother was telling me off or she and I were having a difference of opinion ... So I would flee to my
grandmother and she was always there for me and obviously would take my side.

Anne’s aunt was also important: “She was sort of like an older sister to me really, and she understood me quite often, I felt, a lot better than my mother did.”

Anne found delight in her friends, especially her cousin who was the same age, and also in school and books: “I loved books, so as long as I had books with me I was fine.”

What Anne remembers about God as judge and father coincide considerably with her memories of her parents. All are benevolent and forgiving, but all have high expectations that apparently couldn’t all be lived up to no matter how hard Anne tried. Anne’s memory of her grandmother and perhaps her aunt as playing the same mediatrix sort of role with her mother as Mary appeared to play with God is also significant. Her grandmother was compassionate, understanding and took her side. Therefore, in the earthly and heavenly hierarchies, they were easier to approach than the parent or God who had expectations and who “kept count” of transgressions. When the authority figures were too demanding, others were there to be “haven and refuge.”

7.2.3 Adolescence

In early adolescence, Anne’s Catholic environment and circle of people was much the same as her childhood. Her high school experience of people and church reinforced her image of God as someone who was expecting her to be perfect. She drew a picture of “Father” and “Sister” (Figure 7-2) as she remembered them from her Christian doctrine classes. Even though Father only came about once a term,

Father is always in the background ... presumably he told Sister what to teach us ... he ... had quite an impressive presence ... Whatever you said you knew wasn’t going to be adequate ... And he had that SAME (verbal emphasis) absolute same power when I was an adult ... and why did I go back into this stupid sense of not feeling adequate? Not measuring up. I mean I don’t know if it was a conscious thing with this power, but it was the influence that he had ... this intimidating sense of power over.

“Father” had the same sort of power, influence, ability to make Anne feel inadequate as her parents, and as the God she imaged as a perfectionist and always watching judge.

There was a teacher Anne remembers differently. This sister really understood how I felt about things. She was someone who I felt had a lot of integrity and I admired greatly and thought I would like to be like her. I think the main aspect of her was the respect she showed us as young women, which we were, fifteen. She seemed to be able to relate to us as people rather than
pupils ... She was showing me respect and not talking down to me. I suppose that was the first time I experienced that someone listened to what I said and thought it was important, rather than just sort of judging me or assessing me.

As well as a new way of relating to people, Anne was also learning new possibilities for relating to God.

Conscious of being an only child, Anne recalls a slight sense of isolation in these years, so she always made sure that she “had a best friend.” She still loved school and books, and as she got older was allowed to have more of a social life, so felt less isolated.

From ages sixteen to twenty-two, Anne worked, and this period of time was an opening up of the world far beyond the safe secure Catholic world she had known thus far. She had a good friend whose parents also became important for her. They weren’t Catholic but

I decided that there were people outside the Catholic church who were good and kind and really beautiful. So that was for me quite a challenging time as far as learning about ecumenism. I distinctly remember thinking that despite what the church thought about who was going where for eternity ... as far as I was concerned there were a lot more people in the world who were going to heaven, and they weren’t all Catholics.

Anne also began going out with a young man, whose mother became one of the most significant people in her life.

She had a very strong sense of community responsibility ... something I wasn’t really brought up with, because as far as my parents were concerned, you served the church and that fulfilled everything for them. She was more concerned with local community and affairs of local government ... peace and justice, an awakening for me ... I can remember using her as a role model for myself ... I watched the way she related to her children, which was totally different from the way my parents related to me, and she would actually ask her children things rather than tell them ... she had an absolutely amazing faith in God. And her God was quite different from the God I had been presented with ... my image of God shifted through her ... Her God was a very much more compassionate and open and understanding and loving God. Not the benevolent judge.

Brought up Catholic, Anne’s older friend had had to marry her Presbyterian husband outside the church. Anne struggled with the perplexity and unfairness of the situation:

Here was this woman who I could see was such an amazing human being ... and yet, as far as the church is concerned, she was actually damned. It was incongruous ... that can’t be right. That was another instance of where I was forming ideas about the Catholic church not having all the answers, not necessarily being the only way.

Anne was beginning to realise that the complex world wasn’t all that bad outside Catholicism, and that “God was bigger than that too.” At the same time,

Vatican II would have had something to do with [changing my world view and image of God] ... There was a sense of change, excitement, going out and beyond ... what I felt had been the constraints of church prior to that ... I began to
appreciate that God was much more than had been actually made known to me through my church.

Other friends were also important for Anne because:

I didn’t feel I had to impress them in any way. They just accepted me for who I was, and I them ... I think I was conscious of impressing people throughout my childhood and also throughout my adolescence, making a good impression. It’s probably part of the conditioning I had. I was always aware even after I left school, that I had been a Catholic school pupil ... that I had to live up to it, the convent girl image.

Unlike the God and parents of her childhood, Anne’s friends and the new image of God she was beginning to develop allowed her to be who she was, didn’t judge, and didn’t require her to “measure up” to a standard determined without her input, or without an understanding of who she was as a person.

In a similar way, when during this period of time she met the man she would marry, she said that what was special about him was that “we had this kind of recognition/understanding between us, that’s about the only thing I can think of. I can distinctly remember it at the time, it was something that struck me and I couldn’t get it out of my mind.”

7.2.4 Early Adulthood

Anne married and after a few years had two children. When her first baby was only a few months old, she received a visit from a sister who was on the parish pastoral staff, and was asked to teach CCD.310 Having had no background in teaching, she thought it would be impossible for her to do it, but the sister “insisted.” To her surprise, Anne enjoyed it: “It made me question things in my own life, and made me decide my values, helped me to decide what my values were as an adult person and take on my own sense of direction.”

In the church at that time, many people were concerned with how the worship space was being changed, but Anne had different priorities:

All I wanted was let’s get going, let’s get ecumenical, let’s get on with what the church is supposed to be about, let’s get the world sorted out. A lot of that sentimental stuff to me didn’t matter ... I loved holy pictures and I loved statues and so on, but at this stage of my life ... I thought the salvation of the world relies on us getting on and doing stuff in the world.

310 CCD is Confraternity for Christian Doctrine, a programme of religious education for Catholic children who are not attending Catholic schools.
While her husband and mother were important supports for her in these years, she also became a support for her mother after the death of her father. She also was dealing for a few years with what she now thinks was post-natal depression after the birth of her second child. With no time to herself during the day, she found she would sit at night and knit:

Having not been anyone who enjoyed it very much beforehand ... I used to sit until all hours knitting. And while I was knitting, I was thinking about life in general, and future, and plans ... It was quite a lifesaver for me, because it was time to be alone, and time that I knew was mine.

It was only when she came out of the depression that she realised she “had been in something that was like a tunnel, and there had been a darkness in front of me all the time, or a dullness.” It was also about this time that two other involvements proved to be major turning points in Anne’s life.

The first was the NCRS Walk by Faith programme, which influenced her understanding of God. With NCRS, “I took off on a journey, and that was just terrific. And from that journey I suppose that I got involved with the sense of community ... CCD and parish life became focal.” Anne’s understanding of her relationship with God at this point took on more of a community context:

That sense of journeying with people really started at that point ... [It] was a lot deeper sense of community than I had from being just part of the parish ... And that was when I actually realised that experiencing God in my life was a great deal richer when I saw from that perspective than what it was if I just spoke to God on my own or from my own tight little group of people ... And it was actually quite a turning point.

The second was a group of women involved in the peace movement: “That really changed my whole world view. And with that ... once again my image of God changed, broadened, because there were so many terrific people of good will that I encountered who actually had nothing to do with church at all, any church.”

In particular, there was one woman, a Catholic, who became a role model for Anne. She was a mother but also “had time to consider major issues outside her family ... Peace was her main concern at that time, but all issues of justice - and a really global perspective on those social justice issues.” These people and involvements influenced how Anne shaped her life from that point on. For her, the change was in “realising that I have responsibility that goes beyond just my personal relationship with God, that actually God is about community, about being universal.”
Anne's involvement with justice issues and organisations continued to increase. She was involved with a Catholic social justice commission, a women and church project, and an Asia-Pacific human development partnership. While in Asia, she became more aware of women's oppression through the sex industry and pornography, and she realised that sexism was "very much in place throughout the world, in different cultures and religions."

During the 1981 Springbok tour, Anne felt the presence of God in the movement of people who protested against the racism which the tour represented. She felt that this God of justice was on the move, and even people who didn't believe in God were touched by it, because it was such a strong power, and that was just a wonderful, quite scary, but a wonderful experience ... I can remember [the bishop] talking at the time about resigning as the patron of the Marist rugby club if they supported the tour, and it was extraordinary that such a thing could be said ... and it really split [church and society] totally, people couldn't be apathetic. They were either for it or against it ... It just broke down the boundaries of the church in the sense that God was power and justice, and this wonderful spirit of God in the world.

The friend and role model Anne had met earlier was deeply involved in the peace movement and women's issues as well: "Her faith was so deep, and she lived with such integrity that she was able to direct and focus on detailed things in everyday life and keep her values intact ... she just emanated this lovely sense of peace, and challenge as well ... She had a profound influence on many many people." Then suddenly her friend died, and it was like a great huge chasm had opened up in the earth for me. And I thought, where will I seek my guidance? ... [She] had just become the leading light in my life at that stage in my faith life, and as far as I was concerned, wherever [she] was, God was there in full force, and without her where was I going to find this?

It was also through this friend that Anne became aware of feminism:

She had such a clarity of vision and appreciation of women's gifts that she opened up that aspect to me of feminist understanding of the world, and respect and dignity of women as people. And yet she was able to stay within the church. I often wonder where [she] would be now in relation to church because it's gone a long way back since [she] was here.

Anne's own involvement in church had become strained. A new bishop made dramatic changes which many felt unjust. Anne "felt alienated from the institutional church."

Nonetheless, she continued to work for justice.

Her understanding of God had become increasingly rich and complex. She described God as:

positive energy ... an energy force that is all encompassing, that is always there, that radiates love and warmth and goodness ... creator ... nurturer, compassionate friend, absolute wonder of presence, of awe of creation and the
beauty within it, and within people as well ... a sense of pain but endurance ... where I get my hope from, the newness of God, continual newness, fresh, exciting, and power as well ... God provides the power to [act], enabling, community, acceptance, celebration.

When Anne calls God creator, she says it is because

of the on-going sense of creation, and also the growth ... the sense of renewal ... continuing ... creating all the time ... and [even though things were done this way] yesterday ... there's always a chance that we can change the pattern ... that is the creative aspect of God within each of us if we can actually bring about some positive influence, no matter how tiny that might be.

Anne implicitly believes that God as creator also calls her forth to be creator as well.

Through her social justice work, Anne has increasingly seen the pain endured by people in the world. This has caused a shift in her understanding of God and suffering.

Now if I talk about personal pain, then God features within that, because God is going to enable me to endure that, hopefully ... But when I look at the immense pain of global injustices, I think where is God in this ... and then I see that, apart from the fact that God is in those people ... it's only the action of people who are trying to actually overcome that, to stop that pain from happening, that's where the action of God is, that's where God is.

In a prayer Anne wrote, she gave thanks to God for gifts, health and well-being, and also for opportunities and challenges. In reflecting on her prayer, she comments:

I suppose the eternal giver is what it reveals to me, and ... the challenges that I think come along with being eternal giver. God is always ahead, calling forth, saying 'come along, have you got there yet?' [But also] I think that's where the whole Emmaus thing comes in too, it's the walking with, it's actually doing, living out, taking note, taking stock, along the way, of what was really good, and reflecting on it too ... That aspect of challenge has always been there, but it's much more positive now.

Anne sees God as eternal giver, as she always has, and there is still some element of the God who expects things of her ("have you got there yet?"), but she also has come to see God as "walking with." The challenge to be in the image of God is something she still feels, even though she feels it is more positive. God is now "calling forth" rather than being an "expectant teacher" like the priest in high school, or parents who expected perfection.

Anne addressed her prayer to "Gracious God," and says that her use of that image is about dignity, and integrity, sincerity. It's not about placating but it's about encountering at a level where I know I'm accepted but I don't have to prove something to be accepted ... It's about respect ... I probably would have in my childhood and [most of] my adult life felt that to call God [gracious] would have been a bit impudent ... like I was addressing God ... by God's first name if God had one. I would have probably said almighty ... because it was about being bigger and better and more powerful ... and I don't have that sense of God.

Her address of God has much to do with the changes in Anne's self-image, as well as a deepening in understanding of God based on experience. She feels accepted and respected,
things she appreciated first in friends and a teacher during her adolescence, then in many
women during adulthood. She has a sense of her own dignity and integrity, is confident that
God does too. She doesn't have to "placate" God by calling God "almighty." She calls God
by a name which she has found God to be through her experience of other women:

As my image of God has changed and widened to encompass images of women,
I can now put in place in images, the experiences I've had of women who have
been influential in my life. You ... add them to God's cloak as it were, and
appreciate those aspects of God that I didn't appreciate before because they
weren't really open to me. They were limited, or hidden.

Anne's growing involvement with women's groups has led her to a new understanding of
"God's spirit bursting forth," as she described in the Springbok tour protests. It
has progressed now to my understanding, appreciation of God as "She Who
Is"... that women actually give life to others and empower people ... My view
of God now is never without that. It's basically ... taken over any other image of
God that I had. It's the whole linking up of the whole of creation, life, and sense
of belonging.

Anne's understandings and reflections also led her, toward the end of the interview
period, to leave the institutional church, which "appears to be ... going away from that
wonderful feeling of the sense of liberation that God for me has become in the last fifteen
years." Whenever she would go to Mass, she would feel increasingly angry, and decided
that "it was not conducive to a good relationship with God ... it was a block."

She still thinks of God as positive energy, but "where I sense that and where I feel
that has changed." She finds now that it is where women gather that she finds that "source
of energy": "When I think of actually making a difference in the world, I can only see
women doing that." She also finds God as nurturer among women: "Being with women is
my source of strength [and] also a source of nurturing and faith."

The understandings of God that had grown in depth and breadth are now harder for
Anne to see:

As far as images of God are concerned ... everything tends to become hazy,
unclear, I almost have the feeling of sort of wandering ... I think it is [part of the
journey] because I'm not panicking ... I still feel that I am on this journey but I
don't now know exactly where I am, whereas I used to, wherever I was, or at
least I thought I did. I thought I knew what point I was at and where I might be
looking to next. But I don't know where I'm looking to next now. But I have this
sense of trust ... it's a desert-like place, but it's not unpleasant, but it's only that I
can't find any markers, I can't find any pointers, I can't find any real familiar
signposts or anything ... But I also have the sense that the trust is still there, I
have a sense that God, wherever, whoever, whatever, however God is, that I trust
I'm being led somewhere.

311 Her image is borrowed from Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is.
For all her questioning, when asked how she would want her grandchildren to understand God, Anne replies:

I would want my grandchildren to have a view of the world [in which] they would experience God ... They would be open to relationship with other people and also an honesty within themselves. In that they would experience God’s love ... I would try to give them a sense of dignity about themselves ... and in turn they would have to give that to other people ... It’s a sense of God’s ever-presence ... and tuning into that trust ... that God really is ... in themselves deeply and they can touch down within. Then they can bring that forth for others to share as well.

7.2.6 Synthesis

Anne’s God images reflect the influences of many people: her parents, grandmother, and an aunt in childhood; a priest, religious sister, friends and friends’ parents in adolescence; another sister, a bishop, many women friends and colleagues throughout her adult life. Other experiences which have influenced Anne’s God images include Vatican II; NCRS; CCD; knitting, a time she used for reflection and contemplation; the peace movement; the Springbok tour; the Social Justice Commission; Asia Pacific projects and travel; feminism; the death of a role model woman friend; the church as an institution; and her “desert place.”

7.3 Diane

7.3.1 Background

Born in Europe in 1941, Diane was the third of four children, with two older brothers and one younger sister. She was Catholic from birth, although her father was agnostic. The family was displaced for some years during the war, and later lived in a number of places in Europe and Asia. Diane studied medicine, married, emigrated to New Zealand and had three children. She has lived and worked overseas, spending several years in three countries in the developing world. Her family has lived in several locations in New Zealand, and she has been involved for many years on ethics committees, in family, health and sexuality programmes, and with women in the Christian churches, as well as continuing to work in the medical field. Diane was in her early to mid-fifties when interviewed.
7.3.2 Childhood

Diane’s first impression of God was of darkness. Her family was living in Asia at the time, and her memory is of being in a Buddhist temple:

In those days they were lit with oil or butter lamps and it was very dark. But it wasn’t a threatening darkness, and I had this immense sense of the presence of God - which always strikes me as rather funny actually [because it was in] a totally alien kind of culture and religion. However that’s how it was ... this incredible sense of God around us in the dark ... I was quite often frightened of the dark, I used to have nightmares and be afraid, but I wasn’t at all then.

Diane remembers her mother saying prayers with the children at night, but has no recollection of their content, although she always felt a sense of trust: “I did have this clear sense that God was somebody who was to be trusted, and I never really wavered from that.” To illustrate her trust, she relates the following:

We were out fishing, we got hit by a squall. The waves were huge and I was petrified. I simply knelt down and prayed. My mother said ‘darling, we’re all right’, and I said ‘I know we’re all right because I prayed.’ She said ‘you don’t need to worry’ and I said ‘but that’s what the men did in the boat.’

Not only was there a sense of trust in God, but when the weather did calm down, Diane notes wryly that it “reinforced my sense of power.”

While in Asia, Diane attended a Methodist mission for Sunday school which she was very fond of, until the local Catholic priest insisted that could not be allowed. She was prepared at an early age for her first communion. Although she has no memory of what that preparation entailed, she remembers the priest for his goodness and kindness, a beard that made him look like St Jerome, and the smell of Dutch cigars.

Her mother’s uncle was a Jesuit, and Diane regards him as a formator for her:

He’s the first person I can remember having a theology discussion with when I was about eleven ... I started arguing with him about ... how you could bring together the theory of evolution and the biblical teaching which was terribly literal in those days ... I can remember him being slightly startled and being quite gentle with me ... saying, ‘no, no.’ And my saying, ‘well, why can’t you bring the two things together, why do they have to be in contradiction?’

Diane also recalls that about this age, eleven or twelve, she was rather “pious” and “prim.” In school, Diane remembers hearing “a lot about saints ... I remember the great celebrations when Maria Goretti was proclaimed a saint.” At that time, she was taught an “image of God keeping an eye on and watching over and waving a warning finger.” Thus, the God of Diane’s childhood was not only someone to be trusted and a sense of presence in darkness, but also “the sort of standard rather triumphalist God, almighty, the one who made all the decisions for everyone.”
At home she gathered her own impressions about church and God from those around her. A neighbour who was a Jehovah's Witness used to attempt to convert her mother until she finally told him, "It's no good, Mr Stevens, persuading me that I ought to join you. You belong to your group and I belong to mine, and I think we shall just have to leave it at that." Diane recalls that as "an important lesson about the process of religion," that her mother and their neighbour "could respect and like one another without having to convert the other," because "the mid-fifties was probably the nadir of the Catholic church in terms of its closed mindedness. There was this immense sense of set apart and the only saved."

Diane remembers her mother as

a reflective person with an immense sense of her own authenticity ... I recall thinking you didn't get away with telling lies ... to mother. She had a knack of knowing. I think I mentioned that ... for the women in the family, there was a sense of unspoken communication, a kind of capacity for communicating without words, which does seem only to occur among the women, not so much among the men. And it was certainly strong for my mother and me, we knew what the other was thinking, which was a bit disconcerting, but, having grown up with it, I accepted it.

As well as her mother, father, brother and sister, and great-uncle, Diane's grandmother, aunt and a cousin were close to her as a child. Her cousin was the same age and was a close companion for many years: "We're still quite close in that we pick up where we left off," and she "provided a lightness in life which was important, because I was rather serious." She also recalls "grandmother came and stayed, and I can remember praying with her, and ... going off to confession, which I suppose we did about once a month on a regular basis." Diane recorded her life story as a history of these and other relationships unfolding as she did, in the form of a chambered nautilus (Figure 7-3).

Many of the things that give delight to Diane now were rooted in her childhood:

We had a house with a view right across the harbour, and I used to get up very early in the morning. I still do. I like the early morning, and sit on the step looking out at the light changing on the sea ... and [took] great delight in the things which grew ... I used to retrieve my father's cast-off plants and plant them again and nurture them into life ... I was a fairly solitary child ... I did have friends ... but I spent quite a lot of time ... on my own reading and just being.

She recalls worrying about her mother, who had lost a baby and was ill. The immediate effect on Diane seemed to be that she would run a fever whenever she was anxious, but she also recalls, "I knew from five what I wanted to do and I never changed my mind ... It was about that time that I became very clear about what I wanted to do, so I suspect that had something to do with it, because there were no medics in the family at all." There was also a stage when she felt treated unjustly at school, when she was being bullied.
Figure 7-3

Diane’s Life Story Drawing
and the teachers wouldn’t take any notice: “I always felt very angry about being treated
unjustly. Still do.”

Diane left childhood with an immense sense of trust in God, even in the darkness and
solitude that might have disconcerted other children, and despite learning God images in
school which were at odds with her experience. She also saw in those around her
authenticity, tolerance, goodness, kindness, intelligence, gentleness and companionship. She
had felt the threat of loss and the feeling of injustice. She found in herself from an early age a
sense of knowing fairly clearly what she felt and what she wanted to do.

7.3.3 Adolescence

Diane remembers diverse ideas about God, religion and church in her adolescence.
She recalls that “by the time I was fourteen I was beginning to argue about the image of God
that was being presented, saying I can’t imagine God sitting counting our sins. Which of
course didn’t go down very well in the convent school of the fifties.”

Diane also found that convent school views didn’t go down unchallenged at home:
One of the things in my adolescence was that religion was hotly debated in our
household because my father was agnostic. So you were likely when you
produced a fact about the Catholic church to have counter facts raised, which
was very healthy ... My mother always had ... a kind of deep faith which wasn’t
necessarily put into words, but which was there ... And my great uncle ... made
me think, and I liked being made to think.

In high school, Diane remembers
there was a lot of talk about the church but not a great deal about God ... In spite
of all of that I used to love school retreats ... I knew that if I had peace and quiet
and solitude I was okay, but if I didn’t I used to get very grumpy. And the thing
about school retreats was that they were nearly all silent, and it was wonderful
just to have that time to be. I have no recollection of any of the sermons lighting
me up or giving me any sense of ‘ooh,’ but I enjoyed the quiet.

During her adolescence, the people important to her spread beyond boundaries of family.
Two teachers were particularly noteworthy. One “was a wonderful and very authentic,
strong minded woman who was a nun ... She struck me as being a very honest person in
that she didn’t mince words but you knew where you stood with her.” The other was
an unusual woman because in those days nuns were so regimented. She was
very much herself. She was open and honest ... and we could discuss anything ...
I think both of those women were very important for me in affirming that it
was fine for women to have academic careers ... not that my family didn’t. My
parents were always quite supportive of the idea.
Both teachers "were very formative in the sense that they gave me a feeling that I still wanted to be connected to religion at that point in my life. While I often argued about church things, I didn't feel there was any sense of non-authenticity."

She also had a number of friends, of whom she says "we shared similar values." Diane also had a close male friend for about six years from the time she was sixteen. He was a "close companion ... but I think I recognised from the beginning that this wasn't ... going to work in terms of marriage."

Travelling to the Vatican when she was seventeen, Diane loved Pope John XXIII, but found "St Peter's and ... the city just awful, these monuments to power, and I was appalled by it." Elsewhere in Italy, she loved the beauty of prayerful places off the beaten track, but "I was mostly appalled by the institutional church." At age eighteen, she left for another city to begin her medical studies, feeling "I still hadn't explored the sense of the presence of God. I just had a very strong sense of God's presence but it wasn't a very articulated one."

The beginning of her study brought unexpected anxieties:

My first year, I nearly gave up. I hated physics ... feeling harangued when I started doing clinical medicine, and feeling assaulted by living in doctors' residences ... There's a way of dealing with women which I found unacceptable at that stage and made very plain, which of course used to cause slight startlement. I was considered terribly old-fashioned. [My male friend] wanting to get engaged caused minor anxiety because I was clear I wanted to finish first.

In adolescence, Diane enjoyed the intellectual challenge of discussing different ideas of God and church, though not her encounter of different attitudes to women. She had role models and support in teachers, family and friends. She continued to find God and herself in times of quiet and solitude. She sums up the period well, describing how she drew the time in her life-story drawing: "The gold line is a sense of the presence of God. Sometimes it's not so clear as other times, but it was always there. And the outside edge is a sense of my own continuity too, which was always very clearly there. I never had any problem knowing that I was me."

7.3.4 Early Adulthood

Once in medical school, Diane sought out the campus Catholic group, but "found them a rather boring lot." A few years on, the Vatican Council began, and she recalls there were some interesting discussions. When the break-up came with her male friend, Diane's
first response “was actually to go and sit in church, which I still think is rather an odd response, except that that felt comfortable, it was dark and it felt right.”

Immediately afterwards, she spent several months working in an American hospital: “It was eye opening too, in that I struggled to keep going to Mass and keep doing the right things and found it was a challenge.” Part of the challenge was to her sense of justice, seeing the poor and the rich treated in separate hospital wards. She also recalls having a woman pour out her life story at a bus stop, and being “deeply anguished by the lack of the presence of God in her story, the lack of a sense of being nurtured and cared for.” The friends she made were mostly Jewish, “and I’m sure that was about an underlying sense of God.” Diane felt “I was never really left for long without a sense of the presence of God impinging in some way. I mean that’s probably true right the way through …”

Her next hospital experience was in the developing world:

That was a life-changing experience … that was very much filled with the presence of God. Here was this war-ravaged … countryside. And yet it was very beautiful even though … we were surrounded by mine fields … brown and stony hills but wonderful light. And we lived on faith.

Medical supplies were scarce but Diane learned to live with that: “I found that I was quite happy to pray and trust, and we never ran out of essential things, ever.” At one stage, the doctor in charge had a family emergency and left her in charge of other foreign staff, nurses and aides: “It was challenging and stretching and yet … I didn’t feel panicked by it. I felt, ‘well, I’ll do what I can do and that’s all I can do.’ I prayed a lot in those weeks.”

Back in medical school, she and a friend she had known for some years “suddenly realised we actually got on rather well, and nine months later we got engaged, which our families thought was much too soon, and then married.” They had “a rather stormy preparation” because of their different denominational backgrounds, but Diane is grateful for that because it made them aware of their differences: “[It] made us realise that they were there and we’d have to continue working on them.”

All through her study, despite a dis-ease with the prevailing attitudes toward women in medicine, Diane appreciated the support of friends and teachers. The priest who took them through marriage preparation was important “in making us look at the reality of difference … which was really important at that stage.” One of her friends was a long-term flatmate “whom I’m devoted to, and I think we’re devoted to each other.” Another friend was close in their work together, “a very strong-minded” and forbearing person.

Among her teachers were several who taught her important values. One “had a breadth of vision about human needs which was more than a scientific analysis.” Another she accompanied on rounds:
You’d go into one place which would be grotty … and you’d go visit the next patient and be given cucumber sandwiches and silver teapots with china tea, it was from one extreme to the other. He taught me a lot about being present to people wherever they are in the same way.

Another teacher gave her sound advice: “Don’t make a fuss about things that don’t matter, but when you stamp, stamp hard.”

Diane describes the way her medical school relationship with God appears in her life story drawing: “The line is fairly thin here. I don’t think I ever had no sense of the presence of God, but it wasn’t very strong, except at particular points.” The major strong point was in the developing world. What was it that made God’s presence noticeable?

Oddly enough, it was the sense of suffering. A suffering which couldn’t be remedied … the sense of having to be trusting and being helpless in one sense, not being able to run it all tidily and organise it. I mean the whole of the time I was in the hospital I had the sense of having to let go of control and just be. There was also a realisation there about the presence of God in a Muslim country … I suddenly became aware that the way the people … treated their sick, particularly their mentally ill, was more ‘Christian’ than many ‘Christian’ countries. So again there was this sense of the presence of God in different cultures and different places, which has been a theme when you look at it from very early on.

The next ten years of Diane’s life were crowded with moves between Europe, urban and rural New Zealand and the developing world - and all that entailed in terms of culture and distance from family; the birth of three children; the beginnings of her medical career; and the death of her mother.

Unable to return overseas for her mother’s funeral, her grief over her mother’s death was put off because of more pressing family needs, and when it happened, it was prolonged and anguished: “I walked up and down the beach … shrieking and raging at … God … and gradually worked through my grief. It took most of that year.” But Diane suspects it wasn’t just her grief at her mother’s death:

I also had a grief at the absence of mother and a grief at the absence of God. There wasn’t a ever a sense that God wasn’t there, [but] at that time I had an amazing sense of the distress of the land, an extraordinary thing really, [there was] this unspoken link between my mother and me, [and then] I became supersensitive to places where there had been massacres or where there were people buried … For the whole of that year there was the echo of the anguish of other people which I found very extraordinary and I can’t explain it, except that I know it happened.

Diane remarks, “there was no time to think about God. One thought about God in the corners with three children under four.”

This period evolved, however, into a time of freedom and creativity. Despite the cultural differences and young children, Diane was able to combine mothering with medical
work with missions, good friendships, reading, and opening up the ideas of God and church. Among her closest friends were the mission sisters and a priest that she met:

[The] priest I met ... stretched my understanding of the presence of God, the boundaries of church ... It was a very creative time, I was reading and thinking. It was a time when I began to look more closely at my faith and the church, in conjunction with this group of Maryknoll sisters and a French psychologist. We went through the documents of Vatican II together. I was reading a lot of Jung at the time. And the combination of Jung and Teilhard de Chardin ... and these monthly discussions when we spent a day actually just talking and reflecting was just wonderful, magical.

What brought the group together was

a common sense of a need for change. We shared anguish at the suffering that went on, and the demand that that made to change from cosy images of God. It was an exciting time, that post-Vatican II time, suddenly there were all these new ideas and new ways of looking at the structure of church ... I found it just an amazing experience in the way church could be ... It was not about shutting people out but unfolding them, not demanding that they become other, but that they be more themselves ... We had communion which was totally inclusive of everyone in the community including the babies, because for the [people] not to include their children in what was good was unthinkable. The Mass was a dialogue between [the priest] and the leader of that community who was a woman, about seven months pregnant ... Discussing the readings which were told as a story and then reflected on by the whole community, it was a totally different way of church ... and [the country] is full of the sense of the presence of God.

After three years, the family moved again to New Zealand, settling for a short time in a small town. Diane had come back “with all these revolutionary ideas” including ideas of “Mary as a strong, mature and independent-minded woman, and the notion that women could preach in the Catholic church” - which Diane did. About the years of her early adulthood, Diane says, “I became very dear about a God ... to whom all people are equally beloved. That theme has certainly strengthened over the last twenty years, but at that time it began to emerge, so that any kind of image of God who was not equally loving of all people didn’t make sense to me.”

7.3.5 Middle Adulthood

As she moved from the small town to one of New Zealand’s cities, Diane attended a conference for Catholic doctors, at which the bishops were present as well. She notes that it was “a wonderfully relaxed time in the church, there was none of the sense of distancing, or authority as there is now ... and I was able to share quite freely the impressions I had.” As a
result, she counts the bishop of that time among the people who were important for her: “I found him a wonderful human being. I didn’t always see eye to eye with him. I would shout at him occasionally, and he would shout back. But I liked him and found him a good caring man.”

She also met a priest who was doing spiritual direction, and he became an important part of her life because he was a man who made me look a little harder at my understanding of God and gave me encouragement to grow and to be, and he really gave me encouragement to write, too ... I used to say I can’t find words, and he’d say, ‘write it,’ and I’d write it. And it was a wonderful revelation for me ... He made me let go of preconceptions, which is an important stage, not wanting to hang on to, and being open to new images and new ways of seeing things ... and feeling comfortable with taking time just to be ... because I was ... zipping all over the country giving papers and running workshops. So it was really at that time when I began to seriously take space and time to reflect about God in my life.

Diane’s husband was an on-going part of all this growing and reflection. When they had gotten married, it was he who said, “Which Bible shall we have?,” and they have “read together intermittently all the way through our married life.” For seven years they were part of an ecumenical prayer group and “did a lot of reflecting, both about our faith and the presence of God, and about religious differences.”

Several years after they had settled in the city, Diane’s father died, and she went back to Europe for the funeral. A few weeks later her daughter told her she was pregnant, and within the same year, the priest who had been her spiritual director, indeed, “spiritual father,” died, followed by the death of the son of close friends. Three deaths and an unexpected birth, and Diane says “I again found myself saying ‘how can you do this to me?’, and grieving greatly. Out of that grief came productive labour - a grandchild who “has been an enormous joy ever since,” a book on grief, and “from that time also came an increased sense of the presence of God. And I think that’s about ... becoming aware again of the presence of the God who’s in the darkness, really difficult times.”

Diane continues to delight in “the beauty of the world ... I never get tired of watching the play of light on the hills, or the clouds.” Another delight is “seeing my grandchildren learning to look in the same way ... I try to get them to look at the cloud or tell them to look at the plants, and the stars, even when they’re so small they can’t talk, because I think that’s really important.” Many people continue to play important parts in her life - friends in medicine, in the organisations she works with, friends overseas, priests and sisters, but also, more and more, I find the presence of God in the vulnerability of people that I’m working with, and in those I just meet ... In the last year or two the sense of the vulnerability of God is something I’ve been spending more time reflecting on, of
a God who suffers with us ... I have let go of the sense of a God who is outside tinkering in.

At this stage of her life, Diane says:

My nice clear images and nice clear picture of God are no longer present. I think that’s been a real process over the last ten or fifteen years. I don’t have an image of God, I find traces of God in a great many things ... God is present in anything that speaks of integrity and wholeness and growth. But God is also present ... in those who struggle with suffering ... One of the things I am becoming much clearer about is that in situations of pain and suffering there is an element of mystery which is about God ... God [is] present in the fidelity of not running away from suffering ... Some of the running away is about fear of mystery and not being able to tidy it up.

Diane feels that often people fear getting too close to suffering:

One of my children ... once said to me when he was about four, ‘pain is like treacle, mummy’ ... When you touch pain, you’re left with some pain ... I think that just very vaguely and dimly I’m coming to understand that that treacly quality of pain is where God is.

Diane continues to find God in solitude, nature and people. When she thinks of God, she thinks of

compassion, tenderness, challenge, storm too - the kind of storm that stirs up the gravel from the deep. Also light ... one of the things that I loved about being able to spend some of my youth by the sea is light, because it has taught me a lot ... When I sit in bed I see the dawn come up over the sea and the first rays of the light actually hit the hills opposite, and it’s like a tender finger just touching on some of the highest bits ... the whole of that side of the harbour glows ... And I sometimes feel the cloud that comes right down on the water, and it’s like the cloud of unknowing, you can’t see anything. And other days it’s a kind of scene and half of the hills ... are visible, and I mean, life’s like that. You know there are days when it’s all wonderful and clear, and there are days when [it’s] either blacked out on the water or the ground, basically you have a very limited view.

When asked what scripture passages spoke to her particularly about God, Diane mentioned Psalm 139 as “a marvellous description of human unfolding.” Verses 13-14, for example, read: “It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother’s womb; for all these mysteries I thank you: for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works.” Diane notes that the book of Wisdom “describes Wisdom as ongoing creation,” e.g., in 7:24-25, “she pervades and permeates all things. She is the breath of the power of God,” and verse 27, “she makes all things new.” Diane understands the Syrophonician woman as “a model for women in the church today,” and the whole story (Mt 15.21-28; Mk 7.24-30) as about “God in the process of unfolding.” Not only was Jesus unfolding, but God also unfolds:

It strikes me that the static images of God that I was certainly brought up with don’t make sense in a world that’s unfolding ... And I suspect that that’s why the old can’t cope with institutional renewal. They recognise there’s a conflict between what they know, their world, and what they hear about God ... But it’s even more of a mind shift than that ... The world which is fixed in its relationships is secure ... where each has its place ... and it’s all held together by this God outside, kind of organising. To allow the chaos of a world which is in the process of unfolding, a world in which chaos and order coexist, is ... very difficult ... I’m not dismissing those who want to hang on to their own world, cause it’s a much safer world than the one unfolding at the moment.

The scripture passages Diane chose are all connected. She has an understanding that just as human beings unfold, and creation unfolds, so God also must unfold in response to human beings and all creation, and especially to human beings in the midst of the present world of chaos and suffering.

Diane's understanding of God evolved from her early images of darkness and solitude and nature, images still with her, to an exuberant abundance of places in which she finds God, and a complexity of ways in which she thinks of God. Her sense is that the presence of God is in everyone and everything, in the light and in the darkness, in the mystery of not understanding, of suffering, and of being helpless in the face of suffering. God meets her in relationships - from the authenticity of her mother to the intelligence of her father, the compassion and honesty of teachers and friends, the companionship and stimulation of many people over the course of her life, and now in the wonder and delight of her grandchildren. The very clear images are no more, but Diane finds God’s traces in everything.

7.3.6 Synthesis

Numerous people have shaped Diane’s understanding of God: her parents; her uncle; other family members; the priest who prepared her for communion; friends; teachers; husband; children and grandchildren; those she works with; people she has met all over the world, not least of which is herself. Other factors which contribute to her God images are the diversity of cultures to which she has been exposed; nature and beauty; her natural solitude and intellectual bent; her observation and experiences of injustice and suffering, including deaths; and her experience and involvement with church.

The way in which Catherine, Anne and Diane’s God images developed from their mixed childhood images into a bounty of rich imagery in midlife is not unlike the development of the images of Miriam and Rose in chapter 6. Catherine’s, Anne’s and
Diane's images, though, are now infused by mystery, reflections and glimpses, lack of clarity, and - in Anne's case - haziness and desert.

Chapters 4 - 7 have chronicled the lives and faith histories of eleven women, drawing attention to God images at each life stage, and the people and experiences which have helped form and change the images. In Chapters 8 and 9, God images and the factors influencing God image development for each of the women will be compared together, so as to answer further questions about how and why God images form and change (1.2).
CHAPTER 8
FORMATION AND CHANGE IN GOD IMAGES

8.1 Childhood Images of God

From recent research, and from readings of the transcripts and life stories of the study participants, it appears that God images may be 'caught' in the sense that children may ascribe parental traits to God; 'taught' in the context of catechism, prayer or conversation; or otherwise influenced by circumstances, the child’s own temperament, or - according to those of faith - by the working of God.

This section will compare the women’s retrospective childhood God images, trace some of the possible factors in the formation of those images, and comment on how the perceived formation of childhood God images in these women compares with that in the literature described in 2.2, where relevant.

The first step in looking for influences on childhood God images was to extract the women’s childhood God images from the life stories presented in chapters 4-7. These are presented in Table 8-1, along with an assessment of the woman’s overall childhood feeling about God.

Table 8-1 indicates that four women (Chapter 4) seem to have childhood images of God which included all positive attributes like love, care, forgiveness and nurture; four

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313 The images are retrospective because the women in middle adulthood are describing their childhood images in retrospect. There is no way of recovering how they would have described their images at actual past points in time: a longitudinal study over a lifetime would be required to compare actual childhood images with retrospective ones. It is assumed for the present study that there is some degree of relationship between the two.

314 Not all studies reviewed in 2.2 will be commented on here. Because this study is aimed primarily at exploring the overall evolution of God images through life, it does not study aspects of childhood images in the same way as the studies of children in the literature review.

315 All findings discussed in this chapter are obviously heavily dependent on the thoroughness of the interview process and transcript analysis. The transcript analysis and production of the life stories (Chapters 4-7) were checked by the women themselves to ensure that the author’s interpretation of their views about God, parents and others were accurately represented. Chapters 8-10 have not been subject to such review, but the information used in tables is taken from the verified life stories occasionally other transcript material.

316 In the women’s descriptions of God, there are traits which the participants regarded as positive, negative, and neutral. Caring, loving, nurturing, etc. were regarded as positive, while threatening, authoritarian, judging, etc. were regarded as negative. Father and creator were regarded as neutral, as often these were just words without content to the child, unless they were specifically linked with positive or negative content words. The third column indicates whether, taken together, the description of negative and positive traits leads to an overall assessment of the childhood feeling toward God as positive, negative or mixed.
### Table 8-1

Images of God and Feeling Toward God in Childhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood God Images317</th>
<th>Feeling Toward God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>man, someone at church, important, male statue and figure on cross, trinity, power to help, give strength and support, prayed to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, spirit-confirmation, Mass, understanding, forgiving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>God helps, cares, knows what one is going through, parent substitute, only person I had to talk to, constant factor and space, prayer, Our Lady, saints, Mass, to be trusted, Mary on par with Jesus, Father giving Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Gentle Jesus, meek, mild, brown beard; friendly, loving, person in white nightie, kind face, beard, Jesus type figure, loving presence, masculine personage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>Jesus - friend for children, human, tender shepherd, loving, caring, nurturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>fearful, slightly threatening presence, powerful, always watching, guy with beard on cloud, huge person, Trinity will get you - guilt and fear, Jesus and God same, unconditional love, bible stories, all-doing, statues, mural of God looking down on crucifixion, father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>prayed through Mary - needed to go through her as mediator, rosary, order, removed, creator, Mass, authoritarian person, authority figure, father figure, to be obeyed, not being obedient a sin, Michaelangelo's old man, couldn't get away, felt like prisoner, watching, represented in parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>big judge, had to be obeyed or would put me in my place, God would favour me if I did the right thing, stern, mystery, Jesus statues, awesome, non-approachable, mystical, father God, father figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>distant, string-puller, could organise things the way I wanted, help pass exams, judging, bearded man, king, Mary mediator one prayed to get God to answer, rosary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>old distant gentleman on high brass throne, to be respected, adored, prayed to, rosary, Mass, miracles, spiritual bouquets, fear and duty, threat of mortal sin and damnation, creator, statues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>judge, keeping score, perfect, ultimate supreme father figure, creator, hierarchy of God- Mary-saints, devotion to Mary, forgiving, merciful, kind, benevolent, eternal giver, Mary - haven and refuge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>immense sense of presence of God in (non-threatening) darkness of Buddhist temple, saints, God to be trusted, later with school - triumphalist, Almighty one who made all decisions, waving finger, watching, counting sins, demanding, guilt-inducing father</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

317 God 'images' here include not only titles, attributes and visual images, but also associations the women made with God, e.g., confirmation, Bible, rosary. As a child, much to do with God was so intermingled with everything to do with church that, as some women noted, they didn’t separate it out until later.
women had negative images, including a God who is fearful, threatening, authoritarian and distant; and three women had a mixture of positive and negative images. Many of the God images recalled by women in this study have also been reported by others.

In order to find out how these images and other associations were formed, a cue is taken from the research which showed parental attributes in God images. Parents are usually the major formators in many aspects of child development, so their attributes will be explored for possible similarities to their daughters' childhood God images.

8.1.1 God Images 'Caught' from Significant People

The women's life stories were sifted again to see if their God descriptions were matched by descriptions of parents or other significant persons. Matching traits of God and significant persons are listed in Table 8-2. Significant persons who were the major formators of the women's God images are summarised in Table 8-3.

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318 These findings do not seem to support studies by Johnson and Eastburg, and Heller (2.2.1.1) which found that children often hold a good and bad God in tension (only three of eleven women in this study report doing that). But, as retrospective childhood images, there is the chance that such childhood tension has faded from the memories of the women studied here.

Table 8-2
Matching Attributes of God and Significant Persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God Attributes</th>
<th>Person’s Similar Attributes</th>
<th>Person(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen + Important</td>
<td>+ Important</td>
<td>Mother P G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Understanding, forgiving</td>
<td>+ Broad-minded</td>
<td>(Brothers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Help, strength, support</td>
<td>+ Caring, strong, protective (+ Protective)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ + Important, + + Understanding, forgiving</td>
<td>Broad-minded + Caring, strong, protective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ + Help, + + Strength, + + Support</td>
<td>+ + Caring, + + Supporting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie + + Cares</td>
<td>+ + Kind</td>
<td>Father P G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Friendly, loving, kind</td>
<td>+ Can talk to them, father is peaceful, heart, feeling (+ Fan)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary + Friendly, loving, kind</td>
<td>- Can talk to them, father is peaceful, heart, feeling (+ Fan)</td>
<td>Father P G &amp; Father P (Siblings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie + Friend, human, loving, caring, nurturing</td>
<td>+ Loved me, dotted on me, thought I was wonderful</td>
<td>Mother P, Father &amp; Grandmother G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie - Induces guilt</td>
<td>- + Unconditional love</td>
<td>Mother G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ All-doing</td>
<td>+ + Nurturing</td>
<td>Father (Nun)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fearful, threatening, powerful, watching</td>
<td>+ + Authoritarian, induces fear (- Cruel)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare - Order</td>
<td>- Neat, tidy, organised, life like clockwork, devoted to keeping house clean and looking after children o Shy - Enslaved family</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Removed</td>
<td>- Required that Clare be obedient and good, father made decisions for her o Saw selves as God’s representatives - Authoritarian</td>
<td>Mother G &amp; Father G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Made her feel like a prisoner, couldn’t get away</td>
<td>- + Fearful, threatening, powerful, watching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Authority figure, not being obedient a sin</td>
<td>o + + Authoritarian person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Represented in parents</td>
<td>o + + Authoritarian person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- + Non-approachable, awesome</td>
<td>o Gap between us, busy, chores came first, attended to house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam - Big judge, stern, had to be obeyed or would put her in her place, would favour her if she did the right thing</td>
<td>- ‘Listen and do your job’, obedience important, induced guilt</td>
<td>Father n P G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Listed with each participant’s name is the assessment of overall feeling toward God from Table 8-1. Attributes are preceded by +, -, or o to indicate whether the participant considered them positive, negative or neutral. In a few cases, a matching attribute for God and person have a different ‘valence.’ It is likely that some of the traits of parents, though diplomatically recalled as adults as neutral, in fact affected the child negatively, and were transferred to God with a negative connotation. Attributes of persons in parentheses appear to be of a supporting role to parent’s influence, rather than a major formative role on their own. Parents are given the letter P or non-P in the case where a preferred parent could be identified (to confirm whether or not God image is related to attributes of preferred parent as in research by Marven Nelson, and Birky and Ball, see 2.2.1.2). Parents and other significant persons are also given the letter G if they were mentioned as significantly associated with teaching prayers, about God, or taking children to church. Note that the attributes of persons mentioned here are not their total attributes, just those which seem to match with the participant’s God image. The question of why some
Table 8-2 continued

Matching Attributes of God and Significant Persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God Attributes</th>
<th>Person's Similar Attributes</th>
<th>Person(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>- Distant</td>
<td>o Tired, busy with babies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Judging</td>
<td>- Disciplinarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>- Distant, high, throne</td>
<td>o Difficult to show affection or talk to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Fear and duty, threat of mortal sin and damnation</td>
<td>- Present but love conditional, approval given for being good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>- Judge, Perfect, Keeping Score</td>
<td>- If let down, Anne would hear in no uncertain terms, expectations to do and say right thing, make parents proud, dominating, disappointed if Anne disagreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Ultimate supreme father figure</td>
<td>- Expectations, dogmatic, things are God’s will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ Forgiving, merciful, kind, benevolent, eternal giver, Mary as haven and refuge</td>
<td>+ Gentle, compassionate, refuge, always there, took her side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>+ Immense sense of presence of God (in non-threatening darkness), God to be trusted</td>
<td>+ Intuitive, reflective, unspoken communication, sense of authenticity, sense of trust, care (+ Close + Gentle + Protective + Goodness)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8-3

Major Formators of Participants' Childhood God Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Formators of God Images</th>
<th>In the Childhoods of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Helen, Rose, Diane, Miriam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Marie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother and Father</td>
<td>Mary, Susie, Clare, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother, Father, Grandmothers, Aunt</td>
<td>Annie, Anne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A number of observations can be made from the tables:

1) Attributes of significant people, usually parents, appear in all of the women’s childhood God images. Contributions of traits by the grandmothers and an aunt in Anne’s and Annie’s images were judged to be as important as parental influence. Traits of other family, a priest and a nun are reflected in some women’s childhood God images, but are considered supporting or secondary influences.

2) Mothers played a significant role in forming the God images of ten of the eleven women, and fathers were formators for six out of eleven women. Grandmothers were important for two women, and an aunt for one woman.

3) In ten out of the eleven women, the assessment of the woman’s childhood feeling toward God is predictable solely on the basis of the traits contributed to her God image by parents and other significant people. In the eleventh case, the fact that Diane’s mother contributed positive traits to her God image should have meant that Diane’s God image was positive, as there were no negative factors contributed by other people. Diane’s God

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321 This finding is in line with studies of parental attributes, e.g. Donelson (2.2.1.2).

322 Judgements on the main formators of childhood images of God are subjective ones, based on the facts that parents in most cases were the primary caregivers and that where others (grandmother and aunt) were important, they were spoken of a number of times, at some length, with evident emotion and/or their traits were clearly represented in God images. Supportive formators were sometimes only a part of the child’s life for a year, on occasional visits, were not looked up to in the same way as parents, or their traits not as obviously reflected in God images.

323 The finding that maternal traits are drawn on by most of the women in this study supports the object relations work of Ana-Marie Rizzuto and Martha Robbins, in which children’s God representations were heavily influenced by their mothers’ personality traits (See 2.2.1.3). It would be interesting to see if later studies of younger cohorts find more equal mother - father influence as shared child care becomes more common.). In the present study, only Marie’s God images do not follow that pattern. Marie’s childhood was so traumatic that both parents were essentially unavailable for her. Even though her father has one trait in common with her God image, essentially most of her God image comes from elsewhere (see 8.1.2). Recent research sheds some light on this issue: Amy Eshleman found that children felt closer to God if their parents were less involved with them; and Jane Dickie found that children use God as a substitute parent as they separate from their parents with age (See 2.2.1.1). Marie’s separation from her parents was an enforced early one, and she herself describes God as a ‘parent substitute’. The findings of Eshleman and Dickie provide a reasonable explanation for why Marie’s relationship with God developed differently with respect to the lack of mother attributes in her image of God. Rizzuto found that unfulfilled longings or needs contribute idealised traits to a person’s God representation, and this would explain Marie’s completely positive God image in contrast to her life experience. Heather Johnson’s finding that a positive sense of connection with God can decrease the effects of traumas such as depression and anxiety (see 2.2.1.3), which it might be assumed Marie would have struggled with in her home and boarding school environments (See 221.1.1).

324 Of the six women whose preferred parents could be identified from her parental descriptions, four had preferred parents whose attributes related to their God images, all positive. Of those four, two mothers, and one mother - father combination (Helen, Mary, Annie) had attribute descriptions which seemed to match their daughters’ God images. The God image of the fourth woman, Marie, matched with her father, but only in one trait. The negative assessment of the God images of two women (Miriam and Rose) did not match with their preferred parents’ traits (their father’s traits were positive in each case). There is thus insufficient evidence in this group of women (for the predictions of Marven Nelson, and Birky and Ball - see 2.2.1.2) that preferred parent attributes predict childhood God attributes, except perhaps in cases where both are positive.
image however, was mixed, and she herself identified the other factor involved: her negative images came from the prevailing understanding of God which she picked up at school (Table 8-5). These findings substantiate Carroll Saussy’s understandings of the impacts of parenting on God images, not only in childhood, but in later life: children with loving and caring parents will usually develop good positive God images which will eventually win out even if the child is exposed to other God images elsewhere, while children with exacting, punishing or cruel parenting (or conflicting parenting experiences) will usually form negative God images.325

4) For all the women, at least one of the persons who contributed traits toward her childhood God image was also closely associated with praying, teaching her about God or taking her to church.

Among the negative attributes included in the women’s childhood images of God were judging, distant, authoritarian, keeping score, and so on. Although God as distant or removed was mentioned by three women, God as a figure with judging or controlling power over them was mentioned by all seven who had mixed or negative images of God. Conversely, all the women whose images of God were positive or mixed, attributed traits like caring, loving, trust and nurturing to God. While various persons sometimes contributed either solely negative or positive traits to the women’s childhood God images, those persons often had other traits that were not transferred to God by their daughters. To try to find out why, Table 8-4 presents the controlling and caring attributes in God and in significant persons.

### Table 8-4
Controlling and Caring Attributes in God and Significant Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Controlling Attributes in God</th>
<th>Controlling Attributes in Mother/Father</th>
<th>Caring Attributes in God</th>
<th>Caring Attributes in Mother/Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none/none</td>
<td>power to give help, strength, support</td>
<td>strong, caring, protective/ (touch)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none/none</td>
<td>can help, cares, knows about me, I can talk to God, can trust, constant</td>
<td>none/ (kind)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none/none</td>
<td>gentle, kind, friendly, loving,</td>
<td>could talk to her/ say things to him, peaceful, heart, feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none/none</td>
<td>friend, tender, loving, caring, nurturing</td>
<td>loved her/(had to work out he thought she was wonderful)* - grandmother doted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>powerful, always watching</td>
<td>manipulation, associated with guilt/ authoritarian, associated with fear</td>
<td>unconditional love</td>
<td>nurturing, didn’t raise voice/ none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>watching, authority, demanded obedience</td>
<td>clockwork life, enslaved family/ authority, made decisions, both demanded obedience</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>(looked after children)*/ none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>big judge, demanded obedience</td>
<td>listen and do job, inspired guilt, demanded obedience/none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>big heart* / could talk to him, common enjoyments*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>judging string-puller</td>
<td>disciplinarian/none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>(wanted her to be educated)<em>/ did things with her</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>duty-invoking royal, threatened damnation</td>
<td>up and down, angry, Both - love conditional on behaviour</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none/ (taught her things)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>judge keeping score/creator</td>
<td>Both - expectations had to be met/dogmatic</td>
<td>forgiving, merciful, benevolent, eternal giver</td>
<td>none/none, grandmother and aunt - on her side, understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>triumphal, almighty decision-maker</td>
<td>none/none</td>
<td>can trust, sense of presence</td>
<td>associated with trust and care/none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

326 Listed under each name is the assessment of overall feeling toward God from Table 8-1.

327 Significant persons other than parents are included for Annie and Anne. Asterisked attributes are those not reflected in the child’s image of God. Attributes in parentheses are those which, although caring, did not seem to be indicative of a larger relationship of caring with that person.
A number of observations can be made from Table 8-4:

1) The first four women, who all had overall positive images of God have no association of God or their parents with the exercise of a judging type of power over them. They all mention caring traits for God, and at least one parent contributes caring traits to the women's God images.

2) The remaining seven women, who have mixed and negative God images, mention controlling traits for God, and all but Diane mention controlling traits in at least one parent. Diane's God images seem an anomaly, because although she reports controlling traits in neither of her parents, she does report them for God. As mentioned previously though, Diane herself notes school influences at work here.

3) For all six women who had at least one parent with controlling traits, the women's childhood God images also had controlling traits. The data suggests, then, that the way parents exercise authority will affect children's images of God. If one or both parents are demanding, controlling or judgmental, children's images of God are likely to reflect those traits as well.

4) Seven of the eleven women understood God as having caring qualities during their childhoods. All seven also reported caring qualities in at least one of their parents or another close relative such as a grandmother or aunt. Of these seven, four had overall positive feelings about God and three had mixed feelings. Of the three who had mixed feelings about God, Susie and Anne's caring God attributes were countered by controlling God attributes contributed by both their parents. The third, Diane, had caring God attributes countered by controlling attributes she learned at school.

5) The other four women (Miriam, Clare, Catherine and Rose) did not recall God as caring in their childhoods at all, despite the fact that all of them recognised some kind of caring qualities in one or both of their parents. These women, who all had controlling God attributes contributed by one or both parents, had a negative overall feeling about God, and the 'taught' God they received did not seem to include caring attributes (see Table 8-5). A reasonable question to ask is: what does it take to give children a caring God image, assuming one can be given? To answer, the situations of the four women whose

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328 Not only did caring attributes of parents in these four women not transfer to God images, but Marie's negative parental attributes did not transfer to God, and both Marie and Diane have God attributes not found in either parent. This challenges the findings of Birky and Ball (2.2.1.2) that an individual's God image correlates with parental composite images. In addition, the fact that seven of eleven women had controlling God images, and an equal number (but different grouping) of the women had caring images indicates that these findings do not correspond with Hertel and Donahue, who found that there was a prevalence for God as love over God as authority, and that girls and mothers were more likely to see God as love than God as authority or authoritarian. Neither of their findings would be true for this study.
parental images did not contribute caring traits to their God images are looked at case by case.

In Miriam's life, it seems that the atheism of her parents, who said either God did not exist or God was unloving, and therefore did not pray at home, combined with the mostly negative teaching she received about God from other sources would probably be sufficient to explain why her God images were negative even with caring parents.

Clare remembers both God and parents as authoritarian, orderly, and expecting her to be good. The only caring quality she mentions in her description of her mother is that she looked after the children, and that only in the context of devoting her life to keeping the house clean. So perhaps there was not sufficient caring of an affectionate kind for Clare to invest God with caring qualities.

Catherine's childhood God was one of fear and duty, and although her parents were reliably there, they seemed unable to give her the kind of affection or communication that she needed. She recognised that her father loved her by making her things and teaching her to do things, but it wasn't enough to allow her to understand God as loving or caring.

Rose's childhood God is perhaps the most difficult to explain, for her father was a major influence on her life, kind and doing things with her, although her mother was more of a disciplinarian and busy with babies and house. Despite her closeness to her father, Rose's God image was still one of judging, and she had to pray madly, usually through Mary, for what she wanted.

A common factor for the latter three of the four women is that they all had mothers who were somewhat distant and busy, and were therefore not able to have the kinds of relationships with their daughters which the children felt were truly caring. Of the other seven women in the study, six had relationships of care with a female figure - five with at least their mothers, Anne with grandmother and aunt. The seventh, Marie, while having a father who contributed one positive trait to her God image, had no one available at all to her in a caring relationship, as was explained earlier.

While all the women who had at least one controlling parent also had a controlling attribute in their God images, the relationship between parental and God images is not as clear for caring qualities. The most that can be said is that a female child seems more likely to have a caring attribute in her God image if:

1) at least one parent or other significant person has a close caring relationship with her;
2) the child has a caring relationship with her mother or another female carer;
3) the person with whom the child has a caring relationship also is associated with praying with the child, taking her to church, or at least affirming that God exists.

Although parental traits are an essential part of how childhood God images are formed, it is time to look further at aspects of God image formation that arise from being 'taught' in other ways about God.

8.1.2 ‘Taught’ God Images

God images and attributes may also come from ‘taught’ sources. Among them are school; church; teaching heard from nuns, priests, friends and family; music, books and art; and personal experience of relationship with God.\footnote{Other media were not mentioned by the participants. Television was not common in New Zealand until the participants were in adolescence or early adulthood. Radio had little religious content except for an occasional broadcast of Mass or an imported programme by Bishop Fulton Sheen (Peter Hassan, Personal communication, April 2002).} Table 8-5 lists mostly yet unaccounted-for God attributes, with likely sources, noted by the participants themselves or deduced from life stories or context. A few attributes (underlined) already discussed also appear in the table if the participant noted that the attribute was taught to her, or if there was another strong indication that it was taught.

\footnote{Other media were not mentioned by the participants. Television was not common in New Zealand until the participants were in adolescence or early adulthood. Radio had little religious content except for an occasional broadcast of Mass or an imported programme by Bishop Fulton Sheen (Peter Hassan, Personal communication, April 2002).}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant and Childhood God Images/Attributes</th>
<th>Probable Sources of Image/Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helen</strong> Catholic from birth</td>
<td><em>male statue at church, statue of Jesus, figure on cross</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic primary school</td>
<td><em>nightly prayer ritual at home -mother</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Catholic, Father convert when Helen was seven</td>
<td><em>confirmation [school or parish], Sunday Mass</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>catechism</em>(school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others: rosary at school, bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marie</strong> Catholic from birth</td>
<td><em>chapels visits, her own experience</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic primary school (including some boarding school)</td>
<td><em>school (nuns, though cruel, did not give her a wrathful image of God), her own experience, novenas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Catholic, Mother non-practising Presbyterian</td>
<td><em>rosary, prayers and devotions at school</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>[catechism - school, church]</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>[reflection as an adult]</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others: books - lives of saints, special days of prayer, Mass with father on Sundays, and on her own weekdays, plenary indulgences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mary</strong> originally Methodist</td>
<td><em>cards from Sunday school - mother taught at Sunday school, mother taught about God, Presbyterian and Methodist ministers who took services and came to dinner [may be personality as well as teaching of ministers]</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State primary school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Methodist, Father Presbyterian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annie</strong> originally Methodist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State and Christian primary schools</td>
<td><em>Methodist grandmother read her Bible stories, Sunday school, immersed in grandmother’s church-going and involvement, taught prayer: ‘Jesus tender shepherd, hear me; bless thy little lamb tonight in the darkness.’</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Methodist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

332 God images are taken mostly from Table 8-1, supplemented by associated material from the life stories in Chapters 4-7. Images associated with gender are in italics; those associated with Mary are in italicised bold.

333 Sources listed are those given by the participants themselves, except for those in square brackets, which are researcher deduction. In most cases, direct associations between the image and its origin were given by the participant, in others the association was made by the researcher.

334 Catechism would have been taught in all Catholic schools, and it would have nearly always been taught by nuns. Priests then were more frequently seen in high schools than primary schools, and lay teachers were uncommon.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant and Denominational History</th>
<th>Childhood God Images/Attributes</th>
<th>Probable Sources of Image/Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susie Catholic from birth</td>
<td>• guy with beard on cloud, up in sky</td>
<td>• mural of God looking down on crucifixion [in church], mixed up with wee statues [Jesus, saints]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic primary school</td>
<td>• huge person</td>
<td>• Bible stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Catholic</td>
<td>• jesus and God same</td>
<td>• learned about God from mother, [school and church]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• father</td>
<td>• rosary a family ritual, daily Mass, ritual communicating with God morning and night - prayers taught by mother, [catechism - school]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare Catholic from birth</td>
<td>• prayed through Mary - needed to go through her as mediator</td>
<td>• rosary and trimmings - home, [church]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State primary school</td>
<td>• creator</td>
<td>• Sunday and often daily Mass, [religious music, home]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Catholic</td>
<td>• Michaelangelo's old man</td>
<td>• art from church, home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam no denomination</td>
<td>• judge</td>
<td>• Protestant Bible school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State primary school</td>
<td>• mystery, awesome, mystical, non-approachable</td>
<td>• Catholic Mass with ringing of bell, own experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents atheist</td>
<td>• crutch, non-existent</td>
<td>• parents taught this, but Miriam doesn't seem to have believed them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• father God, father figure</td>
<td>• Mass, [prayers, extended family]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Others: grandfather’s huge statues - Jesus with the Sacred Heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose Catholic from birth</td>
<td>• God distant, Mary mediator one prayed to get God to answer</td>
<td>• praying like mad - the Memorare, rosary every night - home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic primary school</td>
<td>• bearded man</td>
<td>• [art from school, church, home]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Catholic</td>
<td>• king</td>
<td>• [art from school church, home; religious music, church, school]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• string-puller, could organise things the way I wanted, help pass exams</td>
<td>• later childhood - frantically praying - taught to pray at home and school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Others: catechism - school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Continued on next page</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 8-5 (continued)

‘Taught’ God Images and Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant and Denominational History</th>
<th>Childhood God Images/Attributes</th>
<th>Probable Sources of Image/Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Catholic from birth</td>
<td>• old distant gentleman on high brass throne</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• to be respected, adored, prayed to, fear and duty threat of mortal sin and damnation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• creator</td>
<td>before school [art from church, home]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>school - touching host a mortal sin, sang Sweet Sacrament Divine, to pray - say rosary - go to Mass - was a duty, spiritual bouquets, were told to have holy statues or they were ashamed of their faith, and taught prayer to be said nightly: ‘I must die, I know not how nor when nor where, but if I die in mortal sin I am lost forever…’, school clock with pendulum that said ‘always damned never saved,’ touching host was mortal sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>catechism - school, [religious music]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others: miracles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Catholic from birth</td>
<td>• ultimate supreme father figure and judge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• God was he</td>
<td>[catechism - school, prayers at church, home, school]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• creator</td>
<td>[church, home, school; religious music, art]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• pyramid of God with Mary and saints, devotion to Mary, go to Mary rather than directly to God</td>
<td>[catechism - school, church, religious music/art]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td>holy pictures in house, [school, church, home, religious music, art; going to Mary rather than God may also be related to the personalities of Anne’s father and grandmother]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Others: church and God featured in everyday life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Catholic from birth</td>
<td>• immense sense of presence of God in (not threatening) darkness of Buddhist temple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• triumphalist, almighty one who made all decisions, demanding, guilt-inducing father</td>
<td>own experience, mother said prayers with her at night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others: heard about saints at school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A number of observations can be made from this table:

1) The two women who were brought up as Methodists both had a taught childhood image of God that seems based totally on Jesus. Only two Catholics mentioned Jesus - Marie mentioned the son and father, but more soteriologically. Both Helen and Susie refer to Jesus, but in addition to their other images of God, and indicate that as children they did not really distinguish between Jesus and God.

2) Of the eight women who were Catholic from birth, all except Diane noted the importance of Mary. The rosary was a daily part of life, and for five women (Helen, Marie, Clare, Rose, Anne) Mary seemed to function as an image of God. She was on a par with Jesus; part of the pyramid made up of God and the saints; or was prayed to as mediator because God was distant but would listen to his mother. It is possible that for the first two women (Helen and Marie), Mary functioned as part of their positive understanding of God. For the latter three women (Clare, Rose and Anne), whose childhood God images were at least partially authoritarian, Mary may have been one of or - for Clare and Rose - the only listening and caring aspect of divinity they had access to. Of the eight Catholic women, five also mention the saints, and two of these (Susie and especially Anne) indicate that saints were somehow entwined with the Godhead.

3) Miriam, having no denominational affiliation or parental religious support - but having attended Protestant Sunday school with friends and holiday Masses with aunts - has no trace of either Mary or Jesus in her taught God images, even though she was impressed with the huge Jesus statue her grandfather had.

4) For nine of the women, all the Catholics from birth plus Miriam, other taught images of God are largely from school catechism, sung about in church, and prayed in set prayers. Four women mention father; three mention creator; two mention judge, two mention king (one of these uses 'throne', but king is implied); and there is one mention each of spirit, trinity, triumphal, and almighty. Miriam used distant images and attributes including mystery, awesome, mystical and unapproachable, perhaps due partially to her experience of not having home access to God, as well as reporting her parents' idea that God was a crutch.

5) Many of the childhood images of the women Catholic from birth include attributes which refer more to a spiritual relationship with God rather than straight catechetical teaching. Catherine's God was to be respected, adored and prayed to, probably reflecting the particular spirituality of her school. Marie's God was intensely personal - someone she could talk to, was constant, helps, cares, that she could trust, and a parent substitute, reflecting the vacuum of those attributes in her home life. Diane's experience of the
presence of God reflects something of her relationship with her mother and something of Diane's own inner sense. Rose's string puller was descriptive of a relationship with God based on how a child might understand the working of prayer.

6) Several images of God were based on artistic license. Two women reported a bearded God; three reported an old God; one reported a huge person; and the same person reported God up in the sky. These images, as well as the king image deduced from the presence in the image of a throne, were seen in holy cards, murals, and other renderings - and some very well could spring through Bible stories from colourful imaginations.

7) As might be expected for the 1940s and 1950s, the God images of all eleven women include indications that their childhood images were masculine. In most cases, the male gender image was also supported in the women's original transcripts by the use of male third person pronouns and adjectives.

Gendered God images would have been handed on to children by the traditional use of male pronouns and adjectives as well as by images of king and father which children would have heard from all religious sources in their childhoods, including teachers, church services, and religious art and music.

Balancing this male image of God in the eight women Catholic from birth is the host of other heavenly figures: Mary and perhaps some of the female saints - Diane mentions Maria Goretti. Neither Mary, Annie or Miriam, who were not Catholics as children, mention other figures when speaking of their childhood God images. Mary seems to function as a divine feminine figure who was either a more loving part of God or a more accessible and compassionate person than God - and in either case who had no complicating associations of fear or judgement. The two women who grew up with Protestant backgrounds had a friendly Jesus who filled this role. Miriam's mixed background afforded a relationship with neither Mary nor Jesus, and an uneasy one with God.

Childhood images of God appear to be a combination of attributes and associations with origins in both traits of significant persons and in teaching received from a variety of sources at home, school and church. By far, parental traits are the most important in determining childhood God images, supporting the suggestion of Justice and Lambert that personalities of parents may be more consequential than religious instruction, as well as the

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335 Catholics, for example, would have attended Mass at least weekly. A look at the English translation of Mass prayers in a 1940 missal shows nouns used for God approximately 273 times: of these, 147 are male images and 127 are gender neutral ('Christ' was excluded from the total, as for different people, the gender understanding differs). Mass prayers provide ample illustration of the prevailing gender attribution to God in the Catholic world. Dom Gaspar Lefebvre, Saint Andrew Daily Missal. (Saint Paul: E. M. Lohmann Company, 1940).
object relations studies mentioned previously. Nearly all anthropomorphic traits attributed to God originated in the traits of parents or other significant persons, although some originate in or are reinforced by teaching from other sources. Specific titles, e.g., creator, trinity, father, and associations with Mary, saints, worship, artwork, spirituality, etc., derive from many sources introduced or ‘taught’ during childhood.

8.2 Images of God in Adolescence

Images of God in adolescence recalled by the women in the study are presented in Table 8-6. Adolescent years brought changes for all of the women in the study. By late adolescence, if not before, all were either working or doing tertiary study. This, in addition to the developmental switch in focus from family to friends, brought new ideas and people into their lives. These changes challenged and often changed their understandings of God.

A conspicuous finding is that eight of the eleven women - all except Clare, Miriam, and Anne - declared a moratorium on relating to God during at least some of adolescence, commenting, for example, that God was “hard to recall” or was a “bit blank.” For these women, it was not so much a case of unbelief, but a suspension of and release from the beliefs they learned from many quarters in childhood. A number of women noted that they went to church more out of habit or duty, or didn’t pray as often: the world was opening up, and God as they had known God was not as evident in or relevant to their new world.

Another finding of note during adolescence is that struggles with self esteem surface at this time for most of the women. Only Diane, who noted in her life story that she always “knew I was me” shows no signs of anxiety or self-esteem issues. Because self esteem issues extend beyond adolescence in many cases, they, and their links with God images, will be explored further in 9.5.

336 See discussion in 2.2.1.2 and 2.2.1.3.

337 Janssen reported the biggest change in adolescence was the growth in God image categories of doubt, unreality (unbelief) and negative ascriptions. See 2.2.1.1.
Table 8-6
Adolescent Images of God

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant &amp; Feelings</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen [+]</td>
<td>- could bring positive outcomes (exams), safe presence, forgiving, understanding, someone to talk to, superhuman, encompassed everything - hard to recall, can't remember, - friend, someone to talk to</td>
<td>- teachers' college - on own out teaching Others: Bible, Vatican II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie [+]</td>
<td>- someone to talk to, could trust, ask for help, only person - share/talk religion with others for first time, not less close, but not relying on God, had someone else, didn't pray as much</td>
<td>- State high school, parents' divorce - working, Catholic Youth Movement, fiancé-to-be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary [+]</td>
<td>- might be more complex/have more faces/different people have different ideas, might take effort/hard work - handy to have around when anxious, not particularly relevant</td>
<td>- Billy Graham, teacher &amp; Crusaders - teachers' college, fiancé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie [+]</td>
<td>- don't remember God or Jesus being important - forget God here for a while</td>
<td>- high school - university, world broadened out, fiancé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie [+-]</td>
<td>- bit blank, didn't think much about him - he didn't register at all, duty to go to Mass</td>
<td>- State high school, ridiculed by nuns, stormy home life, accepting teachers, trusting surrogate parents - teachers' college, sister went overseas, monastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare [-]</td>
<td>- Mary centre of religion, rosary a comfort, made Mary book, fascination, holy purity - God centre of life, passionate and merciful, not authoritarian, social justice, Jesus in others</td>
<td>- Catholic high school [1 yr boarding], shifts - Catholic Youth Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam [-]</td>
<td>- same, to be obeyed, awesome, strength, all that guff</td>
<td>- move to New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose [-]</td>
<td>- still bearded man, distant, rigid, had to be hounded to respond to prayers - no particular memory, can't remember - learned to question, - searching</td>
<td>- regimented Catholic boarding high school - role model teacher, - university, adult education course</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

338 Positive (+) and negative (-) feelings toward God were assessed in the same way as in childhood images. Participants felt positively about a God who seemed understanding and helping, and negatively about a God who might make unreasonable demands (Mary), required duty (Susie), obedience or was distant or exacting. Two new attitudes appear, the searching or questioning attitude (?) and the feeling that God wasn't that relevant (o). Comments relating to relevancy are italicised in column 2. Childhood feelings appear in square brackets for comparison. People and events which appear to have influenced a particular image of God are placed opposite each other in the table.

Continued on next page
### Table 8-6 (continued)

#### Adolescent Images of God

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant &amp; Feelings</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catherine [-] - o +</td>
<td>- just waiting for her to commit a mortal sin to send her to hell, no pleasure out of God, fear of sins of impurity - they were never defined, thunderous God - God wasn’t anything, I didn’t think about God very much, prayed to God who would look after people, make things right, no depth</td>
<td>- Catholic high school, nuns important negatively, boring retreats &amp; spiritual reading - understanding priest, fiancé-to-be - teachers’ college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne [+/-] - +</td>
<td>- much the same, childhood images reinforced, expected perfection, exacting judge - could be understanding, compassionate, bigger, more than church had made known</td>
<td>- Catholic high school, priest who made her feel inadequate - sister who respected her, work, new friends, role model, Vatican II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane [+/-] - +</td>
<td>- God of Catholic history, keeping an eye on, watching, waving a warning finger, demanding guilt inducing father - age fourteen - God doesn’t sit counting sins - wanting to stay connected with religion - presence of God, sometimes not clear, but always there</td>
<td>- Catholic convent high school, pious nature - debates with father &amp; uncle - two authentic teachers - enjoyed quiet &amp; solitude - medical school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Helen’s and Marie’s understandings of God stayed much the same as in childhood, although it was during late adolescence when out on her own that Helen traces the beginning of her conscious image of God as friend. Marie’s understanding of a trusted God stayed the same.

Mary did not lose her childhood images of God, but they were called into question. Interestingly, her conversion to Catholicism seemed not to affect her God images: it was like “changing sport” - the enjoyment was still there, but some of the rules changed.

Annie and Susie - as with the previous three women, but more fully - entered a time of moratorium in which they didn’t think much about God. As Annie bluntly put it, “Forget God here for a while.” Adolescent activities and interests were full-time occupations.

Clare, whose very negative childhood God images had been balanced somewhat by her devotion to Mary, found that the comfort it gave her was needed as her family shifted almost yearly in her early adolescence. In late adolescence, Clare found the CYM offered her a passionate and merciful image of God, combined with a theology of social justice and of seeing Jesus in every person - a turn-around from her childhood authoritarian God.

Miriam’s adolescence was interrupted by a traumatic move to New Zealand with the consequent loss of the security of friends and culture. In the midst of upheaval and transition, her God image stayed the same, a strong and awesome (to her meaning fearsome) God to be obeyed.

Rose’s regimented boarding environment was a plague for her emotional life, though her intellect blossomed. Her God image in that environment had little opportunity to shift from its distance and rigidity. But one teacher became a role model, and Rose learned she could question God. Her university years offered her opportunities for moratorium and for searching, at first intellectually.

Catherine’s early punishing God became more entrenched in high school, and if it were not for an understanding priest, her friends, and meeting her fiancé-to-be, her high school years might have been completely miserable. After leaving the Catholic high school which taught her fear and duty, Catherine had a period of time out from thinking about God in the busyness of teachers’ college, and noted her first positive image of God - a God who would look after people and make things right.

Anne’s mixed understanding of God stayed much the same through the end of high school, but she met both a nun who listened to her and treated her as an equal, and friends beyond Catholic circles. From them she realised God did not have to be the exacting judge, and was far more compassionate, “bigger” and “more” than she had known before.
Diane passed the pre- and early adolescent phase of school-instilled images of God as demanding father, and began to argue that God doesn’t sit around “counting sins.” The authenticity and strong-mindedness of two role models gave Diane the feeling that she wanted to stay connected to religion during this time. She notes that while the presence of God may have been unclear at times, it was always there.

Although at least in early adolescence still rooted in parental traits, the God images of most of the women during this period show evidence of change due to the influence of friends, teachers, nuns, a priest, groups like CYM, the experience of working or doing tertiary study and, for most, living away from home. The findings of Dickie (2.2.1.1) that adolescence brings God images closer to self images and away from parental images fits well here. The fact that many young women struggled with esteem issues may also be reflected in their ‘moratorium’ ambivalence about God during this time. Another reason for the ‘moratorium’ may be that while women did not remember thinking about God during this time, they were actually meeting God in a multitude of new places. They did not recognise God because God was in many cases very unlike the previous God they had known.

God images can shift from their parental-influenced basis when those prevailing images interact with images employed by other significant people (Robbins) and when the alternate understandings both appeal intellectually and are experienced as true (McDargh). Among the women whose negative adolescent images appear to be in flux are Clare, Rose, Catherine, Anne and Diane. Each met people who introduced them to more appealing God images either explicitly or in their accepting and caring qualities. Diane’s growing maturity enabled her to reject taught negative images in favour of her caught and intuited images. Some of the seeds planted in adolescence by these people and experiences will lie dormant for a while, others will sprout or continue to grow and bear fruit in early adulthood.

339 See 2.2.1.3.
340 Janssen’s findings (2.2.1.1) that common ‘activities’ for God in adolescence are wielding of power and “ethics, help and support” are reflected in both the childhood and adolescent God imagery of the women in this study.
8.3 Images of God in Early Adulthood

In this stage of life, all the women in the study married and began to have children. Those who had gone to university began work; others continued work or postponed work with marriage and children. Adult affiliation with church and other organisations began, and new relationships based on family connections began. Table 8-7 lists the understandings women had of God, and the aspects of their lives which influenced God image development during this time.

In early adulthood, many women moved from not finding God relevant to God becoming an important part of their lives. Reflection on and questioning of God increased from adolescent years due to personal circumstances and encouragement in the more open church environment following Vatican II.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant &amp; Feelings &amp;</th>
<th>Images of God</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen [+, +o] +</td>
<td>- more important to give children opportunity to know - different from church ritual - in people</td>
<td>- children - mother - mother a friend and haven when children young, close friends, parish priests kind and always there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie [+, +o] +</td>
<td>- in caring of community (God and faith differentiated from church changes and parish life)</td>
<td>- children, close friends, neighbour groups prayed rosary and supported one another, community service organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary [+ , ?o] +</td>
<td>- love in world, there wherever love is, in people (not church as institution), in action of people there for her, can ask for help, enveloped her as love of family and friends</td>
<td>- births of children sacramental, children gave her purpose, Vatican II, parish groups, social justice, priest, nun, friends, soulmate, university, work, colleagues, cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie [+ , o] +</td>
<td>- as grandmother taught - loving, no: a lot of thought</td>
<td>- move to New Zealand, welcoming Catholic community, came into Catholic church to participate with husband and children (even though Catholic hierarchy=male domination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie [+ , o] - , o +</td>
<td>- hovering in background, to be asked for help, didn't figure largely - physical audible presence, peace, comfort, personal mentor, all-encompassing ever-present presence - related to self acceptance</td>
<td>- found unconditional acceptance in husband, yet still doubts, challenged each other's boundaries - husband's accident in midst of two babies, terrible tiredness, aftermath of accident, working in garden, time of realisation, getting back to nature - women's prayer group, mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare [- , +] - d , +</td>
<td>- seen from a child's point of view - Jesus of social justice and upholding women, in feminine images, can make decisions for her</td>
<td>- four children, father's death, husband's work load, depression, said rosary - charismatic movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam [-] -</td>
<td>- not changed significantly, still far away and untouchable, if you abided by commandments, said prayers and attended church, everything should be all right - not a loving God - reinforce-ment of childhood images, questioned existence, threw God out window</td>
<td>- husband and in-laws, four children, shifting house almost yearly, few friends, baptism in Catholic church (richness of liturgy, rosary) - marriage ended</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on next page
### Table 8-7 (continued)

Images of God in Early Adulthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant &amp; Feelings</th>
<th>Images of God</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Rose**               | - started to expand, God can be a lot more, images opened  
                        | - "there", a parent, to be talked to, searched, questioned, still him, wider than church | - Vatican II, exploring, talking to people, employer treated her as equal, marriage relationship equal, mutual  
                        |                                     | - loss of two babies |
| [-, -o?]               |              |            |
| +?                     |              |            |
| **Catherine**          | - changing with learning about God’s family and questioning of sacrificial theology and church | - four children, childcare centres, discussion groups, children’s sacramental programmes, post-Vatican priests encouraging openness and questioning |
| [-, -+o]               |              |            |
| +?                     |              |            |
| **Anne**               | - to be questioned, searched for  
                        | - experienced in wider community (in and outside of church) richer than on own or in tight group  
                        | - about community and being universal, inspires responsibility beyond individual God relationship | - nun, CCD, Vatican II changes, post-natal depression, knitting, thinking  
                        |                                     | - NCRS, parish community, women’s peace movement changed world view  
                        |                                     | - Catholic woman, peace & justice role model |
| [-+, +]                |              |            |
| ?                      |              |            |
| +                      |              |            |
| **Diane**              | - in comfort of dark church  
                        | - not a strong presence  
                        | - underlying presence in people of faith  
                        | - can be trusted, in suffering which couldn’t be alleviated, in helplessness of having no control, presence in Muslim country  
                        | - can be raged at, absent and present in grief  
                        | - to be thought about in the corners  
                        | - opening of ideas, became clear, one to whom all people were equally beloved | - relationship break-up  
                        |                                     | - medical school  
                        |                                     | - made Jewish friends  
                        |                                     | - hospital in war-ravaged third world, suffering, beauty, Muslim respect for treatment of sick and mentally ill  
                        |                                     | - mother’s death and absense, intuition of distress of land and anguish of people  
                        |                                     | - birth of three children  
                        |                                     | - developing world; missionary sisters and priest friends; discussions on Vatican II, theology, Jung; beauty and suffering in people and land |
| [-+, +]                |              |            |
| +                      |              |            |
| ?                      |              |            |
For some of the women, especially those who had seen God as at least partially positive and loving in earlier stages of life (Helen, Marie, Mary, Annie, Anne, Diane), God is now understood as present in their expanding worlds of family, friends and wider community.

Helen, Marie and Mary found the love and caring of God in their children and in supportive friends. For Helen, God was in people; for Marie, God was in the caring of community. Mary's understanding of God was enriched by the births of her children and further strengthened by the way people enveloped her in love during her struggle with cancer.

Annie's life was very full bringing up children, and even her decision to become Catholic did not prompt further thought about God beyond the loving God of her grandmother.

Anne and Diane were both bringing up children; experiencing suffering such as Anne's depression and Diane's mother's death; making friends; and entering communities which exposed them to issues of church - and suffering, injustice and violence in the wider world. Both reflected and found the beginnings of what would develop into their major images of God in later years. For Anne, God continued to be in the wider community and was about more than just an individual relationship.

Diane discovered God's presence in vulnerability and suffering, the beauty of landscape, and cultural richness, all of which she encountered in her work. She continued to find God in solitude and dark places. Despite venting her grief and rage, she trusted in God's presence and came to know a God who loved all people equally.

For some of those who were still struggling with negative images in adolescence (Susie, Clare, Rose, Catherine), God images now open, expand and change. For Susie, some of her questioning quieted after a physical experience of God's comfort and peace. She continued to be nurtured by God through her love of nature and by a women's prayer group and its wise facilitator.

Clare felt she still had her childhood God images, and was dissatisfied with them both for herself and for her young family. For her the charismatic movement was partially a learning and growing experience for her faith, and brought her new though not fully internalised ideas of God as feminine and the God of justice Jesus points toward - but at the same time it contributed to her inability to make decisions for herself.

Rose found the post-Vatican II years ones of exploring new images of God and church. Her experience of equality and mutuality in relationships with employers and husband helped free her from earlier negative images of God. By the time her two babies
died, she was able to say that God was there for her and was parent, although she searched for sense in the tragedies. That experience, along with living several months overseas, convinced her that God was wider than church, and she would go on searching.

Catherine found that God began to change for her when she was preparing her own children for the sacraments. Her discussion and reading, combined with the openness following Vatican II, made it acceptable to question what she had learned as a child.

Only for Miriam, for whom life circumstances were lacking in some forms of security and love, was God still removed and unloving. The frequent absences of her husband, the constant moving from place to place with the children, and finally the break-up of her marriage were not conducive to finding God’s love in her life.

Among the seven women who had all or some negative childhood images of God, Anne and Diane now saw confirmed their adolescent direction of discovering new images by reflection on their interactions with the many other people they encountered. Susie, Clare, Rose and Catherine also began - through their experience of God directly and/or through mentors, friends, children, groups and communities - to feel and reflect on new more life-giving images of God. In addition to people, life events also intervened in some women’s lives to spark reflection and changes. Among them were Vatican II, the charismatic movement, jobs, overseas stays, marriage breakdown, illnesses, accidents and experiencing the suffering of others.

The role of experiential and intellectual learning in the development of their God images is in line with the findings of John McDargh, who posits both kinds of learning as necessary for God image change.342 The shaping and reshaping of childhood images in response to new interactions and experience follows the reasoning of Martha Robbins.343 The movement in the direction of their images toward positive ones as the women mature is in line with the findings of Todd Hall and Beth Brokow, who correlated psychological maturity positively with benevolent God images, and negatively with irrelevancy and wrathfulness.344

342 See 2.2.1.3.

343 See 2.2.1.3

344 See 2.2.1.3. Hall and Brokow’s God attributes of benevolence, irrelevancy and wrathfulness were not well-defined, but on the surface, these seem equivalent to some of the traits or groups of traits attributed to God by the women in this study. Benevolence is assumed to include basic traits like the love and caring which are constitutive of positive God images in this study (see, for example, Table 8-2). Irrelevancy would be comparable to what this research called a ‘moratorium’ - a time in which God seemed irrelevant (see 8.2). Wrathfulness may be similar to the authoritarian traits attributed to God, particularly in childhood, but extending into adolescence. If these comparisons are valid, then the direction of many of the women’s God images, moving from wrathfulness and irrelevancy to benevolence as women mature, is what would be expected based on Hall and Brokow’s
Miriam alone did not yet have the experiential or intellectual meeting with a kinder, more trustworthy God to challenge her distant and judging images.

In early adulthood, more of the women also begin to differentiate between images of God and church. In childhood, images of God and associations with ritual and cult such as the Mass, Mary, rosary, saints, etc. were merged together. In adolescence, some women (Susie, Catherine) mentioned church affiliation as a duty and others (Helen, Anne, Diane) commented that their belief or practice was different in some way to that of the institutional church. But by early adulthood, ten of the women (including Susie - who had already considered church differently in adolescence, but excepting Miriam) had in some way made a distinction between the values to which their images of God pointed and the way they experienced church. There were questionings of teaching and structures; new ideas and visioning; and sometimes a clear sense that God and faith were different from and not always found in church hierarchy or parish life. Many comments about church were in the same breath as mentions of Vatican II and hopes or dislike of change. The way in which understandings of God and of church continue to diverge becomes even more remarkable in middle adulthood, and this issue is discussed more fully in 9.7.

While there are similarities among women's God images and among the influences which form the images, each woman's path to understanding God is unique. While childhood images were formed largely by parents, with some input from church and school, and adolescent images began to be influenced by friends and new experiences away from home, early adult images add yet further strands to the weaving: husband, children, friends, church and community groups, work, overseas stays, illnesses, accidents, deaths, Vatican II, reflection on and experience of issues of justice and peace in the world.

8.4 Images of God in Middle Adulthood

In middle adulthood, as many women's experiences continue to expand in depth and breadth, their God images become more well developed and/or seemingly boundless in number and imagination. The women and their images of God are presented in four tables, grouped according to the ways in which their God images have developed to this point in time.

findings. (The meaning of other Hall and Brokow attributes were even less evident, so are not discussed in relation to these findings.)
8.4.1 God Has Always Been Love/Friend

Table 8-8 presents God images of women for whom God has always been seen in a positive light, and predominantly as love or friend throughout their lives.

Table 8-8
Middle Adulthood God Images: Helen, Marie, Mary and Annie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>God Images345</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>- friend, always there, can talk to, long-term knowledge of her, comfort, knows what she's going through, won't talk you down - protects, helps, strong, is everywhere, power to help, strengthen or support, often through people - in stillness and letting go - never changes, allows me to change - doesn't hold me back - God neither and both male and female, encompassing sexuality of both, Lord - can experience in nature, plants, flowers, animals, scenic beauty, paddock; in liturgy</td>
<td>- mother as best friend, death of mother, friendship with her children, colleague at school and others - mother, traditional teaching, scripture, e.g., “The Lord is my Shepherd” - experience of prayer of others while grieving mother's death - traditional teaching, experience of change and growth, husband, children - home environment, courses, CFLE, childhood - nature, children; CFLE liturgies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>- carer, watches over, helper, involved with her family's lives - always there, friend, can talk to and share things with, can trust - connected with Mass, sacraments, children's religious education and personal prayer - love - father as part of the trinity, God as son of Mary</td>
<td>- experience since childhood - experience since childhood - traditional teaching, experience since childhood - experience of family - traditional teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>- love; centre of ever-widening circle of love; love expressed; love of others; a comfortable presence - presence on sacramental occasions and in symbols - God presence not being, androgynous (not masculine) personage - Lord (title with dignity, not childlike, like loving Jesus not God of church authority), caring father</td>
<td>- love and sharing of her parents; having children; involvement with church; experience of love of others; - childbirth, marriage, death, Eucharist, being together with people, in music, beauty of nature, cross, candles - exposure to inclusive language, reflection - reflection on childhood images, experience of church, own father</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

345 Principal descriptive words in the images are italicised. Primary images (those which are patterns, recurrent, or considered significant by the women) are in bold italics. Some 'images', especially secondary ones, are more attributes or associations. Gender is mentioned here if it was specifically part of a God description: a full discussion of gender in the women's images is found in 9.1.
Table 8-8 (continued)

Middle Adulthood God Images: Helen, Marie, Mary and Annie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>- love, in people (including self), centre of every person - thus universal, encompassing every person, creating mysterious, arrogant yet humble spiritual link between all people, this revelation more intensely personal than meeting God in prayer. - well of love within, the water and moisture plants need to blossom and grow; without this water/ability to love, people dry and shrivel; one who nourishes and nurtures world through each person's ability to love - to go out to each other in service</td>
<td>- for both aspects of image: grandmother, reinforced by family, friends, mentor; marriage; births and deaths; goodness and wonderfulness of people, bible study and reflection in NCRS and other courses, reading, feminism, work environment, CFLE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That Helen's mother was a major influence on her God images is seen in Helen's primary images of God as friend and helper, as well as her nascent images of God in stillness and letting go, which originated in the wake of her mother's death.

Marie's primary images are very similar to Helen's, but are based on her early childhood experience of God. Her secondary images come mostly from traditional Catholic teaching.

Mary and Annie both understand God primarily as love, an image strongly influenced by their family experiences. Annie's image has two aspects: love which creates an intimate link between all people, and the God-within whose nurture and love enables each person to serve others.

Each woman has had positive God images since childhood, and the traumas each has suffered, including deaths, childhood misery, cancer and family worry and deaths, have only reinforced - and helped develop - their original understandings. Helen and Mary developed new secondary God images with exposure to new ideas and life experience, and Annie has incorporated new ideas into the images she was already working with. Mary seems at a resting point with her images at this point in time, while Marie says she would like to explore both God and herself more. Annie's image of God as love with several aspects to it seems ready to explode like fireworks into a multitude of related images. Helen, with her understanding of God as allowing her to change, is on the cusp of such changes - which may challenge her understanding of an unchanging God.
8.4.2 God Images in Restless Transition

Susie and Clare’s middle adulthood images (Table 8-9) are more numerous and varied than those described by the women in section 8.4.1, are not rooted in positive childhood images, and are still in considerable flux.

Table 8-9
Middle Adulthood God Images: Susie and Clare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>- all encompassing comforting presence cloaking her, ever-present, security, rock hard - in people - friend, walks beside you, tell God anything - someone [judge, or parent of an adolescent] with whom Susie can argue, bargain with about fairness and reasonableness, calls her to order, sometimes on good terms, sometimes he doesn’t listen, no response, no action, gone out for day, not at her beck and call, all-doing, unconditional love accompanied paradoxically by doubts about trust - no gender - bright light, - has wisdom</td>
<td>- experience of God in early adulthood and wonderful people who helped in hard times, time alone - friends there when needed - women friends and mother, children growing and asking questions, husband - husband’s accident; newlywed relationship with husband; adolescent relationship with parents - challenging, testing, yet relying on them and looking for acceptance; Susie’s self understanding of not having to be at her children’s beck and call - reading, talking, reflection, women’s group, feminist theology - experience - tradition and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>- love, meaning of existence, force that keeps everything in order, nature ticking over, universe organised, creates beauty and perfection of nature, power of nature, in sea, rocky coastlines - body of Christ as community, people being hands and feet of Jesus - Lord Master, creator with her as parent, giving love freely, cycle of love creating children - peaceful being, Jesus in barren land and countryside of Israel, never phased by things, stillness, rock - heavenly father - feminine qualities</td>
<td>- husband and children, reflection on creation; attributes from parents in childhood - order, organisation, perfection and power - experiencing/giving support in women’s singing group, traditional teaching - (Lord Master and creator) traditional teaching about God; (parent) experience as social worker, parenting experience; loving children and letting them go - film, longing for stillness in busy life, hymn “Be Still and Know” - early teaching, Mass, father - women’s group, feminist theology. courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Susie and Clare share, with the first four women, images of God as love, friend, and in people. As well as deriving from individual experience, as in Susie’s encounter with the presence of God and Clare’s experience of being co-creator with God, Susie and Clare’s images reflect their on-going search to know God for themselves rather than the God given them in childhood. Susie’s struggle with the judge/parent calling her to order and Clare’s view of God as a force for order - reminiscent of her childhood relationship with her mother - are evidence of this. Clare’s image of God as a peaceful being may be, as Clare says, based on a peaceful Jesus, but is also an example of an image of God, as Ana-Marie Rizzuto\textsuperscript{346} theorised, contributed by Clare’s own unfulfilled longings. Susie came through a major trauma with a new God image - all-encompassing presence. Clare’s experience of a big family and traditional husband involved more everyday stresses, but they nonetheless formed her understanding of God as love and co-creator.

\subsection*{8.4.3 God of Infinite Imagery}

Table 8-10 summarises the God images of Miriam and Rose - seemingly endless and all positive. Although they may each still argue with God, there is less uncertainty in who they are and who God is for them, than with Susie and Clare. Their images are rooted primarily in their experience of life and people since childhood, although some of Rose’s images have elements that are in opposition to those of her childhood, and nature imagery has early roots for both.

Miriam’s images have largely formed in the middle adult years of her life, since before that she retained mostly the negative God images of her childhood. Her major life turning point was a personal encounter with a loving God. Following that encounter she experienced community, mentoring and healing, which all manifested themselves in her new God images.

Rose’s five primary images are interconnected with one another as well as with her life experiences, which are marked by tragedies (particularly the deaths of three children) from which Rose drew new opportunities. Most of Rose’s God images contrast markedly with those of her childhood - relationship, freedom and empowerment rather than control and distance.

\textsuperscript{346} See 2.2.1.3.
## Table 8-10
Middle Adulthood God Images: Miriam and Rose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Miriam**   | - loving and accepting presence, living being, personal God (no longer awesome, way up there, can’t be reached)  
- heals, loves, cares  
- in people, family of God  
- to be trusted, brings peace and freedom  
- creation, like God as sea, giving and containing life, soothing, nourishing, refreshing, destructive, powerful  
- co-creators in God’s image, participants, partners, God within us to ‘get on with it’  
- light for guidance, sense of identity, shows way, Christ - I am, light of world  
- calling women made in God’s image to walk along with Jesus  
- being, power, pal, trusting friend, identity, bigger than one thing like father, spirit, trinity | - marriage breakdown, giving up on God, ‘St Paul’ experience on retreat, solitude, religious sisters  
- healed physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, charismatically  
- movement, children, son’s accident, son’s death  
- families, religious sisters supported her, children, son’s accident, son’s death  
- letting go of anxieties and judgement, charismatic movement, children  
- book, love of nature |
| **Rose**     | - mostly feminine (some masculine) images rather than sexless ‘he’  
- creator of opportunity (not string-puller) with her on journey, gives opportunities to respond to situations and people, possibilities arise out of awful situations, alternative routes, no shut doors, no stopwatch  
- birthgiver to new wondrous ideas, people, situations; a feminine image; empowering, allowing people control over their lives, giving them opportunities while labouring for them  
- painter of sunsets, grandiose, beyond human; in deep blue lake, still sea, raging sea, snow on hills  
- nurturer, helps people to grow, transforms them into God’s image, empowers (opposite of string pulling), nurtures people to freedom  
- God of being beside, in communication, friend, understands  
- paradox, changing, not a person, not limited by people, yet in relationships and nature, there and here, in pain and joy  
- sense of humour | - reading, theological study, reflection, experience of being able to affect things  
- experience of increasing self identity, scripture (John)  
- scripture (Genesis 2; John - vine and branches, anointing by Mary, woman at the well), feminist theology, own experience of purpose, justice issues  
- experience of God changing her life, traditional teaching  
- reading, CFLE, retreats on sexuality, alternative liturgies, work with pregnant women, seeing self as God’s image  
- life experience, seeing possibilities in all things, being there for people, losses, waiting  
- experience of God, self-giving life, seven pregnancies, four children, knowing child controls the birth process while mother waits and labours, joy and sorrow, work with pregnant women  
- sunsets, walking in the hills, nature  
- being mother, enabling children to grow, Isaiah, Psalms, childhood learning that freedom and empowerment preferred over control, friends, time with pregnant women  
- deep relationships, in contrast to distant early ones  
- reflection on life and how God works  
- lost voice, could only listen |
Miriam and Rose have both sustained deep losses in their lives, yet out of those have come opportunities and love. Both have transformed the negative God they were given in childhood, and have reshaped their images from their own meetings with God in people, situations and all creation.

8.4.4 When Once Clear Images Fade

Catherine, Anne and Diane have many and diverse images of God, as had Catherine and Rose, but they also have a sense of God as hidden, mystery or unclear (Table 8-11).

Somewhat like Miriam, much grief and turmoil preceded Catherine's experience, for the first time, of a real feeling that God cared for her, and yet all of her life experience seemed to contribute to this understanding. Following this realisation, Catherine's continual reflection and on-going experience led to a feast of God images - as well as the lack of a clear image: God as mystery, haze, bigger than she can grasp.

Anne's middle adulthood brought a proliferation of amazing God images, some carried over from early adulthood. Her work with justice issues and disillusionment with church have brought her to a desert place in which God is now hazy and unclear, yet is still leading her to something beyond.

During the earlier years of Diane's middle adulthood, her images were exquisitely deep, broad and clear - the result of a unique blend of cultural and life experience, intuition and imagination. Her clear understanding from the time of her childhood of God in darkness sets her apart from the usual association of God with light, suggesting a kinship with mystics like John of the Cross and with traditions in the Hebrew bible. The very images of God in darkness and later in mystery seem to suggest movement toward the unknown. Now there are "no more nice clear images," but traces of God in a great many things.

Catherine, Anne and Diane have weathered immense struggles and losses in life - with teachings, practices, or actions of the church or people in it; and inequity, injustice or loss in their personal or professional lives. Their varied experiences all uniquely shape their God images from the raw materials provided by nature, human goodness and growth,

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principles, reflection, experience of all sorts, and mystery. At the time of the interviews, each had come to a point at which God was or was beginning to be unfathomable - too mysterious to try to name much further. While up to a point in middle adulthood, each of them had searched out and named God, now more often God was a mystery, unclear, yet leaving traces in everything. Each had entered or was about to enter a time of change at their last interviews: Catherine had had a series of major changes in life; Anne was in the midst of a period of uncertainty; and Diane intuited change approaching.
Table 8-11
Middle Adulthood God Images: Catherine, Anne and Diane

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>First Block of Time - hard to remember who God was in midst of questioning life and existence</td>
<td>- grief and turmoil: coping with father's death, family mental illness, adolescent children's questions, husband's parents' difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second Block of Time - one who had an individual love for her, cared, gave her joy and delight, was mercy, love and forgiveness, could be trusted</td>
<td>- all above plus retreat, 'Life in the Spirit' faith and spirituality courses, disturbed charismatic, work with refugees and disabled, wise generous older friends, realisation she was carrying childhood hurts and low self image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third Block of Time - mystery (self and relationship with others also part mystery)</td>
<td>- selflessness, self-reflection, complexities of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- reflected in creation, every person, greatness, order, bigger than we can understand, gives her confidence to cope, expects God to work in unexpected and mysterious ways</td>
<td>- experience of knowing God loved her personally, realising husband's love was a reflection of God's love, tradition experienced and reflected upon, Julian of Norwich (&quot;All will be well&quot;), nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- within (in better moments), little hazes are there that I can't see through: &quot;As the mist clears from the hills, let all haze clear from my soul&quot;</td>
<td>- reflection on idea that God is in all creation, self-confidence, introspection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- solid rock and the hollow in the rock where you take shelter</td>
<td>- husband her rock, nature, scripture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- friend, accepting, power to listen and help, unconditional love</td>
<td>- friends and soulmates, love of husband, disabled child at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- light, truth (very much), love, all knowing, all powerful, Lord</td>
<td>- tradition experienced and reflected upon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- God is God, allowing God to be God</td>
<td>- coping with complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- the one I weep to, putting tissues in a bundle, handing them over and saying &quot;you deal with it&quot;</td>
<td>- struggling with life's difficult issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- at the clothesline</td>
<td>- everyday experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- accepting, including (unlike church)</td>
<td>- gay family member and recent revelations on history of Humanae Vitae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>- justice, strong wonderful scary power, spirit of God in world, present in all who work for justice, liberation</td>
<td>- 1981 Springbok tour, justice issues, role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- positive energy force, all encompassing and always there, radiating love, warmth, goodness</td>
<td>- Catholic woman friend and peace- worker, gatherings of women as sources of energy making difference in world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- creator, on-going creation, growth, renewal, creating all the time, continual newness, fresh, exciting, chance to change patterns, in each of us</td>
<td>- reflection on own journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- eternal giver, challenging, calling forth, walking with</td>
<td>- reflection on childhood images in light of experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on next page
Table 8-11 (continued)
Middle Adulthood God Images: Catherine, Anne and Diane

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne (continued)</td>
<td>- gracious, dignity, integrity, sincerity, like calling God by first name, not almighty</td>
<td>- change in self image (doesn't have to prove anything to be accepted, can call God gracious without having sense of being impudent, doesn't have to call God almighty to placate God - has mutual relationship), relationships with women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>She Who Is</em>, taken over other images, linking up of creation, life, sense of belonging</td>
<td>- Elizabeth Johnson's book, feminism, theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>nurturer</em></td>
<td>- relationships with women as sources of strength, nurturing, faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>enabling</em>, God provides 'power to'-</td>
<td>- Christian feminism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>wonder of presence, awe of creation</em>, beauty within it and people</td>
<td>- reflection on nature and people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>compassionate friend</em>; enables endurance of pain, suffering; where I get my hope from; community; acceptance; celebration</td>
<td>- experience of relationships, suffering, community, death of mentor, justice issues, own self image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>hazy, unclear</em>, but can trust God is leading her somewhere</td>
<td>- disillusionment with church; unsure where she is on journey; in desert-like place, not unpleasant, no markers, signposts, pointers; unsure about rest of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>- <em>in darkness, mystery</em>, and in difficult times; a <em>vulnerable God</em> in the vulnerability of people, in those struggling with suffering, in fidelity of not running away from suffering, one who suffers with us, not a God who is outside tinkering in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>in the process of unfolding</em> and creating (like people), chaos and order coexisting (not God in a box, world static and secure)</td>
<td>- suffering of others and herself - physical or emotional pain from illness, death or other circumstances; reflection, writing, spiritual direction, talking with good friends, work here and overseas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>light</em> - fingers of dawn over the sea, harbour, hills; light that brings clarity and clouds that limit view</td>
<td>- Psalm 139, Wisdom 7, Syrophoenician woman; world events; reflection on unfolding of natural world and people, on dying and being born, on church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>challenge</em>, storm that stirs up gravel from the deep</td>
<td>- love of beauty of nature in many places in the world, solitude, reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- in anything which speaks of <em>integrity</em>, wholeness, growth, compassion, tenderness, nurturer, enabler, one who calls us to growth</td>
<td>- adversity and her responses, nature, reflection, writing, mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <em>no more nice clear images of God</em>, traces of God in many things</td>
<td>- exposure to many cultures, recognising the presence of God in each one, mentor, experience, reflection, children, suffering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having followed the women's God image development stage by stage and explored the influences on their images at each stage, it is now appropriate to look at the whole pattern of development for each of the women from childhood to middle adulthood.
8.5 Patterns of God Image Development from Childhood through Middle Adulthood

8.5.1 Individual Development Patterns

Figures 8-2 through 8-12 illustrate the content and development of God images and their major influences for each woman from childhood through the point in middle adulthood at which she was interviewed.

Figure 8-2 shows clearly that several strands of images flow throughout Helen's life. The God who was understanding in childhood and early adolescence can be linked to the friend-to-talk-to in late adolescence, to the God-in-the-people including her friends and mother around her in early adulthood, to the developed friend image of middle adulthood. The God who could help is in evidence in childhood, adolescence and middle adulthood. God's importance is mentioned in both childhood and early adulthood. God as a man is still 'Lord' in prayer, but partially transformed on an intellectual level by middle adulthood into a gender neutral God. Although Helen mentions a number of God images, it is still friend and helper from childhood which are her primary images in middle adulthood. Although Helen speaks of her two primary images in adolescence, there is also the 'moratorium' God who is present in most of the women's adolescent images. Two images of God connected with church are noted, and these along with the other women's images of God and church, will be discussed in 9.7. The major influence of Helen's mother on her God images is evident in Helen's understanding of God as important, as friend, and as helper in different stages of life. Traditional teaching was another influence on childhood images; but by middle adulthood most taught images fell away, and new images arose, influenced by nature, the Bible, deaths, prayer, CFLE and life experience in general.

Marie's God images (Figure 8-3) have remained remarkably stable since childhood, and indeed, Marie herself noted that she didn't think they had changed. Both her primary images of God have been reinforced throughout her life by different people and groups, as

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348 Figure 8-1 is the key for Figures 8-2 - 8-12. Influences informing each image are drawn from life stories (and the tables in 8.1 - 8.4), while the connections between images in various life stages (represented by coloured lines) are the way the researcher understands the images developing.

349 Transformation of early images into later ones is considered to have taken place when there are two images in different stages of life which are related in content but usually opposite in affect or gender (or sometimes a doctrinal correction). Sometimes God as man becomes feminine or gender neutral; sometimes a controlling God in childhood becomes an enabling God in adulthood.

350 A primary image is one which at middle adulthood is well or very well developed and/or has been mentioned repeatedly in the participant's life story (primary images are enclosed in coloured ovals on the figures). A secondary image is one which is undeveloped and mentioned only once.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>Alternative liturgies</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>Groups, organisations</th>
<th>Pr</th>
<th>Prayer</th>
<th>Wv</th>
<th>Volunteer Work</th>
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<tr>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Ts</td>
<td>Theological study</td>
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<tr>
<td>En</td>
<td>Encounter with God</td>
<td>Nc</td>
<td>NCRS</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>University, teacher’s college, tertiary study</td>
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<td>P</td>
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<td>Friends</td>
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<td>Priest(s) or minister(s)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>CYM</td>
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**Figure 8-1**

Key for Figures 8-2 to 8-12
Figure 8-2
Sources and Development of Helen's God Imagery
**Figure 8-3**

Sources and Development of Marie’s God Imagery
well as sustained by experience in midlife. Her taught images remain similar, although her childhood understanding of Mary, which was seemingly as a divine figure typical in the Catholic women in this study, has been replaced by an understanding of Mary as Mother of God. Her need for a parent substitute disappeared in adolescence. Like Helen, Marie is reaching the time when her children are leaving home, and is faced with new decisions on the direction of her life. Of all the women interviewed, Marie has fewer influences on her God images outside her job, family and church. She also likely had the most difficult childhood situation to come to terms with.

Mary’s image of God as love has not changed in essence since childhood (Figure 8-4), but in adulthood the image developed due to the tremendous number of people and life events which affected Mary: her children, Vatican II, belonging to many groups, justice issues, priests, nuns, friends, university, work and her major illness. A secondary area of imagery, though not developed into discrete images, is evident from Mary’s discussion of symbols and ‘sacramental occasions’ which speak to her of God. This natural inclination to view life symbolically was perhaps given a boost by her conversion to Catholicism, and may be a nurturing place for new God images in the future. Mary’s childhood understanding of God as ‘male personage’ has been largely replaced by an androgynous image, but is still evident in her references to God as caring father and ‘Lord,’ the latter related to her early God image of a Jesus-type figure.

Figure 8-5 is straightforward and concise, as is Annie’s description of who God is for her. Like Mary, she has had one primary God image throughout life, and everything in her childhood supported that image. Unlike Mary, however, Annie’s image of God as love did not begin to grow and blossom until middle adulthood, when Annie returned to tertiary study and teaching. In the workplace she found herself in an environment which provided role models, friends and support for her newly discovered search for God through courses and reading. Annie’s understanding of love as an internal well, God in others, and love through service seem nearly ready to develop into related but more discrete images of their own.

Susie’s God images (Figure 8-6) begin with many typical taught God images imbibed from Bible stories, church murals and statues which drop away after childhood, and her idea of God as male is mostly transformed over time into a gender-neutral image. Susie’s major God images all have their roots in childhood. God as all encompassing presence begins as unconditional love, and image which was largely ignored - as all her images were - in adolescence, but establishes itself firmly at the time of her encounter with God following her husband’s accident in early adulthood. Those experiences and the image also led to other
Figure 8-4
Sources and Development of Mary’s God Imagery
Figure 8-5

Sources and Development of Annie's God Imagery
Figure 8-6
Sources and Development of Susie's God Imagery
middle adulthood images of friend, God in people, and a secondary image of God having wisdom. Susie also still carries a mixed image of God as the judge/parent she bargains with, who alternately has her trust and is inaccessible for days on end. This image seems to be a combination of the childhood images of love, fearful/powerful, and guilt-inducing.

Clare's childhood images (Figure 8-7) are largely based on the traits of her parents she perceived in her parents, plus some images taught from religious sources. Mary was a major divine figure for her, offering her comfort into late adolescence, at which time Clare was introduced for the first time to positive personal images of God through CYM. In early adulthood, with stresses of children, her father's death, her husband's job, and her own depression, she returned to her childhood images. For Clare, the charismatic movement was the first in a series of image-expanding experiences: she was introduced to feminine images of God and to Jesus' life from a justice perspective. She was also re-introduced to a God who would make decisions for her, reminiscent of God and parents in childhood. This God seems still to be present in Clare's midlife images of father, Lord and master, while the Jesus of justice seem to be left hanging as other images have come to the fore.

In middle adulthood, Clare's experience of raising seven children, her involvement with singing/support group, numerous courses, and reflection have led her to four primary and two secondary images for God. Two of the primary ones and both secondary ones are rooted in her childhood, though some have been transformed. Her understanding of God as the meaning of her life and all existence is one of love, but it has partially transformed overtones of the order and authority images of her childhood. The image of creator/parent, while incubating in reflection on her experience as a mother, appears to have its roots in her taught image of God as creator and her childhood understanding that God was represented in her parents. She also understands God as having feminine qualities, partially transforming her former male image, though these nascent ideas nurtured by her involvement in women's groups and feminist theology is undeveloped. Two other primary images are peaceful being and body of Christ. The first, as noted in the previous section and by Clare herself in her life story, is a yet unrealised attribute in her own life; the second is both a taught image of the relationship between God/Christ and community as well as one she has internalised from her experience of being supported by different groups in her life.

Miriam's God images (Figure 8-8) for most of her life were not appealing ones. God was unapproachable, a judge to be obeyed, and possibly non-loving or non-existent. For Miriam, father appeared to be more a taught image than based on her own father's attributes. It was not until Miriam was in her mid-thirties and after all but giving up on
Sources and Development of Clare’s God Images

Figure 8-7

Childhood
- Order
  - M
- Removed
  - M
- Imprisoning
  - M
- Authority
  - M,F
- Represented in parents
  - M,F
- Creator
  - Ms,T,Mu
- Authoritarian
  - F
- Through Mary
  - T,Ro
- Old man
  - Ca

Adolescence
- Childhood God
  - C,F-L,O,H-W,De, Ro
- CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT
- CYM

Early Adulthood
- Makes decisions
  - Cm

Middle Adulthood
- Meaning of existence, love, force that keeps nature in order
- R,E,N,H,C,M,F
- WOMEN'S GROUPS
- Peaceful being
  - Fi,Lg,Mu
- Creator/parent
  - T,W,Em,C,B
- Community - body of Christ
  - E,Gw,T
- Feminine qualities
  - Gw,Fm,Cs
- Heavenly father
  - T,Ms,F

God feminine
- Cm

Jesus of justice
- Cm

Merciful, just
- Y
Figure 8-8
Sources and Development of Miriam's God Imagery
God when her marriage ended, that she had an experience of God from which she has
never looked back. Reflecting on many experiences, people and involvements since then,
Miriam named seven primary God images and a number of secondary ones, some included
in a brief comment linked with a transformed father image. Her most important image is
God as a loving personal being, the God revealed to her in her encounter, which can also be
seen as a transformation of her negative childhood images. In addition, Miriam images God
through experience as a God who heals and can be trusted; through her theological study as
co-creator and one who calls women; through her love of nature as God in creation,
particularly the sea; and in friends as God-in-people.

Rose, like Clare, grew up with a predominantly negative image of God based on
parental traits - although many of her childhood images were taught, including her 'string­
pulling' God whom she had to hound as a teenager for response to her prayers (Figure 8-9).
Likewise, her parental-trait influenced images were reinforced in adolescence by her
boarding school environment. Not all the nuns reinforced those images, however; one in
particular taught her to question.

In early adulthood Rose was still searching, but with more urgency. Through the loss
of two babies and the absence of church support she was able somehow to experience God as
there, as someone to talk to, and as a parent - an image group that transformed the distance
she felt from God earlier and coalesced into her middle adulthood image of the God-of­
being-beside after the loss of yet another child, fears, and the support of close friends. In
early adulthood, her God images were expanding with Vatican II, an overseas stay, work
and other life experience (especially pregnancies and losses), but that reflection really bears
fruit in middle adulthood. Rose herself notes that three primary images - creator of
opportunity, birthgiver and nurturer - are formed from her adult experience, but are the
opposite of her childhood string puller image. Nurturer also appears to be, in part, a
transformation of the judging and distant images, as well as the fruit of Rose's experience as
a mother and her reading of the scriptures. Birthgiver also arises from Rose's experience of
being a mother, and creator of opportunity is influenced by Rose's experience (including the
loss of three children) of learning to wait and see what windows open when doors have been
shut. The painter of sunsets image arises as she has more free time in nature. In middle
adulthood, Rose's God images change to feminine and gender neutral images, and her
experience of God also includes paradox and humour.

Catherine's dominant childhood image (Figure 8-10) was a distant God of fear and
duty, and that complex mix had elements of parental traits reinforced by nuns at school and
Figure 8-9

Sources and Development of Rose’s God Imagery
Figure 8-10

Sources and Development of Catherine's God Imagery
a variety of other religious influences, including the fabled clock with its message of damnation. Aside from a brief mention of a 'feeling'-neutral creator, there is no hint of love in God until Catherine has left school in late adolescence when she remembers praying to God to look after people.

In early adulthood, with the births of children, Vatican II, meeting with groups and hearing questioning homilies, Catherine began to take on board some of what she was learning from preparing her own children for the sacraments: the significance of who God was to her if people were God’s family. Catherine struggled with this because she perceived that this family offered a far different relationship than the distance, fear and duty she had always felt before in God and in family. Her questioning continued into middle adulthood, which was full with children, reading, her father’s death and family mental illness, disturbing charismatics, work with a disabled child, responsibility for refugees, reading, reflection and many friends. On a retreat she suddenly realised that God loved and cared for her as an individual person, and also that she was worthy of being loved. In the latter part of middle adulthood, Catherine’s images are the fruit of many adult experiences including illness, involvement with a gay support group, relationships and the time to reflect on them.

The images of mystery, creation, God within, creator, and ‘God is God’ all carry strands of the mystery and unfathomability Catherine says God is for her at this most recent point in her life. God as friend and rock both share the influence of Catherine’s husband. In addition to the originally taught images like light, truth and love - now reflected on and internalised, the God to weep to and God at the clothesline are images arising from Catherine’s experience. Her reading, support for the gay community and experience of church has also led her to comment on her relationship with God as opposed to that with church, further discussed in 9.7.

Although most of Anne’s childhood God images (Figure 8-11) were affect-neutral (creator, father) or positive (eternal giver, Mary), the negative judge image weighed heavily on her until late adolescence when exposure to families of other Christian denominations taught her that God could be found outside the church and that God could be a more compassionate and bigger God than had been made known to her. When her children were young, Anne went through a time of searching and questioning caused by Vatican II, teaching CCD, and post-natal depression. This period coincides with the beginning of the transformation of her judging God image to a gracious and accepting God, and by middle adulthood to a more developed understanding of God as eternal giver. The gracious and accepting images were also influenced by her friends, the women’s peace group she was working with, and growth in her own self esteem (9.5). In early adulthood, the influences of
Figure 8-11

Sources and Development of Anne's God Imagery
the women's peace group and justice issues contributed to images of God beyond the
individual or anthropomorphic images. These influences, together with a role model,
influenced Anne's understanding of God as universal and as giving people wide
responsibilities in life; and her experience of NCRS and parish groups joined those other
influences to produce an image of God alive through community.

In middle adulthood, the community image is further developed, while the former
understanding of God as universal, derived from God as eternal giver and God as
compassionate, may be seen to contribute to the more developed eternal giver image. The
eternal giver image in turn spawned two further images - the God of justice, crystallised by
the Springbok rugby tour events, and compassionate friend, influenced by the life and death
of Anne's close friend and role model. Anne's experience of God in her role model and
working with women's groups also led Anne to image God as the positive energy which is
all encompassing and always there. Some secondary images include God as enabling and
celebration, springing most likely from Anne's experience with friends, women's groups and
feminism; and awe of creation, influenced by reflection on the wonder of nature and people.
Anne said that all these images coalesced for her into the image of She Who Is, borrowed
from her reading of and reflection on feminist theology - the God who links up all creation
and life. By the end of the interview period, Anne had entered a time of uncertainty and had
cut formal ties with the institutional church, trusting the desert as a place in which God was
leading her.

Diane's overall image of God (Figure 8-12) throughout her life is presence, imbibed
first from her mother and various family members, as well as her own inner self, and later
manifested in various images. For a short time in late childhood and early adolescence, the
taught images of God as 'demanding father - always watching' were operative, but this gave
way to her belief in a God who doesn't count sins. From nuns in adolescence she acquired
an attitude toward God and church of wanting to stay connected. In early adulthood, with
influences of medical school, overseas work, marriage, young children, the death of her
mother, friends, many moves and many cultures. God was not only a presence in Diane's
life, but a presence in suffering which can't be alleviated. In addition, from overseas
experience in different cultures, in the aftermath of Vatican II and much discussion with
missioners who were inculturating worship, God was a God who loved all equally.

By middle adulthood the latter God image contributed, with others, to an
understanding of God in a great many people and things which are about integrity,
wholeness, growth, and so on. The God in suffering was a God who suffers with us in
Sources and Development of Diane's God Imagery
darkness and in mystery. God was challenge like a storm stirring the deep, and God was in the gentle play of light on hills and sea. God was also not one who was static and unchanging but, like the creation and people made in God’s image, was dynamic and unfolding. Diane’s middle adulthood was full of involvements, not only with husband and family but with church and ecumenical groups, an organisation for pregnant women, CFLE, friends, medical practice, loss of her father and a close mentor, and more overseas experiences. All these contributed in various ways to formation of her God images. In this period, however, although Diane sees traces of God in many things, there are no more nice clear images. She has learned to make decisions and wait, and to sense when God is moving her toward change, a sense that she had at the end of the interviews.

8.5.2 Comparing Development Patterns

The women in the study have shown different patterns of God image development. The patterns are the result of the unique way in which each woman’s life experiences shape and usually change her childhood images throughout life. Information on images from Figures 8-2 to 8-12 was tabulated in Appendix H, to facilitate making the following observations, some of which are illustrated in Figure 8-13:

1) Nine of the eleven women carried forward some of their childhood images through to adulthood (middle line, Figure 8-13). The two who did not (Miriam and Rose) had a negative childhood feeling toward God. Women with negative childhood images were more likely to transform negative images into positive ones (top line, Figure 8-13): there fourteen images were transformed among four women - Clare, Miriam, Rose, Catherine - as opposed to six images transformed among the other seven women who had mixed or positive imagery. There was a clear movement over their lifetimes, among those who did not have a solely positive feeling toward God in childhood, toward a more positive understanding of God. This is understood as a move toward greater psychological and spiritual maturity by object relations psychologists. As children, four women had overall positive images of God, four reported mostly negative images, and three had

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351 There is no suggestion that one pattern is better than another. Each arises from life circumstances of individuals, although in adulthood it can be argued that individuals have more freedom to examine their imagery and make life/God image changes. There is also no assessment of possible stages in God image development: although possible, this belongs to a study which focuses on stage development.

352 See studies by Brokow and Edwards, and Hall and Brokow in 2.2.1.3.
Summary of Image Change and Development: Childhood to Middle Adulthood

(Derived from Table H-1 in Appendix H)
mixed images. By middle adulthood, ten women had what they regarded as positive images of God, while Susie, who had mixed childhood images, still had mixed images.

2) There are two major groups of images, caught and taught, which are carried forward relatively unchanged, though more developed, into adulthood (Figure 8-13, middle line). Of seventeen images carried forward, ten were caught images, derived predominately from traits of parents or other significant persons; e.g., helps, loving, understanding, fearful. Six taught images, e.g., creator, father, man, Jesus, were carried forward along with one experiential image, Marie's 'someone to talk to'. No caught images were carried forward by those women who had negative childhood understandings of God. There seems to be an imperative - whether psychological, spiritual or otherwise - to understand God in positive terms. Those who do not persevere with this imperative perhaps absent themselves from God and/or church. Of the images left behind in childhood or otherwise prior to middle adulthood (bottom line, Figure 8-13), eleven were taught, e.g., Mary, father, spirit, king, huge person, and five were caught, including removed, authoritarian, important, and father. Thus it seems more likely that taught images do not stick as well as caught images.

3) Comparing the information in Figures 8-2 to 8-12, women who have always had positive images average four and a half images each, increasing through each of the four groupings of women (as grouped in Chapters 4-7) to six and a half for those considered in transition, nine for those with many images, and ten for those who have the additional understanding of mystery in God. This should not be understood as stage development, although those in transition seem to still be evolving. Women in each group show signs of change and of relative contentment in their God images, as is natural in any kind of growth. There is nothing inherently better about having more numerous God images, but the reasons for them will be discussed further in 9.6 along with the role of life experience in God image formation.

4) By the time the seventeen childhood images carried forward from childhood became middle adulthood images (middle line, Figure 8-13), their number had increased to twenty-five. Only three of the images carried forward, all taught ones, were from the four women with negative childhood understandings of God. However, those with positive childhood God understandings had a total of nine middle adult images which stemmed from eight childhood images, of which five were caught. Those with mixed images had a total of thirteen images which branched from six childhood ones, of which five were caught. It seems that, in this group of women, positive caught images not only stick better throughout life than negative or taught images, but also spawn a proliferation
of positive images later in life. Other reasons for multiplication of images will be explored in Chapter 9. It is also clear that women with negative images in childhood carry fewer of their childhood images into adulthood.

5) Although women with negative childhood images carry fewer childhood images into adulthood, they contribute more images to the total of adulthood images than those women who had positive or mixed childhood images. The images they contribute to the total are either totally new images springing from their life experiences or images of their childhood which have been transformed. Negative caught childhood images\(^{333}\) which were transformed were changed into more positive images, while taught images usually involved a change in gender from male to gender-neutral or female, or a correction in doctrinal understanding, for example, fine tuning Mary from divine to mother of the divine. A total of twenty childhood images - fourteen from women with negative God understandings, of which nine were caught and five were taught - were transformed into a total of twenty-five middle adult images - fifteen from women with negative childhood God understandings. Thus fifteen of twenty-five of the transformed images came from the four women who had negative childhood images, while ten came from the seven women with mixed (three) or positive (four) childhood images. Those with negative childhood God imagery are thus more likely to contribute transformed images to the total middle adulthood images than the women with mixed or positive childhood understandings. They have more to transform, and have the imperative to do so. The pattern in groups of women is that the women who had lifelong positive images, the group in transition, the group with multiple images, and the women for whom God is mystery contribute an average of less than one, two, just over three, and close to four images respectively to the total of middle adulthood images which have been transformed from childhood images.

6) In addition to the fifty middle adult images already discussed - of which half were related to childhood images, and half were transformed images - there are also thirty-six new images which arise at some point by middle adulthood which had not appeared in the childhood images reported by participants. New images, eighteen and twelve middle adult images respectively, are created more by those with negative and mixed childhood images than by women with positive childhood images, who contributed six

\(^{333}\) While it may appear that only the caught images were negative and thus more caught images were transformed, it must be remembered (8.1) that many of the negative caught traits were taught as well (that is, reinforced by teaching), so contain elements of both caught and taught. They were called caught traits because
middle adult images. The latter women may not have had the same imperative to find new images, since their images were already positive. Thus while women whose childhood images were caught and positive carried them on into adulthood with some related additions (item 4 above), women with negative images contributed more images to the pool of middle adulthood images both in the form of transformed images (item 5 above), and new images drawn from post-childhood experience. There is also a pattern in the groups in the table. The first two groups (Chapters 4 and 5), consisting of women who always had positive images plus those in transition, had a total of nine new images among six women; those in the latter two groups (Chapters 6 and 7) - women who all had multiple images of God and God as mystery - contributed twenty-seven new images among five women.

Looking at the development of the women’s God images as a group over time, Figure 8-13 illustrates the movement toward further development of positive childhood images. Following the middle line, seventeen images - more caught than taught - branch into twenty-five by middle adulthood. On the top line, twenty negative childhood images are transformed into twenty-five positive ones. Seventeen images - more taught than caught, and no longer important - are dropped and thirty-six new positive images are formed by middle adulthood. The same pattern has been traced in individuals: while four women had negative and three had mixed childhood God images, ten of eleven women (excepting Susie) report only positive God images by middle adulthood.

The following chapter will further explore some of the characteristics of God images, and some of the life experiences which influence and catalyse the development, transformation or creation of God images.

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the trait modelling by significant people was in itself predictive of whether a child’s overall feeling toward God would be positive, negative or mixed.
CHAPTER 9
LINKING GOD IMAGES AND EXPERIENCE

The first two sections of Chapter 9 examine gender and power issues to identify life experiences which may reinforce or change the kinds of powerful male God images which most women learned in childhood.

Section 9.3 identifies further traditional God attributes and images which were imbibed from doctrine and liturgy by most women during their younger years to see which ones are still used by the women in this study. This section also compares the God imagery of women in this study with that used by participants in other studies and by the feminist theological literature.

Sections 9.4 - 9.7 explore suffering, self image, the people and events of life experience, and women's relationships with church as potential influences on God image formation.

9.1 Gender in God Images

Gender and power connotations were the aspects of traditional God images most criticised by theologians (2.1.3, Appendix A), and also among the aspects explored by social scientists (2.2). Gender and controlling/caring aspects of God's power have already been explored in childhood images of God (8.1): here the gender of the women's adult God images will be discussed, followed by power in the same images in 9.2.

Table 9-1 lists stated and observed adult gender attribution to God - all childhood attributions were male - and possible influences on change since childhood.

While in childhood, all gender attributions to God were male, these have undergone change over the life span to middle adulthood. At the time of the interviews, most of the women tended to think of God as having no gender or as inclusive of both genders. They preferred gender neutral language like rock, friend, love, etc., or inclusive language, which includes gender neutral images as well as he and she, mother and father, rather than

Information for the table is taken from life stories (Chapters 4-7), previous analysis in Chapter 8, and from transcript answers to questions on worship with alternative images and the importance of God language (Appendix G - Interview 2, question following question 45; Appendix G - Interview 3, question 1).
### Table 9-1
Gender in Adult God Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated God Gender, Adulthood</th>
<th>Observed God Gender, Adulthood</th>
<th>Comments on Gender of God Language and Imagery</th>
<th>Possible Influences on Adulthood God Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen gender-neutral</td>
<td>male, he, Lord</td>
<td>non-sexual imagery preferred, but feelings more important than words</td>
<td>school (where teaching), CFLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie male</td>
<td>male, son, he, father</td>
<td>prefers familiar male language</td>
<td>CFLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary gender-neutral, tending to male</td>
<td>mostly gender-neutral, part male Lord</td>
<td>language is very important; reacts negatively to non-inclusive language; but male persona still more comfortable than female persona</td>
<td>school (where teaching), CFLE, reading, friends,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie female or gender-neutral</td>
<td>gender-neutral</td>
<td>language very important; public worship shouldn’t use exclusive or dominance language; own images are feminine - God more warm, loving, present</td>
<td>school (where teaching), CFLE, NCRS, reading, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie gender-neutral</td>
<td>mostly inclusive, more male pronouns</td>
<td>tunes out exclusive language in worship, thinks ‘aaaauugh!’; personal images are female - God warmer, understanding, accepting; prays to God as female for personal worries, God as male on world issues like war.</td>
<td>women’s group, CFLE, reading, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare both</td>
<td>mostly male, he, Lord, master, father</td>
<td>conscious of language in liturgy and her own prayer; appreciates images of both genders, but uses male images</td>
<td>courses, women’s groups, CFLE, charismatic group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam inclusive</td>
<td>mostly inclusive, male pronouns</td>
<td>language very important; male language conditions; feminine images enable her to celebrate being a woman</td>
<td>study, CFLE, reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose feminine, gender-neutral</td>
<td>feminine, gender-neutral</td>
<td>language extremely important; makes deliberate choice of words for God; feminine imagery gives affirmation and valuing</td>
<td>reading, speakers, CFLE, friends, women’s groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine not issue</td>
<td>gender neutral, part male Lord</td>
<td>God more than gender; doesn’t like triumphal, king, punishing images; clumsy changes irritate, but appreciates insights of different wordings</td>
<td>CFLE, Mass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne gender neutral &amp; feminine</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>language very important - one of most difficult things about church; feminine imagery more relevant, close, intimate</td>
<td>friends, reading, women’s groups, CFLE, courses, NCRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane inclusive</td>
<td>inclusive</td>
<td>almost physical sense of pain when inadequate, limiting language in rigid framework used about God (male or oppressive power)</td>
<td>reading, women’s groups, writing, CFLE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

355 Terms in italics are words and images of specifically male gender.

356 General discussion of inclusive language issues is an influence assumed for all.
traditional male-only God language. Only Marie stated a clear preference for retaining the familiar male-only terminology, while six of the women (Annie, Susie, Miriam, Rose, Anne, Diane) felt strongly that female imagery was important. The four remaining women (Helen, Mary, Clare and Catherine) had mixed views on the gender of God language, and also themselves used more male language than the six women for whom female imagery is important. The greatest appreciation of God language that was gender-neutral, inclusive or feminine came in middle adulthood, coinciding with the wider availability of feminist theological literature as well as greater maturity and time for reflection.

While all women except Anne spontaneously stated preferences for God language gender, their use of language for God during the interviews did not always exactly match those preferences. Helen and Clare, while stating that they preferred God language which was gender-neutral or inclusive of both genders, respectively, both actually used mostly male imagery and pronouns. When questioned, they explained that even though they used masculine words and images for God, they did not think of God as a male human being, or indeed a person of any kind.\footnote{Clare, while stating she did not think of God as a person, felt differently when she described her use of ‘Lord’ in prayer: then she felt she used the term Lord because “I guess Lord just makes it a bit more personal, I’m not quite sure, rather than just saying God, more of a person somehow.” Clare did not at this point seem aware that her intellectual understanding of God differed from the more emotional understanding expressed in prayer.}

Third person references to “he” were often made by Helen, seldom by Mary, and occasionally by Susie and Miriam. All commented spontaneously when they noticed they were saying “he.” Helen rhetorically questioned what other possibility there was, and noted that “he” was a hangover from the past; Mary commented, “forgive the ‘he’”; Susie, like Helen, questioned what to use, noting that language was something “I still work on”, then she proceeded to use both male and female pronouns, as well as noting that she prayed to God as female for personal issues and God as male for global issues.\footnote{Susie’s awareness of the connection between divine gender and attributes corresponds to the work of McMinn and others (see 2.2.1.6) who found that more power was attributed to a God perceived as male, and more mercy to a God perceived as female.} Miriam caught herself twice, noting that it was interesting how automatic and conditioned the usage was. Clare used the most male imagery, including heavenly father, master and Lord, followed by Marie. Helen, Mary, Clare and Catherine all addressed their prayers to Lord, which is both a male and potentially controlling God-image.\footnote{The use of Lord will be explored further in 9.2.}

Annie, Rose, Anne and Diane used no masculine imagery or pronouns for God in their interviews. Each of them mentioned that God language was very important to them;
read feminist theology; was significantly involved in women's groups or had been working predominantly with women over a number of years. The other women who share these three characteristics are Mary, who uses mostly genderless language but some male language; and Susie, who uses slightly more male pronouns but uses feminine or gender neutral images for God. Language is also important for Miriam who has done reading and theological study, and uses mostly inclusive language. These seven women find inclusive language important in public worship, and their own images of God (except for Mary's) are inclusive or feminine. Five of those (Annie, Susie, Miriam, Rose and Anne) find that feminine imagery for God gives them value and acceptance as women, or allows God to be more present and close to them. A sixth woman, Diane, feels strongly that male imagery is simply inadequate and that female imagery is important for all, though she concedes that open (gender-neutral) imagery is a possible compromise for those in the churches for whom female imagery is a threat.

Of the other four women (Helen, Marie, Clare, and Catherine), Helen and Marie did not mention women's groups or theological reading. Clare mentioned contact with a women's church group and Catherine reads. While all were conscious of the inclusive language issue, it was not as important an issue for them as for the other seven women. Helen, for example, said that what individuals felt was more important than the actual words used; Marie preferred familiar language; Clare said she was conscious of language and appreciated inclusive images, but appeared not to have internalised these into her own God language to the same degree as others; and Catherine was concerned more for the way changes were made than the issue itself.

It appears that reading feminist theology, working or praying specifically with women's groups and working in a largely female environment - all of which may sharpen awareness of God language issues - may be conducive to (though not sole determinants of) the use of inclusive language and God imagery. This exposure to feminist theology and other women's ideas, as well as to the way other women function in prayer and work, brings to mind John McDargh's reasoning that women must be both introduced to alternative images of God, and have them validated by experience before they are internalised.

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361 See 2.2.1.3.
Women meeting together creates both the opportunity for them to appreciate the qualities of other women, and a space for questioning the traditional verbal assumption of God as male.

It also appears generally more likely for the women who have always had positive God images (three of first four women in Table 9-1) to retain some male language for God; and more likely for those in other groups (who have shifted in other areas of their God image content) to both appreciate insights of inclusive language (all of last seven in table) and to move toward feminine images (five of last seven in table). In other words, those who have been less supported by their God images from childhood may have more reason to look for new images than those women who already have positive images.

The fact that women's gender understandings of God have changed during middle adulthood may be a maturational factor in combination with greater awareness of the issue and availability of both speakers and literature on the issue.362

Adult gender images of God may also be related to esteem issues (illustrated by the women who found female God images valuing and affirming), which will be discussed in 9.5; and to the kind of power attributed to God, a subject to which we now turn.

9.2 Power in God Images

There are many kinds of power, as several women pointed out when asked what God's power meant for them. God may exercise power to create, help, heal, bring justice; God may act directly, through people or other aspects of creation; God may exercise power over creation with authority and control, or God may be seen to use power by empowering people. This section investigates a number of aspects of power in the participants' understandings of God; in particular whether women perceive God to have the controlling type of power which theologians and psychologists believe to be harmful to self image and to the ability to act for justice in the world.

Table 9-2 summarises controlling attributes in childhood and middle adulthood God images, along with any God images with accepting or empowering characteristics which appear to counter controlling power, and possible influences for any changes in the adult images.

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362 A study including younger women would assist in determining whether maturation (stage of life) is a factor.
Table 9-2

Changes in Control Attributes for God between Childhood and Adulthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood God Potential Control Attributes</th>
<th>Mid Adult God Potential Control Attributes/Titles</th>
<th>Possible Influences if Adult Changes</th>
<th>Mid Adult God Potential Counter-Control Images/Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen + none</td>
<td>+ none; Lord</td>
<td>no changes</td>
<td>God allows me to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie + none</td>
<td>+ none</td>
<td>no changes</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary + none</td>
<td>+ none; Lord, father</td>
<td>no changes</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie + none</td>
<td>+ none</td>
<td>no changes</td>
<td>nurtures world through each person's love/service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie + powerful, always watching, fearful</td>
<td>+ God calls me to order [judge/parent]</td>
<td>acceptance from husband, friends, family, women's group</td>
<td>friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare - watching, authority, demanded obedience</td>
<td>+ force that keeps things in order, universe organised; Lord, overall, master, heavenly father</td>
<td>parenting, training and work as social worker</td>
<td>parent - letting children go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam - big judge, demanded obedience</td>
<td>+ none</td>
<td>close friends and mentors, social work, univ. study</td>
<td>brings freedom, co-creator, partner, calling women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose - judging, string puller</td>
<td>+ none</td>
<td>loss of children, parenting, work with pregnant women, close friends</td>
<td>creator of opportunity, birthgiver, nurturer (all empowering images)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine - fear and duty invoking</td>
<td>+ none; Lord</td>
<td>husband, wise accepting friends &amp; mentor</td>
<td>God as friend (accepting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne + judge, keeping score</td>
<td>+ none</td>
<td>mentor, women's peace &amp; justice group, friends</td>
<td>challenging, calling forth, liberation, enabling, gracious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane + triumphant, almighty, decision-maker, demanding</td>
<td>+ none</td>
<td>family, friends, self (change in adolescence)</td>
<td>vulnerable, suffers with, enabler</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

363 Information in the table is taken from life stories (Chapters 4-7) and previous analysis in Chapter 8. Childhood and adult assessments (+) of feeling toward God are also given.

364 Although some influences in Table 9-2 are mentioned in the life stories, some are taken from remaining interview transcripts and pre-interview questionnaires. For all the women who had changes in their images, reflection and discussion with others are assumed to have played a role. Further influences are discussed in the following pages. Helen and Mary's God attributes showed no change between childhood and adulthood, but both women use Lord as a title in adulthood prayer. As will be seen in the text, the usage does not seem to indicate a change in image.

365 These are images that arise from meeting God as either an accepting/supporting or letting-be presence (normal type face); or as an enabling, empowering presence (bold face).
Most of the middle adulthood God images of the seven women who had controlling childhood God images show no sign of controlling authoritarian attributes for God. The mid-adult God attributes of women in transition (Susie and Clare), however, immediately attract attention. As discussed in 8.4, all the women except Susie reported what they understood as positive images for God in middle adulthood: although Susie still has mostly positive God images, she also struggles with a God who, like a judge or parent, “calls me to order”. Susie’s image of God as friend is a positive accepting one, but not an empowering image that might break the hold of the still partially controlling God image.

Clare, while reporting generally positive God images in middle adulthood, used words in her God image descriptions that were actually associated with her earlier negative images (force, order, organised). Further, when questioned on her understanding of ‘Lord’ (a title used in her prayer), Clare used other images (the overall, Lord master) which indicate there may still be controlling power elements in her God images. She also mentioned that she often prayed to God as heavenly father, which on its own may not be significant: but given that Clare’s controlling childhood images of God are rooted partially in the authoritarianism of her own father, the continued use of the image points toward a potentially controlling element in the heavenly father image as well. Clare does refer to the ‘letting go’ aspect of God which is like parenthood, which contains a hint of a less controlling God image in the making.

Three other women (Helen, Mary, Catherine) whose stated middle adulthood God images were positive, but who were happy to retain some elements of male imagery in their adult God images, used the title Lord not in speaking of their God images, but in prayer: thus the title appears to be one they used with ease and a genuine element in their understanding of God. Literally, Lord means master, ruler, nobleman, or feudal superior, and has connotations of male power as well as referring to God, but what do these women mean when they say “Lord”? Helen reflects on why she used the term Lord: “I suppose Lord is someone who’s higher ... I think it’s a term I like better ... Jesus is one part of the Trinity, [also] God the Father - whereas Lord is the whole lot.”

Mary says:

There was a clear decision on my part not to say ‘dear God,’ because I don’t talk to God. But Jesus is more a child-like concept ... Lord is a kind of in between. It sounds right. It has some sort of dignity ... whereas Jesus would be more everyday ... It has a little more ... authority, a little more substance, than Jesus.

Catherine ponders: “It spills over ... God created, but also Jesus ... I suppose I would also be praying to the spirit but I don’t change the name.

There are a number of observations about the use of the word “Lord” by these women, including Clare:

1) For Clare, Helen and Catherine, Lord implies all of the Godhead; where for Mary, Lord is a more adult name for Jesus. As when she was a child, Mary’s God image is Jesus-centred.367

2) Helen and Mary both describe their use of Lord in the sense that the word somehow ‘feels’ right, as opposed to a concern for its meaning: for Helen it is a word that “I like better” and for Mary it “sounds right.” As noted in Table 9-1, words are less important than the feeling behind them for Helen. Mary, in a discussion of the importance of God language and kinds of images, noted that the “right kind of feeling” about a word (not necessarily its meaning) is important, and further that words don’t necessarily conjure up an image for her, but “more a feeling, an ambience, a sense of feeling.” Catherine is a writer, and sensitive to the way words are used, especially in music: it is likely that the feel of a word such as Lord may also take precedence with her over its literal meaning. This aspect of feeling over meaning may indicate that there is a psychological or personality factor at work368 in the way that people hear, understand and prefer to use language. For these women, the sound or feeling of a word is important, where for others (Annie, Susie, Miriam, Rose, Anne, Diane) the meaning of the word is critical.

3) Clare, Helen and Mary perceive mastery, hierarchy, and dignity and authority respectively in their understandings of the word Lord: though not understood with a negative connotation, those perceptions may reflect an understanding of a God who is in a place of authority or control, despite the fact that their stated important God images do not mention such understandings. Perhaps the important factor, noted by Helen (“God allows me to change”, Table 9-2) is that although these women understand God to have some control over all creation, they do not perceive God as exercising that control over human lives.369

367 As noted in the discussion following Table 8-5, the Jesus-centeredness may be more common in those of Methodist background than in Catholics from birth.

368 Observations of this dynamic have also been made by the researcher and others during discussions of / training for Myers-Briggs personality typing. Women in the present study were not asked to take this indicator, but future God image research may find it fruitful to compare God images and personality types. Thanks to Frances Skelton for calling my attention to the issue of word meaning/feeling several years ago.

369 Discussion of autonomy and God’s power is continued later in this section.
Sallie McFague, Rosemary Ruether, Judith Plaskow and Elaine Wainwright (2.1.2), who believe that language shapes our belief and reality, might expect that women who use the title Lord would understand God as having control and power-over, but this may not always seem to be the case, at least for these women for whom it is only a portion of their God image. Most of the women who use the title in this study profess their major God images to be those of friend, help, love and so on. Another key here may be that one word can mean different things to different people despite what theologians might understand to be the prevailing meaning. Rather than Lord as a controlling royal power figure, Lord for some people seems to have a more popular softer connotation connected with the Lord Jesus, be conflated with God as creator, or be used as a dignified title bestowing some kind of authority. It is these popular meanings which seem to be parts of some women’s God images. This kind of usage has also been documented by pastoral theologians who have found Lord to be a title for a personal and responsive God or Jesus rather than a distant uninvolved God. It also doesn’t seem that McFague and others considered that the ‘feel’ of a word may shape reality more than its meaning. Later in this section, Lord will be looked at again in light of the women’s understandings of other aspects of God’s power.

The five women who seem to have no traces (remaining or ever) of controlling aspects to God images are Annie, Miriam, Rose, Anne and Diane. All five women have middle adult understandings of God which include at least one enabling, empowering image or attribute.

Table 9-2 also lists some factors which may have influenced the changes in women’s perception of God attributes with regard to control between childhood and adulthood. Influences for change in each woman’s life for those who had controlling God images as children are nearly all people: husbands, children, friends, mentors - and for many - the kind of work or interest group in which they are involved. When a woman has had a controlling image of God, which in all cases except for Diane was rooted principally in parental traits,
behaviour modelling of a different way of being and relating by others may be a key to changing that image. Most of these women - by late adolescence and certainly throughout adulthood - encountered other people who they felt accepted them, understood them, affirmed them and loved them for who they were, offered relationships based on equality and mutuality rather than control or power-over.

This finding reinforces John McDargh's and Robbins' reasoning that not only must women be introduced to alternative images of God, but the images must be validated by experience before they are internalised. The women in this study for whom God changed had their new images of God validated, in large part, by the love and acceptance of other people.

Another factor in God image change overall - and controlling God image change in particular - may be the natural process of maturity, a factor noted by some of the women themselves. Of necessity, parents are in a controlling role of some kind, and children naturally grow out of the need for that role. Some of the women (Helen and Susie in particular) in fact renegotiated their relationships with their mothers in adulthood on more equal friendship bases. The same sort of renegotiation may be seen in many of the women's relationships with God: where there was once a hierarchical relationship, most women have found by middle adulthood a relationship which understands God in much more of a relationship of mutuality. New mutual relation and counter-control attributes are seen in God: like parents, God can let children go as they grow up (Clare); God brings freedom and is seen as partner and co-creator (Miriam, Anne); God is empowering, friend, enabling, suffering with, and so on (Rose, Catherine, Anne, Diane, Susie). Some of the women (Marie, in particular) still live with the God of their adolescence who, according to John Shea, offers security at the price of freedom, while others still struggle with remnants of that God image to various extents (Susie, Catherine, Clare, Mary, Helen).

Another influence which cannot be underestimated is that of Vatican II and the many movements in its spirit which both preceded and followed it - CYM, CFM, adult education groups of all kinds, and women's groups. There were opportunities for people to question

373 Table 9-7 identifies women who have had such accepting/empowering relationships. Influences of other people and events in the women's lives on their God images are explored further in 9.6.

374 See 2.2.1.3. Other authors have also observed that God imagery comes from the experience of how people know God in their lives. See Martin Lang, Acquiring Our Image of God: The Emotional Basis for Religious Education. (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 71; Charlie Westfall, "Images of God," 64; Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 210-211.

and explore their faith. For a few decades at least, one might see the Catholic church as having gone through a similar renegotiation of relationships within itself - an encouragement of growth and a recognition of equality in relationships. Without this environment, which was paralleled and encouraged by world-wide secular movements toward decolonisation and equal rights, the influences of other relationships and the maturing process might both have been more muted.

To explore further the kind of power women attribute to God, several interview questions specifically addressed potentially contributing issues. Women were asked what and who influences their decision-making, whether they feel they have autonomy in their relationships with others including God, and what ‘almighty’ and ‘power’ mean for them in relation to God.

The women’s responses indicated that none of them considered God as the sole or controlling authority in their decision-making and all except Clare understood themselves as autonomous in their relationship with God. All of the women except Marie redefined ‘power’ away from the sense of almighty, and usually toward empowerment, transformation, helping, healing, presence and mystery.

The power-over which theologians were critical of is the control associated with authoritarianism which gave many of the women their negative childhood God images, which for some persisted well into middle adulthood. Any remaining traces of controlling power in the God images of middle adulthood are summarised in Table 9-3.

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376 This is to be taken up further in 9.7.

377 For exact wording of questions, see Appendix G - Interview 3, questions 11, 10, 7, and 8.
### Table 9-3

**Controlling Power in Women’s Middle Adulthood Understandings of God**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Potentially Controlling Image or Attribute</th>
<th>Potentially Non-autonomous God Relationship</th>
<th>Potentially Controlling Aspect in Understanding of God’s Power</th>
<th>Tentative Assessment of Women’s Attribution of Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Lord (super being, higher), feeling of word important</td>
<td>strong, power to heal, not control, not really power to change</td>
<td>God may be higher, but God doesn’t control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td></td>
<td>has power but doesn’t use it</td>
<td>God could but doesn’t control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Lord (dignity, authority, substance), feeling of word important</td>
<td>can be dependent on God</td>
<td>God has power and authority, but doesn’t appear to be controlling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>calls me to order [like judge/parent]</td>
<td></td>
<td>God is mostly ‘beside’, but Susie’s phrase implies some control is felt*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>Lord (overall, master), heavenly father, force keeping nature in order</td>
<td>depends on people (where God is for me)</td>
<td>God controls all creation, but usually acts only when people can do no more*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td></td>
<td>can do anything, all-powerful, authority</td>
<td>God has power, but doesn’t control people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>Lord (creator), feeling of word important</td>
<td>all powerful, acts in mysterious ways</td>
<td>God acts but probably not in controlling ways</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

378 Aspects of women’s understandings of power were included in the table if there was indication in any aspect of a potentially controlling attribution to God. Since none of the women understood God as the sole authority in their decision making, this factor is omitted in the columns of the table.

379 Asterisks indicate belief that God exercises some control or power-over. Note that God’s controlling power is reassessed for some of the women in 9.4 and 9.5 following discussion of women’s understandings of suffering and of self image.
Of the various ways power has been examined, there was some evidence in seven of the eleven women’s God attributes/titles, relationship with God or definitions of power which indicated they might understand God as a controlling power or authority in their lives. Of the four women who use the title Lord, three like it more for its ‘feel’ than its meaning, and other factors illuminating Helen, Mary and Catherine’s understandings of God’s power support their explanation that for them, Lord may indicate authority or hierarchy, but not necessarily controlling power. The fourth woman, Clare, has potentially controlling titles for God, and understands God as controlling nature: but her understanding of how God works with people seems to be a relatively ‘hands off’ stance which allows people the freedom to act first, with God acting sometimes to control a situation when all other hope is lost. Her own relationship with God, involving God as parent, heavenly father and Lord-master indicate retention of some of the controlling aspects of her childhood images.

Of the other three women whose understandings of God’s power are probed here, Marie understands God as having power, but since she doesn’t believe God uses that power, she would not perceive God as exercising control. Susie still struggles with the God who ‘calls me to order’ and the phrase, used over and over in her transcript, indicates that her image of God does exercise at least the threat of control over her. Miriam has a great belief in God’s power: although she knows God does not always act, she seems to believe not only that God is capable of controlling situations, but does act sometimes to do so. In her own relationship with God, however, she considers herself a partner and co-creator with God, and would not consider God controlling.

After many aspects of power in women’s images have been examined, the conclusion drawn is that all the women in this study perceive God to have and exercise a kind of power primarily understood as healing, helping, creating and enabling in some way. These understandings of power are the kinds of life-giving power about which Elizabeth Johnson says, “feminist theologians are grappling for language to give voice to this understanding of power arising from women’s experience. Neither power-over nor powerlessness, it is akin to power-with.”380

However, two of the women (Clare and Susie) - while having primary images of God which reflect those understandings as well as friendship and love - also have a relationship with God which is still affected by their perception of God as partly controlling. Both Clare and Susie were seen to be in a transitional space with regard to both their relationships with

380 Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 270.
God and their understanding of themselves (Chapter 5); in addition, both had childhood images of God which had contradictory elements of love and controlling power. Further, both Clare and Susie have some form of parent figure in their God image.\textsuperscript{381} Clare often prays to heavenly father, and Susie (while not using parent terminology) relates to God as if God were a judge or the parent of an adolescent who can force her to step in line. Rosemary Ruether and others (2.1.3) criticised parental images for God on grounds that they might cause dependence in the human-divine relationship. Such a dependence automatically tilts the power balance toward the one being depended on. The ambiguities in both women's understandings of power and control with regard to God as adults can probably be attributed to all these factors.

Further assessment of women's understandings of God's power will be made in relation to their understandings of suffering (9.4). Whether having an image of a God with aspects of power-over causes women to be passive or dependent - as Mary Daly, Sallie McFague and others feared (2.1.3) - will be explored further in connection with women's self image (9.5) and life experiences (9.6).

9.3 Traditional and Alternative God Images

9.3.1 Use of Traditional Images and Attributes

Just as the notion of a powerful controlling God was either rejected or transformed by many of the women in the study, so may some other traditional images and attributes. Table 9-4 compiles and compares examples of traditional theological God attributes with ones mentioned or affirmed by women in this study (left part of table) as well as traditional liturgical God images with God images of women in the study (right two columns).

\textsuperscript{381} See Table 9-7. Marie, Catherine and Mary also have some form of parent figure in their God image.
Table 9-4

Some Traditional God Attributes and Images Compared with Those in this Study382

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Attributes383</th>
<th>Women Using/Agreeing with Traditional Attributes384</th>
<th>Traditional God Images385</th>
<th>Women Using Traditional Images386</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eternal*</td>
<td>7 - Anne (Anne, Rose, Mary, Clare, Marie, Helen, Annie)</td>
<td>Lord</td>
<td>4 - Helen, Mary, Clare, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>existent</td>
<td>no mention</td>
<td>God</td>
<td>11 - all participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good*</td>
<td>7 - Anne (Anne, Rose, Mary, Clare, Catherine, Miriam, Annie)</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>3 - Marie, Clare, Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immutable* ‘never changes’</td>
<td>5 - Helen (changeless: Helen, Susie, Clare, Marie, Mary)</td>
<td>almighty, all powerful</td>
<td>3 - Marie, Miriam, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 - Rose, Anne, Diane (changing: Anne, Rose, Diane, Annie)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impassible</td>
<td>-3 suffers with: Annie, Catherine, Diane</td>
<td>son</td>
<td>1 - Marie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infinite</td>
<td>no mention</td>
<td>spirit</td>
<td>2 - Miriam, Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incommensurable</td>
<td>no mention</td>
<td>Jesus Christ</td>
<td>2 - Mary, Miriam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomprehensible* ‘bigger than we can understand’</td>
<td>5 - Catherine (Clare, Diane, Miriam, Annie)</td>
<td>giver of life</td>
<td>6 - Annie, Clare, Miriam, Rose, Anne, Diane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

382 Note that the two sides of the table are to be read separately (there is no horizontal connection between the attributes and the images).

383 Traditional attributes are taken from lists given in 2.1.1, Traditional God Language. They are attributes which the women in the study, particularly the Catholic women, were likely to have grown up with. Asterisks indicate that the trait was included on an adjective checklist, discussed further in the next note. Phrases in single quotation marks are alternative ways in which women expressed the trait in their interviews.

384 Women were not asked specifically about these attributes in oral interviews, but any mention of the attributes are noted. Names are given first for any women who mentioned the attribute in the interviews, and in parentheses for those who ticked it on the adjective checklist. The checklist was administered originally as a basis for comparing God and self images, and was not intended to include all God attributes. It does, however, provide a useful tool to determine whether women agree that God has a particular attribute. Whether they all mean the same thing by using the word is debatable. Also, just because there is no mention of the trait in interviews, or only a few women ticked it on the adjective list does not mean that the women would not agree that God had any given attribute. It might be interpreted as meaning that the women took the attribute for granted and/or that it wasn’t that critical to their particular understanding of God.

385 Images were chosen from a list of most common images used in the celebration of Eucharist (note 59). The list is not meant to be exhaustive or even representative of common traditional images, as some like supreme being, judge, warrior, etc are more common in theology, popular pety or scripture. The women may in fact agree if asked directly about these God images, but the list is used in conjunction with their important images to illustrate the hunch that the images which are important in liturgy (many of these core to traditional theology) may be different from the ones important to the women in the study.

386 Women are listed if they have used this image in their mid-adult descriptions of God as given in the life stories (chapters 4-7). Women not listed may or may not agree with the image. If their name is not listed, it means that either they do not have the image or that they take it for granted, but the most important thing is that it is not part of the language which they usually speak of or about God at this time in their lives.
Table 9-4 continued

Some Traditional God Attributes and Images Compared with Those in this Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Attributes</th>
<th>Women Using/Agreeing with Traditional Attributes</th>
<th>Traditional God Images</th>
<th>Women Using Traditional Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>incorporeal</td>
<td>no mention</td>
<td>God of all creation</td>
<td>8 - Helen, Mary, Clare, Miriam, Rose, Anne, Catherine, Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ineffable</td>
<td>1 - Catherine</td>
<td>lamb of God</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'too big to say'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>omnipotent*</td>
<td>6 - Marie, Miriam, Catherine (Marie, Miriam, Catherine, Susie, Clare, Helen)</td>
<td>light</td>
<td>4 - Susie, Miriam, Catherine, Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all powerful*</td>
<td>4 - not omnipotent: Helen, Mary, Diane, Rose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>almighty*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>omniscient*</td>
<td>3 - Helen, Catherine (Catherine, Miriam)</td>
<td>king</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'knows me completely', 'all knowing'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>no mention</td>
<td>saviour</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perfect*</td>
<td>4 - Clare (Clare, Susie, Catherine, Miriam)</td>
<td>holy one</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'perfection of creation', 'force for order'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-existent</td>
<td>no mention</td>
<td>true God</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simple</td>
<td>no mention</td>
<td>most high</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>true*</td>
<td>8 (Susie, Clare, Miriam, Catherine, Diane, Marie, Mary, Annie)</td>
<td>word</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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387 Helen ticked all powerful as an attribute for God on the checklist, but in her interview she felt that God didn’t really have the power to change things. Inconsistencies are to be expected in speaking about God because no one who has begun to appreciate the complexities of God has ironed out every ‘if and but’ in their understandings.
On the left side of the table, nine of the seventeen traditional theological attributes for God were mentioned spontaneously by women in their interviews, including three attributes (immutable, impassible, and omnipotent) which were rejected by some of the women mentioning them. Attributes mentioned positively were cited by one to three women each; attributes mentioned negatively were cited by three to four women each. Six women mentioned at least one of the traditional attributes in the positive and seven mentioned traits in the negative in their descriptions of God, although sometimes using a synonymous term.

Results of an adjective checklist reveal that all of the eight traditional attributes on it were identified by some of the women as part of how they thought about God. Two to eight women affirmed some attributes and four negated a trait: they agreed that God was changing, as opposed to changeless.

More women ticked traits than mentioned them spontaneously, which is interpreted to mean that lack of spontaneous mention does not necessarily mean women disagree with an attribute: they may take it for granted. Lack of spontaneous mention indicates that an attribute was not uppermost in the women’s understandings of God, and not an important part of how they currently speak about God.

The traditional attributes questioned by some of the women in this study were some of the same ones questioned in the literature. Immutability or changelessness, and impassivity and invulnerability have been questioned by Anne Carr, Dorothee Soelle (Appendix A), and others, with Soelle arguing that such a God cannot answer the question of suffering, and Carr understanding God as a relational God who participates in and is affected by human situations, and is thus capable of suffering. Elizabeth Johnson similarly links effects of impassibility and omnipotence.

The kind of power God has was also a major issue in the literature (2.1.3) with the fear that an omnipotent or dominating controlling image of God destroys personal power and promotes unhealthy psychological dependence. Four women in this study said spontaneously that God was not omnipotent or almighty, while three said God was all powerful. Six women checked at least one of the synonymous terms for omnipotent in the


389 Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 246-272.
checklist, but as was seen previously, what they mean by these terms is not necessarily the same as the traditional understanding. Helen, for example, ticked ‘all powerful’ in the checklist, but in her interview explained that God’s power was more to heal, not to change things.\footnote{The issue of God as powerful is picked up again in \ref{9.5} in discussions of self image.}

On the right side of Table 9-4, common images of God articulated in worship were looked for in the descriptions of God women gave during interviews. Aside from ‘God’ which all women used as a name/symbol for the divine, the two images most commonly used by the women were giver of life and God of all creation, with six and eight usages respectively.\footnote{These are occasionally used as forms of address in Eucharist, and appear in various forms (about five times total for variations giver of life, ever-living God, and life; and about four times total for God of all creation, creator and maker of heaven and earth). See note 59.}

The women’s articulations varied around these themes. Around the theme of life, for example, God was birthgiver for Rose, living being for Miriam, a God who suffers in the lives of persons for Diane. On the theme of creation, God was creator bigger than we can understand and reflected by everything in creation for Catherine, painter of sunsets for Rose, in creation and co-creator for Miriam.

Four women each used the traditional title of Lord and for four women God was light, as in ‘I am the light of the world’ for Miriam or the light playing on hills and sea for Diane. Three women used almighty or an equivalent and father. Two women used Jesus Christ and spirit; while one used son. No one mentioned lamb of God, king, saviour, holy one, true God, most high, or word.\footnotesymbol{392} As with attributes, use or non-use by women does not necessarily indicate acceptance or not of the image: it means more importantly and more accurately that the language of the unused images is not the language in which it is most meaningful for them to talk about God.

The information in Table 9-4 demonstrates that the women in this study hold to some of the traditional thinking about God but not all. In particular, a majority of women in the study recognise God as eternal, good, powerful (in some sense), true, giver of life and God of all creation. Some traditional attributes are disputed (God’s immutability, impassibility and omnipotence). Most traditional images are not part of the way most of the women understand God in their own lives.

\footnotesymbol{390} The issue of God as powerful is picked up again in \ref{9.5} in discussions of self image.\footnotesymbol{391} These are occasionally used as forms of address in Eucharist, and appear in various forms (about five times total for variations giver of life, ever-living God, and life; and about four times total for God of all creation, creator and maker of heaven and earth). See note 59.\footnotesymbol{392} Perhaps in every age, different issues will render some images impotent and raise others to prominence. For example, in apostolic days, the reference to the lamb of God would have been an important link for Jewish understandings of Christ, and distinguishing the ‘true’ God from false ones was important. Likewise ‘King’ was an acceptable and fitting image for centuries and across cultures until recent times. It stands to reason that
9.3.2 Use of Alternative\textsuperscript{393} Images and Attributes

At this point it is timely to compare the women's attributions of traits and images to God in their life stories with the suggestions for alternative images posed by theologians and others from the literature reviewed in 2.1.4. Table 9-5 uses the list of alternative images compiled in Table 2-1 and indicates the women in this study who use similar images.

While the images used in the literature and those used by the women in the study are not directly comparable in terms of numbers (note following Table 9-5), it is useful to observe some relative similarities and differences.

Nature images are the most common ones articulated for God in both groups, and are used with similar frequency\textsuperscript{394}. Within the nature images (and listed separately in the table), New Zealanders used water, especially the sea, and light images more than those who contributed to the literature. Both groups cited the image of God as rock with similar frequency, but literature sources used more earth (other than rock), fire, and animal images (especially mother birds). Most New Zealanders, including those in this study, have easy access to the sea, so it is not unexpected that the sea would be a source of God images\textsuperscript{395}.

Similarly, a narrow island country sees incessant changes in weather and light conditions, so God images based on light could also be expected. It would be of interest in future work to see how related the kinds of nature images used by individuals are to the geography of the areas in which they live in or grew up. The preference for nature images overall in both groups indicates the importance to them of nature in mediating God.

Images of healer/helper and compassion are used with similar frequency in both groups.

More common images for the women in the present study are images of God as friend, presence, creator, liberator/power, suffering, love/people, the cluster of other relational images, the cluster of other anthropomorphic images which are traditional, contemporary God images will be shaped by current concerns over ecology, gender and equality (and equally arguable that God images of individuals and communities will also shape those concerns).

\textsuperscript{393} 'Alternative' contemporary images actually include many from Scripture and tradition, and have only been labelled in this way to distinguish them from those most commonly associated with traditional theology and liturgy, such as those discussed in 9.3.1.

\textsuperscript{394} Direct comparison of the two groups is not possible, as one would be comparing apples and oranges (see note 391.). Thus no tests for statistically significant difference can be made. Images are considered to be used with similar frequency if one group's use is no more than half again as much as the other's.

\textsuperscript{395} The connection between New Zealander's love of the sea and spiritual experience is also made by composer Colin Gibson in the anonymously authored "Rejoice in the Lord Always ..." \textit{Tui Motu: Interislands} (April 2003): 18.
Table 9-5
Use of Imagery in the Literature and by Women in this Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God Image or Cluster</th>
<th>50 Theologians’ Usage</th>
<th>Usage in this Study (by 11 women)</th>
<th>Women in the Study who Used the Images or Clusters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature&lt;sup&gt;399&lt;/sup&gt; (includes*below)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Helen, Annie, Susie, Clare, Miriam, Rose, Catherine, Anne, Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rose (labouring birthgiver)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Susie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healer/helper</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Helen (protects), Marie (carer - watches over - involved), Annie (nurtures), Miriam, Rose (nurturer), Catherine (care), Anne (nurturer), Diane (nurturer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Helen, Marie, Susie, Miriam, Rose (also being beside), Catherine (also weep to, at clothesline), Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Womb/compassion</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Helen (comfort), Susie (comforting), Catherine (mercy), Anne (compassionate linked with friend), Diane (compassion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Miriam, Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Helen (is everywhere, stillness), Mary, Susie (all encompassing), Clare (stillness), Miriam, Anne (all-encompassing energy force radiating warmth, goodness, wonder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Clare (meaning, force for order in nature), Miriam (co-creator - partner), Rose (of opportunity, painter of sunsets), Catherine, Anne (growth - renewal), Diane (in process of creating)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberator/power</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Helen (strong, allows change, in letting go), Miriam (power, brings peace &amp; freedom), Rose (empowering - giving people control, toward freedom), Catherine (all-powerful, allowing God to be God), Anne (power, enabling), Diane (enabler)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human objects</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>396</sup> Numbers are not directly comparable, even if one accounted for the fact that there were fifty theologians and only eleven study participants. The theologians and other writers were offering an idea or ideas based on their own experience or thought about what could be, while study participants were giving their own images. Nonetheless, one can get some idea of the relative similarities and differences between a group of mostly theologically trained academics (some are practitioners in related areas, some Catholic, most Christian, a few Jewish) in North America (with a few from Europe and the Pacific) and a group of intelligent and spiritually committed (but not as theologically or academically oriented) Catholic women in Aotearoa New Zealand.

<sup>397</sup> The works of fifty theologians and others (see Appendix B for list and discussion of their articles) contributed to this list (a few more could be added if multiple authors were counted separately). Some usage numbers reflect the fact that some theologians contributed more than one image to a cluster of images.

<sup>398</sup> Some women have more than one image associated with the word used as an image in the literature, or contribute more than one image to a cluster of images. Women’s images are taken from their descriptions of God in transcripts and pre-interview questionnaire. Traits or images appearing only on the adjective checklist are not included here.

<sup>399</sup> Nature images include those asterisked below as water, rock, mother bird, light and darkness, as well as other unspecified images. The nature images were totalled to give an idea of the importance of nature as a cluster of images.
Table 9-5 continued

Use of Imagery in the Literature and by Women in this Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God Image or Cluster</th>
<th>50 Theologians' Usage</th>
<th>Usage in this Study (by 11)</th>
<th>Women in the Study who Used the Images or Clusters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rose (in pain), Anne (suffering, enabling endurance of pain), Diane (in difficult times, vulnerability of suffering people, vulnerable God who suffers with), Catherine (God willing to suffer on cross), Annie (suffering is universal is God)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Annie (well of love), Clare (sea), Miriam (sea), Rose (sea, lake, snow), Diane (storm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Susie, Clare, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goddess</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lover</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indwelling</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Annie, Miriam, Catherine, Anne, Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Abstract</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Trusted - Marie, Miriam, Catherine, Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relational (not</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Forgiveness, confidence, truth - Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including love)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Hope - Catherine, Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other anthropo-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Acceptance - Miriam, Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morphic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Calling - Miriam (calling women), Anne (eternal giver calling forth - challenging), Diane (calls us to growth, challenge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaddai</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Integrity - Anne (gracious God also has dignity and sincerity), Diane (- wholeness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother bird*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Knowing - Helen, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No image,</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Son of Mary - Marie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mystery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peaceful being like Jesus - Clare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Judge/parent - Susie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parent - Clare, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lord - Helen, Mary (Jesus), Clare, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Master - Clare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Catherine (mystery), Anne (hazy - unclear), Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(mystery - no more clear images)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/people</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Marie, Clare, Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helen (strength and support), Mary (in, and of people), Annie (love and in people - service), Clare (love - meaning, body of Christ), Susie (unconditional love, in people), Miriam (loves, in people), Rose (in relationships), Anne (those who work for justice, community, in beauty in people), Marie, Catherine (of love)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejoicing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rose (sense of humour, in joy), Catherine (joy - delight), Anne (celebration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YHWH/I am</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Miriam (I am), Anne (She Who Is)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Marie, Miriam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Susie, Miriam, Catherine, Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darkness*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued next page
Use of Imagery in the Literature and by Women in this Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God Image or Cluster</th>
<th>50 Theologians' Usage</th>
<th>Usage in this Study (by 11)</th>
<th>Women in the Study who Used the Images or Clusters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacrament</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Helen (in liturgy), Marie (in Mass &amp; sacraments), Mary (in Mass, symbols, occasions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Christ - Miriam, Identity - Miriam, Never changes - Helen, Changing - Rose, Anne, Diane (in process of unfolding), Expected to work in unexpected ways - Catherine, Living being, personal God - Miriam, Bigger than we can understand, too big to say - Catherine, Paradox - Rose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

indwelling and rejoicing. The most notably lavish uses are of images of God as love/people and other relational images (excluding mother), images which are grounded in community and in relationships.

More common in the literature are the images of spirit, and especially mother and wisdom, as well as images not mentioned by women in the present study such as human made objects, Goddess, lover, Shaddai, and mother bird. Except for the cluster of objects and God as lover, these images are either obviously female (mother, Goddess, mother bird), have a partly feminine etymology in the scriptures (spirit, Shaddai), or are personified as female in the scriptures (wisdom). Much of the literature which offered these images was from feminist theologians and others who in their works suggest such images to balance or reverse the effects of traditional male images.

Thus, often where one group uses particular images more than the other, the theologians and other authors use images which are specifically female and/or more obvious to those who have studied scripture, while the images of the women in this study are taken more from experience of relationships with God, self and others. The importance of women’s images arising from relationships will be taken further in 9.6.

A comparison of the ten most preferred images (in order) for each group is given in Table 9-6, as well as the preferred images cited in three recent large studies of God images.
Table 9-6

Most Often Chosen/Articulated God Images in Recent Studies

(in order of importance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American Christians&lt;sup&gt;401&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>American Christian Feminist Women&lt;sup&gt;402&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Literature&lt;sup&gt;403&lt;/sup&gt; Christian - Jewish, Female - Male, US - NZ - European</th>
<th>This Study - NZ Catholic Women&lt;sup&gt;404&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Australian Christians&lt;sup&gt;405&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>creator</td>
<td>creator</td>
<td>nature ..................................</td>
<td>nature ..................................</td>
<td>almighty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>healer</td>
<td>spirit</td>
<td>wisdom ..................................</td>
<td>love/people ................................</td>
<td>power ..................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friend</td>
<td>wisdom</td>
<td>wisdom ..................................</td>
<td>liberator/powers* .......................</td>
<td>friend ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>redeemer</td>
<td>healer...............................................</td>
<td>healer/helper ........................</td>
<td>friend ..................................</td>
<td>helper ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>presence .........................................</td>
<td>friend ..................................</td>
<td>presence ................................</td>
<td>healer/helper ........................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master</td>
<td>mystery ..........................................</td>
<td>spirit ..................................</td>
<td>creator ..................................</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>king</td>
<td>friend ..........................................</td>
<td>suffering .............................</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>judge</td>
<td>liberator ........................................</td>
<td>compassion ................................</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lover</td>
<td>help ..............................................</td>
<td>liberator ................................</td>
<td>indwelling ................................</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the ten most often used images in the present study, five of them are also shown to be among those preferred in the other studies and in the literature: liberator/power, friend,

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<sup>400</sup> Key: Solid colour lines connect same images across sources (studies or literature); dashed lines connect same images where there are only two sources with same image; bold print indicates the images which this study has in common with other studies in the ten most common images; italics indicate images found in only one study (not including literature).

<sup>401</sup> Wade Clark Roof and Jennifer L. Roof, “Review of the Polls, 202.

<sup>402</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes, Defecting in Place, 267.

<sup>403</sup> Summarised from Table 9-5 (from Table 2-1, summarised from Appendix B).

<sup>404</sup> Most of the images within a given Image/Cluster category (e.g., healer/helper or love/people) from the present study (Table 9-5) are relatively similar within their categories, but some clearly contain more diverse elements which could not be compared as a single image to the images in other studies. Therefore the clusters entitled Other abstract relational, Other anthropomorphic and Other (as well as Other feminine) were not considered to be single images for comparison. If individual images within those categories had had higher numbers, they would have been added singly to the comparison list for Table 9-6. An exception to this is the nature images which in total are the most common in this study. On its own, only water as an image would have been among the ten most commonly used images in this study (and even that could have been further broken down into sea, river etc, which could be further broken down). The discreetness of images is relative, and would be an issue in other studies as well. Quantitative studies minimize the problem by using a given list of images, so that at least the words are the same, even if people mean something different by the same word. The present study had the difficult task of grouping similar images in which participants often used different words to express or describe a similar belief, feeling about or action of God. It had the advantage, however, of uncovering the images/clusters of nature, love/people, suffering, compassion and indwelling which do not seem to be included by other studies, and which comprise about half of the images/clusters most important to the women in this study.

<sup>405</sup> ‘Tricia Blombery, “Social Factors and Individual Preferences,” 86. The Australian study explores differences in the relative importance of images of God in different age groups. In the age group most similar to the women in the present New Zealand study (40-59), the five images of God used were all approximately equal in importance.
presence, healer/helper and creator. This is not to say that in each study every person understood the same thing by the words used, but a modicum of agreement is assumed.

Two other images - nature and compassion - are mentioned frequently in the literature and are important to the women in the present research, but were not included as images in the other studies. Three images which were very frequent to relatively frequent in the New Zealand study (love/people, suffering, indwelling) are also found in the literature - though not in the ten most often used - but are not among the images used in the other studies.

The most surprising finding in this comparison with other studies and the literature, is that the first and second most important God images or image clusters for the group of women in this study (nature cluster and love/people) were not represented in the images used in the major God image studies elsewhere. It is especially surprising that nature images were not included in the study of American Christian feminist women, given that any reading of the literature would have showed their frequency, and since Miriam Therese Winter, one of the authors of that study, is herself a contributor of nature images to the literature (Appendix B).

As for the love/people image cluster, the frequency with which the women in this study cited God as love and in relationships is remarkable given the absence of those images elsewhere. Even in the literature they are relatively unarticulated. The images are very important in the Christian scriptures, especially the Johannine tradition, and they surely have often been preached on in the Christian churches. It is something of a puzzle why the images have not been identified as important before now: ten of the eleven women in this study identified them as important images, and for many of the women God as love or God in people was a central image.

Three other images, suffering, compassion and indwelling, are also not mentioned or used in other studies, although they are articulated in the literature. Combined with the images/clusters of nature and love/people, these five image groups make up approximately half of the most important images for the New Zealand Catholic women in this study. As noted previously, nature images may be particularly important to New Zealand women because of the geography, natural resources and demography of the country, and may not be to as great a degree to women in the Australian and American studies. As for the love/people images, is there something in the culture of New Zealand or New Zealand Catholicism (more of a culture in which people pitch in to help those who need support, closer family ties, less individualism) which makes these images more common? Images
of God as one who suffers, compassion and indwelling have required much reflection
time and perhaps solitude – two resources that New Zealand women perhaps have more of
than their counterparts in Australia and North America. While geographical, cultural, and
even denominational differences may help explain why there are differences in images
across studies, it is also suspected that since other studies used a pre-chosen set of images
rather than in-depth interviewing, many important images may have been simply
overlooked.

9.4 God Image and Suffering

The theological literature (2.1.3) raised questions about God images which appear to
condone or glorify suffering, and offered alternative images of a God who suffers with the
suffering (Table 2-1 and Appendix B). While pastoral theologians document responses to
suffering given underlying images of God,407 liberation theologians claim rather “that
knowledge of God today is discerned in the midst of suffering.”408 It may be, however, that
the relationship between God image and suffering is a continually growing spiral. An image
of God may determine an initial response to suffering, but any severe or prolonged suffering
may result in questioning the role or nature of God.

9.4.1 Where is God in Suffering?

The traditional understanding of suffering assumed that God was more like an
almighty doctor or judge (sometimes a sadistic one), who acted on his own and dispensed

406 Although one can hypothesise, only a trans-national study aimed at identifying aspects of culture (or feelings
toward nature) could validly answer these particular questions. See 9.6 for the importance of people and events
as influences on God images.

407 Anne V. Sutherland, “Worldframes and God-talk in Trauma and Suffering,” The Journal of Pastoral Care. 49
(Fall 1995): 281; and Patricia L. Wismer, “For Women in Pain: A Feminist Theology of Suffering,” in In the Embrace
141-143.

408 Marian F. Sia and Santiago Sia, From Suffering to God: Exploring our Images of God in the Light of Suffering. (New
suffering as a remedy. How do the women in this study understand God’s place in suffering?

The most common of the women’s understandings of suffering (others will help one cope, it is important to be with others when others are suffering, suffering is a part of life) can be seen as resting on assumptions of partnership with and/or trust in God in the alleviation of suffering.

All of the women acknowledge God as having some part in suffering, but none acknowledge believing that God causes suffering. Although consciously understanding that God may not cause suffering, Marie, Helen and Susie (whose understanding is that they are never given more than they can cope with) still seem to give some residual responsibility to God for giving them suffering.

Marie’s understanding of God and suffering is the closest to a traditional one: she not only believes that suffering can bring us closer to God and that people are never given more than they can cope with, but that suffering is something God asks of us. At present, Marie’s assertion that God has power but does not use it is satisfactory for her in understanding her own suffering. Her understanding of suffering, however, points toward an unconscious belief that God expects or gives suffering (‘asks of us’ seems to be a euphemism).

Five women (Marie, Annie, Susie, Miriam and Rose) mentioned that suffering can bring us closer to God, although Miriam and Rose also note that it can have the opposite effect. Only those two of the five noted any involvement in justice issues, while five of the six remaining women have been or are involved in justice issues. It may be that exposure to suffering and injustice on a large scale makes one less inclined to believe that it brings people closer to God (or to be concerned with that function of suffering over the alleviation of the suffering itself). Similarly, of the five women who said suffering can bring one closer to God, only one (Rose, one of the two who also said it could have the opposite effect) related

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410 Women’s understandings of suffering were gleaned mostly from responses to question 40, Appendix G - Interview 2, as well as from life stories and other places in the transcripts.

411 Diane, Rose and Miriam sometimes direct anger and lament at God, expressed not to God as a cause of the problem, but to God as an accepting listener and friend, and someone who has a role in the problem’s solution (and to human perception someone who seems often not to undertake the desired role!).

412 The transcripts indicate that four women (Diane, Anne, Catherine and Rose) have been actively involved in justice issues for a significant period of time, while three (Mary, Clare and Miriam) have had some involvement.
experiences of others suffering which deeply affected her: of the six women who did not mention that suffering brought them close to God, four mentioned personally suffering because of the suffering of others. Again, it might be that empathy with the suffering of others makes one less likely to be concerned with how suffering functions to bring one closer to God, and more likely to be concerned about alleviating the suffering itself, reflecting a more mutual relationship of responsibility with God.

Five women (Annie, Rose, Catherine, Anne and Diane) say in some way that God is capable of suffering. For Annie, God is the love and the suffering in each person which unites all people together. For Rose, God is paradoxically in joy and in pain. For Anne God is in suffering. For Catherine, willing human suffering is like God’s willingness to die on the cross. Diane’s major focus is on the vulnerable God who suffers with people, the God of darkness, and the God who is in the pain which sticks like treacle to those who touch it; God is also in the fidelity of not running away from pain and mystery and not being able to tidy it all up, and is the mystery itself. These women have understandings of God akin with Dorothee Soelle, Anne Carr, and Elizabeth Johnson who argue that God is relational, affected by humanity and capable of suffering, as opposed to immutable, impassible and invulnerable (9.3.1).

It is notable that four of these five women (except Annie) are immersed in either paid or unpaid work with people who are suffering in some way, and have been or are involved in social justice issues. These women understand that God participates in the immense suffering that they have witnessed. The connections they make between God and suffering are the ones which the Sias make when they propose that a liberation theology of suffering must include images of God - and humanity - as liberator as well as sympathiser. Annie, though not having social justice experiences in her background, understands God’s presence in suffering in a similar way, by virtue of its universality.

Six women (Annie, Susie, Clare, Miriam, Catherine and Anne) make a connection between the suffering today and the sufferings of Jesus on the cross, but their understanding of the cross and its implications for suffering are understood in different ways. Susie’s understanding that God never asks more than one could cope with as in Christ’s suffering,

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414 Cautions are given by feminist theologians about the ease with which many women pick up any cross in imitation of Christ. See Ann Loades, Searching for Lost Coins: Explorations in Christianity and Feminism. (London: SPCK, 1987), 39-60; and Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001): 18; but some are hopeful that one can have
has echoes of atonement theology, which Joanne Carlson Brown, Rebecca Parker (Appendix A) and Marie Fortune\(^{415}\) understand as supporting a culture of abuse and victimisation. Clare’s view that Jesus suffered to identify with the suffering of all humans is one Jon Sobrino would regard as the cross being “turned into ... a paradigm of suffering to which all human beings are subject,” leading to a “mystique of suffering.”\(^{416}\) Neither one of the women holds God directly responsible for suffering, but their theologies and their lives exemplify a transition place of uncertainty and tentativeness in terms of where power and responsibility lie between them and God. As has been noted, Susie and Clare have the strongest understanding of control or power-over in their God images, which seems to shape and be shaped by their understandings of suffering as akin to God either requiring atonement or a kind of suffering for the sake of suffering.

While Catherine uses the term redemptive suffering (which on its own might lead one to believe she was speaking of atonement), her understanding (like that of Anne) is that willing suffering can produce good, as in a liberation and feminist approach: “He [Jesus] voluntarily accepted the consequence, just as did civil rights workers, in order to bring about a greater good.”\(^{417}\) Miriam understands God in the midst of suffering as the Christ who suffers, similar to Sobrino’s understanding that “on the cross God himself is crucified.”\(^{418}\) While Annie regards suffering as universal, her theology is not the kind which Sobrino speaks of as paradigm: Annie’s understanding of suffering, as of love, is that it is God’s presence in them which unites humankind and which reveals the divinity in all people.

\[9.4.2 \text{ The Relationship between Women’s Suffering and their God Images}\]

For each woman there is a connection between her middle adulthood images of God and her understanding of suffering, although for some women there is more integration between them than for others.

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\(^{415}\) Marie Fortune, “The Transformation of Suffering, 139-147.


\(^{417}\) Marie Fortune, “The Transformation of Suffering,” 142.

\(^{418}\) Jon Sobrino, Christology at the Crossroads, 371.
Helen, reflecting on the grief from the deaths of her mother (who was also her best friend) and four other close family members and friends, understands both suffering and God as parts of life, and expects God (as the friend and help her mother was for her) to be a part of her suffering. God had long been friend and help, but since her mother’s death, God is both of those in a closer way. Helen also may have a residue of an earlier understanding in attributing to God the giving of suffering.

Marie’s understanding of suffering - both as a share in the suffering of God’s life on earth, and something God expects of us - may relate to her view of God as friend. Not only (as others would expect) is God the one who is with us in our suffering, but God also seems to be a friend who expects us to share in God’s own suffering, the suffering of all life. Marie’s understanding of suffering as part of God’s plan reveals God as a divine planner whose reasons are not for us to comprehend, a new image (and not one of close partnership) not identified elsewhere in her discussion of God. As such, Marie seems unconsciously to attribute the giving of suffering to God’s discretion. All of Marie’s connections between God and suffering probably have a long history which began as she attempted to make sense of the traumas of her childhood.

In Mary’s major experience of suffering in the form of cancer, she felt God as love in the support and love of others. This was not a new image for her, but a reinforcement of the God she had always known.

Annie’s image of God is the universal love which connects people: suffering, like love, unites us to one another and to the human face of God (Jesus), who also experienced suffering - a universal experience not only of humanity, but divinity. Annie’s experience in middle adulthood of the deaths of close relatives deepened the image of God she had received in childhood, and allowed her to articulate for the first time her understanding of the universality of God’s uniting presence in people through both suffering and love.

Susie’s understanding of God as friend may be reflected in her idea that God would never ask something a person couldn’t cope with. More clearly related are the images she describes in the wake of her husband’s accident - God as all-encompassing presence surrounding her, God in the people who were there for her, and God as the bargaining, challenging, judge-like image: the formation of these last three God images appears to have been catalysed by her experience of suffering. Susie names many of the “easy answers” in
her theology of suffering, and perhaps as suggested by Patricia Wismer, her theology may evolve as she addresses the judge-like image of God which still holds the power to 'call her to order' as well as to deliver consequences.

Clare's only mention of a connection between God and suffering is that Jesus' suffering was his way of identifying with human suffering: this may relate to her image of God as community, or the body of Christ, which should be support, healing and love for its members in times of need. That connection and her God images do not reflect a developed theology of suffering, perhaps partially because, as Clare says, she has not been personally involved in as much grief and pain as others have, and partially because she sees God through a lens still clouded by the authoritarian parent-God issues of her childhood. Again, Wismer's comment may be instructive here.

Miriam has suffered deep losses at every stage of her life, and since her 'St. Paul' experience she has spent much time in conversation with God about suffering. Her image of God as a close, personal and loving God enables her to see God in the midst of human suffering, as in the suffering Christ; her understanding of God in people gives her God's comfort, companionship, support and insight through people; her belief in God's power and her trust in God give her confidence that 'God's in charge'; while at the same time she has learned that God's power - particularly healing power - is not always used as she would want it to be.

Rose's losses - particularly of three babies and her ongoing work with pregnant women have shaped many of her images of God. She has learned through her experiences of suffering that God doesn't control suffering. Like a birthgiver and 'being beside,' God is just there, allowing the one who is coming to birth to further the process. God as nurturer and as 'being beside' provides support, and through the suffering, new life in the form of opportunities (and ideas and people) is created by God.

Catherine's understanding of the relationship between God and suffering was, at the time of the interviews, in a growth process. The idea she was struggling with was the idea of redemptive suffering, and the connection between the cross, the Mass and how humans live their lives. She saw willing suffering of loving parents, friends and artists who sacrificed much - as God did on the cross - for new life, redemption, good, compassion and creation. The loving and caring God, the God who is friend, the one she weeps to, and creator are all capable of this kind of suffering and compassion. Further, the God who is creator and

419 "The solution to the problem of God and suffering...cannot emerge as long as God has any kind of power-over." Patricia L. Wismer, "For Women in Pain," 142. Susie's understanding of suffering is related more fully in
'bigger than we can understand' gives her confidence to hope that good can come out of anguish and awful things. Yet God and suffering are both full of mystery, and Catherine is learning - as Miriam also mentioned - that God is God.

Anne’s understanding (like Helen’s) that God is in suffering as in every part of life, and enables one to endure, seem to be related to her images of God as compassionate friend, as well the eternal giver who is not only in suffering but dies for new life, as do people who deliberately take on suffering for others. Anne’s immersion in social justice issues gives her the insight that the God of justice is not only in suffering, but in those people trying to overcome injustice.

Diane’s lifework involves her in the pain of others, in addition to which several deaths throughout her adulthood have grieved her deeply. Most of her God images are partially or wholly shaped by suffering. God is in the darkness and suffering; God is vulnerable and suffers with the suffering; God is in the fidelity of not running away (in the touching of the treacle-like pain of others), and also in mystery (which is partially what people may be running from in running from suffering). That God is in the challenge and the metaphorical storm which stirs up the deep, as well as in whatever speaks of integrity, wholeness and growth, is to say that God is in the suffering of creation, in the struggle with suffering, and in the sufferer’s faithfulness to life.

While among the women in the study there were a number of shared understandings of suffering, each woman has woven some of those understandings together with her experience of her own and/or others’ suffering to make sense of suffering as a phenomenon in life. Those experiences and understandings were further reflected on together with their understandings of God, with the resulting intermingling shaping - in an on-going way - both their attitudes toward suffering and their images of God, as well as charting a course for many in social justice involvement.

Marie’s, Helen’s, and Susie’s understandings of suffering all implicate God (somewhat unconsciously and to at least some degree) in giving people suffering, which essentially gives God a control or power-over that was not evident in the discussion in 9.2. This seems to indicate that despite the mostly positive middle adulthood God images the

the previous section, 9.4.1.

420 Like Eric Vossen’s study (see 2.2.1.6), the present findings indicate that the experience of suffering affects God images. The present findings would also see God images, along with other life experience, as determining how people cope with suffering.
women shared in their interviews, there are other aspects to their God images that only reveal themselves in different contexts.421

Following the reasoning of Patricia Wismer, Susie and Clare’s partially facile422 understandings of suffering appear related to their (previously noted) residual childhood authoritative or controlling images of God.

For the four women (Helen, Marie, Mary, Annie) who felt that their images of God have always been much the same, suffering reinforced, deepened and helped Helen, Mary and Annie to articulate their already-held God images. Marie’s deepest suffering was as a child, so her early understandings of God and suffering probably developed alongside one another.

For all other women - Susie, Catherine, Miriam, Rose, Anne, and Diane (excepting Clare who felt that she had not experienced suffering in a major way) - suffering was a major influence on the formation and development of God images, and in some cases a catalyst to formation and/or articulation of some already in the making. 423

9.5 God Image and Self Image

God image has been understood to influence self image (especially through self esteem) by many theologians and social scientists. For Rosemary Ruether and others, the influence on women’s self esteem is often a negative one through the use of traditional male or controlling images of God.424 Some psychologists and theologians like Dorothee Sölle reverse the influence, believing that new understandings of the self bring new understandings of God.425 Still other writers, including mystic Catherine of Sienna, find knowledge of God and self going hand in hand: “As the soul comes to know herself she also

421 Controlling God images will be reviewed once again in 9.5 when women’s self images are discussed.

422 See previous discussions of their understandings of suffering, in both 9.4.1 and 9.4.2.

423 Various kinds of suffering and other experiences seen as influences or catalysts in the formation or change of God images for the women in the study are identified in 9.6.


knows God better ... In the gentle mirror of God she sees her own dignity." 426 A number of researchers agree, finding that the roots for both God and self images lie in the childhood environments of those whom they studied: they understand parental traits - particularly acceptance or lack of it - to play a major role in later adult self esteem. 427

How related are women’s understandings of self and God? This section first draws together a number of aspects of God image and self image 428 in attempt to understand if and how they are related, and then compares attributes women use to describe God and self.

9.5.1 Relationships Between God Images and Aspects of Self

Various aspects of God and self images thought to be related (from the literature and by the researcher) are displayed in Table 9-7. A number of questions can be explored with the help of Table 9-7. 429

Are women’s self images related to the gender they attribute to God?

Yes. Those participants whose self images (column 6) are good use more gender-neutral, inclusive and feminine language for God (column 2), while those whose self images are other than good use more male language for God. Five of the six women who used female imagery (Anne, Susie, Miriam, Rose, Annie) say that imaging God as a woman gives them value and acceptance as women, or allows them to feel closer to God (9.1). This finding corresponds to those of Brinkman as well as Anderson and Hopkins, who concluded that feminine God images empower women and make a relationship with God possible. 430


427 See 2.2.1.4.

428 Self image includes self esteem, also the related feelings of how much one feels valued and the freedom with which one can speak and act, as well as an understanding of the kind of person one is.

429 It is important to note that the answers to these questions are valid for the women in this study, but not necessarily other women. A larger group of women or studies of different groups of women would be necessary to verify a more generalised validity. Questions which have unclear answers from this group may have clearer findings from a larger group, or there simply may be no relationship between the factors involved in the question.

430 See 2.2.2.2.
Table 9-7
Some Potentially Interacting Factors in Middle Adulthood God and Self Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Adult God Gender</th>
<th>Adult God Image as Parent?</th>
<th>Does God control? 432</th>
<th>Kind of Power God Has</th>
<th>Adult Self Image</th>
<th>Controlling God /Parent in Childhood</th>
<th>Acceptance as Child/Adult</th>
<th>Empowerment in Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marie 433</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>(yes)</td>
<td>doesn’t use/ to plan</td>
<td>says still needs to develop</td>
<td>no/no</td>
<td>no/ mfG</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>to act/ to order/ in people</td>
<td>wants to know self better</td>
<td>yes/ yes - mf</td>
<td>no/ mf</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>mostly i, some m</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>‘calls to order’</td>
<td>strengthening</td>
<td>yes/ yes - mf</td>
<td>no/ mfG</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>gn, m</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>to act</td>
<td>strengthening</td>
<td>yes/ yes - mf</td>
<td>f/ mfG</td>
<td>mf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen 434</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>(yes)</td>
<td>help/heal</td>
<td>gen. good</td>
<td>no/no</td>
<td>f/ fG</td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>gn, m</td>
<td>yes 435</td>
<td>to act</td>
<td>gen. good</td>
<td>no/no</td>
<td>mf/ fG</td>
<td>f</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>mostly i, some m</td>
<td></td>
<td>love/heal / act/ authority</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>yes/ yes - f</td>
<td>mf/ fG</td>
<td>f</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>gn, f</td>
<td></td>
<td>love</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>no/no</td>
<td>mf/ mfG</td>
<td>f</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>f, gn</td>
<td></td>
<td>empower</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>yes/ yes - f</td>
<td>mf/ mfG</td>
<td>mf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>gn, f</td>
<td></td>
<td>transform / enable</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>yes/ yes - mf</td>
<td>f/ fG</td>
<td>f</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>i</td>
<td></td>
<td>enable</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>briefly/ no</td>
<td>mf/ mfG</td>
<td>mf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

431 Unlike in previous tables, the order of participants here is changed so that differences in God and self images are seen more clearly. Participants here are in order of increasingly positive self image (see Appendix I for fuller discussion). In the second column, gender abbreviations have the following meanings: m=male, f=female, gn=gender-neutral (e.g., rock), i=inclusive (balance of male and female words, may include gender-neutral) - see also Table 9-1 and subsequent discussion. In the penultimate column, ‘no’ was recorded if participants had not mentioned at least one accepting/supportive relationship in childhood. In the final column, ‘no’ is recorded if participants failed to mention at least one relationship in adulthood which was empowering or enabling (encouraging women to be themselves, beyond accepting and supporting). In both the last two columns, m=male, f=female, G=God. Information is taken from Table I-1 in Appendix I, and Chapters 8 and 9.

432 As another check on the assessment in 9.2 of whether the use of ‘Lord’ indicates God’s controlling power, it is noted here that those who used the title do not completely overlap with those whose overall understanding seems to be of God as having controlling power-over. Clare and Helen, who used the term ‘Lord’ do have overall understandings here of a God with power-over. Catherine and Mary also referred to God as Lord, but do not appear to have overall understandings of God having controlling power. Thus the assessment of 9.2 still stands.

433 Although Marie stated that she didn’t believe God used power, and the tentative assessment in Table 9-3 judged her God image to be non-controlling, her understanding of suffering (9.4) revealed a God who has a divine plan and who expects human beings to suffer, both of which can be interpreted as forms of control.

434 Some degree of control is accorded Helen’s God image here, differing from the assessment made in Table 9-3, because of Helen’s understanding of God’s role in suffering (9.4).

435 Although Mary felt that over the years she had moved from a parent-child relationship with God to one of more equality and friendship, she still referred to herself in prayer as a child, and realised the parent-child relationship was still with her.
Are women's self images related to whether they image God as a parent?

Yes. The five women whose self images are good (and a sixth whose image is generally good) did not use parental images when speaking about or to God during the interviews (column 3). Five of six women whose self images were other-than-good did use parental images. Marie and Clare, who indicated they wanted further self development, also used parental God images (father). Susie, whose self image has been assessed as ‘strengthening,’ did not name parental God images, but used the expression ‘God calls me to order’ repeatedly, which was interpreted in 9.2 to refer to an image of God as judge or parent of an adolescent. Catherine (also with a ‘strengthening’ self image) described herself as a child before a God who is a parent-like figure.

Are women's self images related to whether they understand God as having power-over them?

Yes. Women whose self images are good do not understand God as having controlling power-over them (column 4). The two women who indicated the need for further self development both had images of God which had an element of control in them. Half of the women whose images were generally good or strengthening had elements of control in their God images.

Are women's self images related to the kind of power women perceive God as having?

Yes. More women with good self images understand God to have power for transformation, enabling, empowering, and power for love. More women with other than good self images understand God as having power to plan, act, and bring order. God's power for healing and authority is present in women with both good and generally good self images.

Are women with controlling, male or parental God images more likely to be passive and dependent (as the literature in 2.1.3 suggested)?

If women with other-than-good self images are more likely to be passive and dependent, then the answer is yes, because they are the ones who are more likely to have controlling, male or parental God images.

Looking at individual women, the three women who have those three aspects to their God images are all beginning to take initiative for themselves. Marie, with traditional male God images and an underlying view of God as divine planner, is trying to find the motivation and impetus to move from her previous focus on family life and clerical work to do tertiary study. Clare, with her exposure to alternative God images yet consistent use of
traditional ones, has already retrained and found a new job, but she still struggles with feelings of intimidation. Susie, with her God who calls her to order, has also (with support of others) taken initiative in developing her artistic talent, but suffers guilt for leaving a more passive and dependent role in her family.

Three other women have two of the three aspects in their God images. Catherine (male and parental God images) has recently found the courage to do support work on behalf of the gay community, but worries about separating herself from parts of the church community which do not agree with her. Helen (male and controlling images) feels on the threshold of change but struggles with the feeling that family members may try to hold her back. Mary (male God language and father image) values peace and harmony in family and in community: she rocked the boat by gaining her tertiary qualifications earlier in adult life, but it may require some disharmony to face the challenges of mid-life family relationships.

All the women have faced situations where independence and initiative are required. The women with good self images usually approach these situations with less trepidation. On the whole, women with male, parental or controlling God images would require more courage and determination to move out of the passivity and dependence (on unquestioned values, other’s opinions, or in finance and relationships) which come more easily.

Does having authoritarian parents and/or controlling childhood God images affect adult God images or self images?

The findings do not suggest any clear effect on adult women’s perception of God’s gender, parental or controlling attributes, or their self images.

What can be said more definitely is that even though some women have had controlling parents or God images as children, the women are not predetermined to have other-than-good self images as adults. Acceptance and empowerment by others (columns 8, 9) appear to be factors that help mitigate effects of controlling parents and early God images. But where there were no other adults who offered accepting relationships in childhood (Marie, Clare, Susie), and/or no adults offering an empowering relationship in adulthood (Marie, Clare, Helen), the struggle for self image in adulthood may be more difficult.

It is also interesting that while four women (Catherine, Miriam, Rose and Anne) had controlling God images in childhood but not in middle adulthood, two women (Marie and Helen) did not report controlling images in childhood but have an aspect of control in their adulthood God images. For both of them, the control aspect was made evident in connection with their adult struggles to understanding God’s role in suffering.
Does the gender of persons who controlled, accepted or empowered women relate to the gender the women attribute to God as adults?

No. The gender of persons doing the controlling, accepting or empowering of women (columns 8, 9) does not appear to relate to women’s understanding of God’s gender.

Is there a relationship between acceptance/empowerment given to women and the gender and power in their adulthood God images?

Yes. Women who have reported acceptance and empowerment from others (whether female, male/female, or God) have not only stronger self images in adulthood, but have less male, more inclusive and female images of God in adulthood, and are less likely to understand God as a parent or as having controlling power-over them.

Is God’s perceived gender related to the kind of power God is understood to have?

Yes. When God is perceived as male or when language used for God is more male than female (Marie through Miriam in Table 9-7), God’s power is understood as being used to plan, order, act, exercise authority, to help and heal. When God is perceived as wholly gender-neutral, female or inclusive (Annie through Diane in Table 9-7), God’s power is understood as being used for love, empowerment, transformation, and enabling.

To illustrate the difference between how women perceive God differently with different genders, Susie spoke about how she understood God differently when praying to God in male or female images: “[God as] mother [receives] my own personal worries, where I would pray to God for Somalia in the male image, set the world right. See, that’s a real patriarch!” When Susie prays to God for personal and relational issues, she prays to a female God whom she senses is more understanding. When she requires action on a global issue like war, she is conscious of using male imagery because she associates males with more power and ability to accomplish big things.

None of the four women who understand God in fully inclusive, gender-neutral or feminine terms saw God as having controlling power-over; but three (Marie, Clare, Helen) of the four women who had the aspect of control in their God images used all male God imagery. Of the four women who have mostly inclusive or gender neutral imagery but occasional male language (Susie, Catherine, Mary, Miriam), only one (Susie) understands God as controlling.

It is possible to see differences in women’s understandings of God’s gender and power as related over time, maturation and experience. As experience of many global and personal or relational issues increases, so does the eventual realisation that God does not
seem to be solving everything. If God is not powerfully intervening, there is less reason for belief in a powerful God, or the corresponding male God. Also, as women learn to cope with uncertain events in their lives and become proactive in initiating various life experiences (both over their lifespans, and over generations), they re-evaluate the balance of God-human power and responsibility, assigning more equal portions to themselves. Among the women in this study, those with more female God images (and correspondingly less overtly powerful God images) do prove to be slightly older than those with more male God images.\footnote{Women with all male God images had an average age of 48; women with male plus inclusive or gender-neutral images had an average age of 49.75; women with all female, inclusive or gender-neutral images had an average age of 52.25. These findings would have to be repeated in a larger study for the results to be more certain.}

The evidence in Table 9-7 supports the idea that God image and self image are closely related (as well as interrelated with understandings of power, some of which are only revealed by women’s understandings of suffering). For women in this study, God images which are male, controlling (and certain other kinds of power), and parental are related to less certain self images; while gender-neutral, inclusive and especially feminine God images are related to good self images.

\subsection*{9.5.2 Comparison of Attributes for God and Self}

Adjective check lists\footnote{The list of 348 adjectives is found in Appendix G. It is notable that the two adjective check lists (for God and for the each woman herself) were administered several months apart, with no opportunity for copying or comparing.} were used in Interviews 1 and 2 to identify attributes which women ascribe to God and to themselves, respectively. An analysis of the most mentioned attributes for self and God, and attributes common to both, is portrayed in Figure 9-1. A number of observations can be made from Figure 9-1.

1) Of the sixteen traits which were attributed to God by all or all but one woman (see top two boxes under God attributes), eleven were also attributed to the women themselves by at least seven women. Twenty-one adjectives were attributed both to God and the women themselves by at least seven of the eleven women. This demonstrates considerable overlap in the women’s self and God images (insofar as ‘image’ can be indicated by these traits).
### Most Mentioned God Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Number of Women Mentioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life-giving</td>
<td>(11,6,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just</td>
<td>(11,6,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing</td>
<td>(11,7,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeing</td>
<td>(10,4,4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life-enhancing</td>
<td>(10,6,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful</td>
<td>(10,5,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generous</td>
<td>(10,7,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>(10,7,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirming</td>
<td>(9,7,8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comforting</td>
<td>(9,3,3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awesome</td>
<td>(9,0,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever-present</td>
<td>(9,0,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternal</td>
<td>(9,6,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full of integrity</td>
<td>(9,6,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>(8,5,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All encompassing</td>
<td>(8,0,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine</td>
<td>(8,1,1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everlasting</td>
<td>(8,0,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving</td>
<td>(8,5,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free</td>
<td>(8,5,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>(8,6,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentle</td>
<td>(8,2,2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>(8,6,7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truthful</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous</td>
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<td>Holy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Merciful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mysterious</td>
<td>(8,3,3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nourishing</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(8,5,5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>(8,3,3)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(8,6,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering</td>
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<td>Encouraging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joyful</td>
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### Most Mentioned Self Attributes

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<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Number of Women Mentioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Affectionate</td>
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<td>Equal</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respecting</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyful</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interconnected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mysterious</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
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<td>Nourishing</td>
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<td>Spiritual</td>
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<tr>
<td>True</td>
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<td>Encouraging</td>
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<td>Joyful</td>
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<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>True</td>
<td>(4,4,9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Attributes Ascribed Most to Both God and Self

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Number of Women Mentioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>(11,9,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companion</td>
<td>(10,9,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>(10,9,9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joyful</td>
<td>(10,8,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>(9,8,9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interconnected</td>
<td>(9,8,8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faithful</td>
<td>(9,7,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting</td>
<td>(8,7,8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic</td>
<td>(8,7,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merciful</td>
<td>(8,3,3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mysterious</td>
<td>(8,3,3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nourishing</td>
<td>(8,4,4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>(8,3,3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>(8,6,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True</td>
<td>(8,5,7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyful</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interconnected</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faithful</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merciful</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mysterious</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nourishing</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True</td>
<td>(8,5,5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Images of God and Self Derived from Adjective Check List

Figure 9-1

Images of God and Self Derived from Adjective Check List

[KEY: Numbers in parentheses are, in order, women who ticked this attribute as describing God, women who ticked this attribute for both God and self, women who ticked this attribute as describing themselves. Number sequences are given once per attribute. Boxes for God and self attributes include, from top, attributes mentioned by eleven, ten, nine or eight women. Centre boxes include attributes ascribed to both God and self, from top, by nine, eight or seven women.]
2) The kinds of traits which the women understand themselves as sharing with God (the twenty-one adjectives in the middle of the figure) are varied, and could be described as follows: those of care (e.g., compassion, love, nurture, etc.); those of relationship (e.g., companion, listening, interconnected); those of activity (e.g., creative, healing, teaching); those of disposition (e.g., joyful, generous, faithful), as well as assessment (holistic, unique) and similarity (feminine).

3) Among the adjectives commonly attributed to God (by at least eight women) but rarely (by none or one woman) to the women themselves are awesome, ever-present, eternal, all-encompassing, everlasting, and divine: these are traits which are by and large traditional attributes for God that women still ascribe almost solely to divinity. Other adjectives common for God but (interestingly) used only sometimes by women (two or three) include gentle, comforting, merciful, mysterious and quiet. These are traits which might, in past years, have been part of a stereotypical view of women, but women in this study do not identify them as important attributes for themselves.

4) Adjectives most commonly used for the women (by at least eight women) but not as often for God (by one to three women) were capable, independent, responsible, confident, and thinking. As one woman commented during the interview, it isn’t as if God is not those things, just that one expects them of God, while all people don’t necessarily have those traits. They are also traits that in past years would more likely have been ascribed to men, yet women are now finding those traits in themselves.

5) It is interesting to note which traits do not appear in this figure. True to findings already discussed, there are no adjectives which express notions of might, royalty, strength, control or power (except, notably, for ‘empowering’). God was not perceived as masculine, but in fact was seen more as feminine (by nine of eleven women).

The picture painted of God is one who is caring, involved, and in relationship with people. Aside from the more traditional ‘divine’ characteristics noted in (3) above, God appears to be like the traits that women value in other human beings, including ones that they see and value in themselves as women. It is commonly believed (from Genesis) that women and men are made in God’s image: but with good reason, many people ask if we also make (our images of) God in our own image.
9.5.3 God and Self: Made in One Another's Image?

Genesis notwithstanding, from the sixth century philosopher Xenophanes to the Enlightenment's Voltaire and Hume to writers today, skeptics and satirists, pagans, atheists and all manner of Christians pose the challenge that God is more or less a projection or image of believers themselves. Contemporary feminist theologians have noted in a slightly different vein that God language indeed tells us as much about ourselves as it does about God. They argue that while in the past God language has reflected male believers' idealised self images and need for a strong, powerful male ruler and parent, God imagery today should reflect contemporary women's experience of God.

Do God images form or influence self images, or do self understandings affect God imagery? How do women in this study understand the relationship between their understandings of God and self?

438 “If the ox could paint a picture, his god would look like an ox,” is quoted by Tricia Blombery, “Social Factors, ’78. The same reference is used by Lloyd Geering (who regards God images as both projection and fruit of conscious imaging) in Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds. (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1994), 132. Voltaire, Hume and Feuerbach are all cited as believing in a universal human tendency to cast God in human images: for Voltaire, see Marian F. Sia and Santiago Sia, From Suffering to God, 1-2; for Hume, see Tricia Blombery, “Social Factors,” ’78; for Feuerbach, see Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann (who presume donkeys have a donkey god) in God - His and Hers. (London: SCM Press, 1991), 35. John Alexander’s slant on the question is evident from his title, in “A Basset Hound Who Looks Like Me.” The Other Side. 32 (Mar-Apr 1996): 34. These latter two writers seem to fall into the trap of assuming that only other people’s (feminist) God images must be projections, while even Rosemary Ruetier is quick to pronounce male God images projections of patriarchy, though she says the main issue is which projections and metaphors promote love and justice: see Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Hermeneutics, Scriptural Authority, and Religious Experience,” in Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion, Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rike, eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 102-103. Mark Olson writes that God images are who we would like to be ourselves, in “In Our Own Image.” The Other Side. 29 (May-June 1993): 7.


440 Original interview questions can be found in Appendix G - Interview 2, questions 37 and 42. Note there was a bias built into the interview question, as at first it asked only if changes in ideas about God influenced the women's self images. Half way through the interviews, the question was reworded so the participants could voluntarily identify a cause-effect relationship if they wished, in either direction. The wording of the questions did not appear to affect the answers, as women seemed to feel free to turn the assumption in the first question around, or to spontaneously opt for a both/and answer. In the first wording, three women said changes in God understandings influenced their self understandings, two said the two evolve together, and one said although it could happen either way, for her it had gone in the direction of self first, then God image. In the second case, four women said changes in God understandings influenced their self images, of which two also said they evolve together. One said that changes in her self understanding caused her to re-examine her God images. Marie did not give an opinion.
Of the ten women who offered their experience, seven felt that changes in their understandings of God had influenced their own self understandings, and most of them spontaneously cited the particular changes. A less authoritarian God gave Clare more self-assurance. God as friend rather than far away gave Miriam the ability to be a friend to others. Taking the Genesis story to heart made Rose realise that if God said she was good, she could believe in herself as good. Suddenly discovering in mid life that God loved her personally was an enormous change for Catherine, freeing her from the punishing God image to be herself and become involved in many issues and activities. When Annie was exposed to new images of God, she was enabled to believe that she was God’s face to others in a way she hadn’t felt before. Realising that God was all-embracing made Diane want to offer that accepting non-limiting stance toward others. Two of these women, Rose and Diane, also said that changes in God and self image, as part of human growth, evolve together. Susie and Clare noted the importance of life experience in the growth of God and self images, and Diane cited the importance of maturation - human unfolding.

Two women (Mary and Anne) felt that it was their experiences of growth as persons that led them to explore and grow in their understanding of God. Mary noted that the impetus for change might happen either way for others, and both commented that life experience prompted changes in God and self images. Helen felt that growth in understanding of God and self happened together, and as a result of life experience.

The mix of answers indicates that there is some difference in the thinking and experience of the participants (as there was in the literature cited at the beginning of 9.5). There is, however general agreement from the experience of women in this study that God images do influence women’s self image. This experience supports the contention of feminist theologians that by encouraging alternative God images (especially those which embody the attributes the women in this study identify for God, e.g., Figure 9-1), women may become more self-assured; understand themselves as good; be freed from fear and enabled to take social action; offer acceptance not limitation to others; and be enabled in friendship.

Psychologists like Robbins and Rizzuto\textsuperscript{441} understand (as three of the women in this study noted) that God and self images develop alongside one another, and whether one change comes first or second at any given point in time may depend on the life experiences of the particular individual. The point is that each image seems capable of causing change in the other, so it may be equally valid to say to those concerned about women’s self images,

\textsuperscript{441} See 2.2.1.3.
'yes, changes in God imagery may help'; and to say to others hoping for a use of more gender balanced and less controlling God imagery, 'yes, more empowering self images in women may open them to new God images.'

Other evidence for causality might be read from the adjectives women chose to describe God and self (Figure 9-1). For example, the centre list portrays a woman (and a God) who maintains some traditional feminine attributes like loving, warm, caring, but also exhibits traits which perhaps would not have been applied to women (or God) in previous centuries (such as interconnected, empowering, and holistic). It is suggested that the former traditional traits are ones which women are now confident in claiming not only for themselves but for God because of women's increasing roles and voices in western society over the last century. The latter traits may be ones which have arisen as aspirational for women in the cultural milieu of 'middle class educated white western society' at the turn of the millennium, and have also then been judged worthy of application to God. In other words, women's changing self images are also slowly changing their understandings of God, not only as individuals, but as a group in a given time and place.442

While Christian women may aspire to become the images of God they understand at each stage of their lives, those God images often change both as women mature and as their life experience gives them opportunities to interact more and more with the people and events in the world around them - a matter to which we now turn.

9.6 God Image and Life Experience

As has become evident, life experiences do shape God images, some in positive ways and some in not so positive ways. Some painful experiences result in healthy growth of God images and some benign experiences do not seem to influence such growth. This study, as well as documenting God images over women's life stages, has also identified (throughout Chapters 4-9) experiences which influence those images. This section attempts to bring the God image influencing life experiences of all the women together, both for a picture of the

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442 Such a theory would be in line with the research of David Nicholls which demonstrated that images of God have evolved over the centuries along with sociological factors (2.1.1).
many influences on God images over each woman’s lifetime, and for comparison of influences among the women.

Table 9-8 records the influences on women’s God imagery. It also makes some judgments as to whether they are for well or ill, how important they are, and which ones can be understood as catalysts which initiated periods of change in women’s God images. Table 9-9 records the God images affected by each influence, along with the number of women whose God images have been affected for better or ill.

A number of observations can be made from Tables 9-8 and 9-9. First, regarding influences for the better:

1) The two most common influences on women’s God images for the better were their experiences of **motherhood** and their **friends** (Table 9-9). Motherhood - including births of children, caring for them, loving them, deciding how to teach them - influenced the God images of ten of eleven women, and for eight of them it was a major influence. Motherhood helped form such images as friend, love, caring, nurturing, trusted and enabling. Friends were also an influence for ten women, and a major influence for seven of those. Friends influenced the growth of God images like friend, caring, community, love, in people, family of God, compassionate, hope, nurturer, darkness, mystery and God who suffers.

2) For nine or eight of the eleven women, influences for the better included **nature**, **groups** they were part of (church groups, women’s groups, community groups), their **work** (career) or volunteer work, **solitude, illnesses and deaths, courses, mentors** and **feminism**. Nature, as would be expected, inspired images of God such as the sea, painter of sunsets, presence, awe, light, challenge and suffering. Groups influenced such images as caring, community, love, feminine, acceptance, enabling and so on. Career and volunteer work contributed to images of God like love, creator of opportunity, nurturer, friend, compassionate. Serious illness, accident and death – while painful experiences – influenced many women’s God images for the better, bringing images like God in stillness, as friend, love, being beside, paradox, compassionate friend, presence, darkness, mystery, suffering and growth. Solitude gave rise to images of God as friend, presence, mystery, light and no more clear

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443 Even a study of this depth cannot purport to identify ALL influences, but as many as possible have been identified from the transcripts and included in the analysis.

444 Influences for the better imply influences that encourage positive images of God. These value judgments were made in earlier sections of the thesis, are based on theories and studies from the cited literature, evidence from the participants’ lives, and are influenced by my own perspective of feminist theology.
Table 9-8 (see Key below)

Identifiable Influences on and Catalysts to Women's God Image Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influences on God Images Throughout Life</th>
<th>Catalysts to Change&lt;sup&gt;445&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helen</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTHER, teaching, solitude,&lt;sup&gt;447&lt;/sup&gt; education,&lt;sup&gt;448&lt;/sup&gt; children, FRIENDS, priests, DEATH OF MOTHER and others, prayer of others, scripture, CFLE, nature, nuns, school retreats, teacher colleague</td>
<td>'motherhood', CFLE, death of mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14, 0&lt;sup&gt;446&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marie</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parents, TEACHING, SOLITUDE, Mass, PARENTS' MARRIAGE BREAKUP, SCHOOL, NUNS, CYM, groups, work, husband, friends, children, 'motherhood', church, Enneagram, reading, desire to develop faith, speakers</td>
<td>Enneagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12, 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARENTS, SIBLINGS, church art, teaching, clergy, education, husband, children, social justice, MOTHERHOOD, Vatican II, work, illness, FRIENDS, NUN-MENTORS, groups, sacramental occasions, nature, becoming Catholic, church, feminist theology, reading</td>
<td>motherhood, illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16, 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annie</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRANDMOTHER, Bible, teaching, prayers, parents, education, HUSBAND, move to New Zealand, children, 'MOTHERHOOD', friends, NUN-MENTOR, family deaths, NCRS, CFLE, COURSES, WORK, reading, FEMINIST THEOLOGY, grandchildren and their births, opportunities for love, (nature)</td>
<td>work, all courses, deaths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19, 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key to Influences in Table 9-8

- **Plain type** - Influence whose effect toward good or ill is neutral or not discernable.
- **Bold** - Influence for the better, away from all male, distant or controlling images.
- **Underlined** - Influence which led to or strongly reinforced all male, distant or controlling images.
- **UPPERCASE** - MAJOR INFLUENCES IDENTIFIED FROM CHAPTERS 4 - 8.
- **Italics** - Participant-identified influences, insufficient evidence for links with particular images.
- **(Parentheses)** - (Researcher-identified influences, no link with particular image.)

N.B. Some influences are a combination of the above. Influences like people, experience (both mentioned in Chapter 8 by participants), discussion, prayer and reflection are not included as they are assumed for all.

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<sup>445</sup> Catalysts were identified subjectively by the researcher as experiences which resulted in an acceleration of the evolution, growth or change in women's God images. Refer to Figures 8-2 to 8-12 and the Chapter 8 tables as background.

<sup>446</sup> The first number is the number of influences on God images for the better; the second is the number of influences for ill.

<sup>447</sup> Solitude includes a number of the experiences described in Chapters 4-8, including solitude itself (time alone), walking, meditating, 'church building' (making visits), and quiet retreats.

<sup>448</sup> Education includes university and teacher's college diplomas and degrees. Other formal or informal courses are stated simply as courses or specified by name, e.g., CFLE.

<sup>449</sup> Many women, while speaking of the children, actually seem to mean not children themselves, but the thoughts and decisions they come to in the course of caring for or teaching their children. When it is obvious that it is motherhood that is meant, and it is an influence on the women's images, the word 'motherhood' has been added in single quotes, even though the term was not previously used (e.g., in Chapter 8 analyses). Where it is not in single quotes, the woman has used a similar term herself. Motherhood with or without single quote marks includes the births of children.
Table 9-8 (continued)

Identifiable Influences on and Catalysts to Women's God Image Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influences on God Images Throughout Life</th>
<th>Catalysts to Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>husband's accident - encounter with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15, 6</td>
<td>CYM, charismatic movement, women's groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>marriage breakdown - retreat - encounter with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14, 14</td>
<td>deaths of babies and father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>motherhood/ multiple painful experiences - retreat/ work &amp; volunteer work/ illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27, 9</td>
<td>mentors, women's peace and justice group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>overseas work - suffering of others, mentor priests, deaths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24, 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9-9
Influences on God Images for Better or Ill450

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Better</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For the Better by the Given Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Ill</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For Ill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Friend, Caring, Community, Love, In people-family of God, God of Being Beside, Compassionate, Gracious, Hope, Nurturer, Celebration, Positive energy, Darkness-mystery-suffers,</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>In nature, Symbol, Presence, Force that keeps nature in order, Creation, Sea, Painter of sunsets, Awe of creation, Suffering, Light, Challenge-storm</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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450 The numbers listed in this table are only an indication of the direction toward better or ill that some influences have on God images. The complexity and interaction of influences on images is such that only so much analysis in this direction can be done in this thesis. Influences are, if anything, broader than indicated by the numbers here in that the God images said to be influenced may only be a small portion of those actually influenced. Who, for example, would deny that solitude could influence the formation of most God images?

451 A parent God image is a natural one in youth, and also when one becomes a parent oneself. The two people in which the image is regarded as unhealthy (and stemmed partly from the experience of motherhood) are Susie and Clare, for whom parental overtones of authoritarianism and God as judge combine in an unhealthy fashion.

452 Includes CYM, Charismatic movement, Women’s groups and Groups in general - parish or community groups. Images influenced by women’s group are shown in square brackets. While all the women have belonged to groups of various kinds, not all are shown to have had their God images influenced by groups if it the influence was not readily evident.

453 In this case, the questioning is about God’s good nature. Catherine’s encounter with the charismatic movement frightened her into thinking God could trick her into being possessed by the devil instead of the Spirit.
Table 9-9 continued
Influences on God Images for Better or Ill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Better</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For The Better by the Given Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Ill</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For Ill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work⁴⁵⁴</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Love, Images expanding, Creator of Opportunity, Nurturer, Feminine, Loves-cares, Friend, Compassionate-bigger than taught, Challenge-storm, Darkness-mystery-suffers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitude</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Friend, Presence, Mystery, Light, No more clear images, but traces in everything</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(uncaring) Childhood God images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths, Illness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Stillness, Friend, Love, There-to talk to parent, God of being beside, Creator of opportunity, Paradox, questioning, Compassionate friend-hope, Presence, Challenge-storm, Unfolding, Darkness-mystery-suffers, Growth-tenderness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses</td>
<td>⁴⁵⁵ 8</td>
<td>In liturgy, no gender, Love, feminine qualities, Calling women, Feminine, Love-care</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Love, Presence, Loving personal being, Questioning-searching, God loves-cares, Universality-responsibility, Compassionate friend-hope, Positive energy, God of justice, Suffering, God who loves all, Challenge-storm, Darkness-mystery, Integrity-wholeness-growth-enabler</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td>⁴⁵⁶ 8</td>
<td>Androgynous, Love, No gender, Feminine qualities, Calling women, Birthgiver, Enabling, She who is</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuns</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Love, Loving personal being, In people-family of God, Compassionate, Searching, God who loves all</td>
<td>⁴ Help, Someone to talk to⁴⁵⁷, Induces guilt, Distant, Rigid, fear-duty</td>
<td>⁴⁵⁷ These images come about not because the nuns embodied them, but because they were so awful to Marie that Marie had no one else to turn to for these things but God.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁴⁵⁴ Art is included as work for Susie; volunteer work for Rose and Catherine.

⁴⁵⁵ Includes courses in general plus CFLE, NCRS, theology and Enneagram. All women in the study have been on the CFLE course, but it is not listed for all women because it may not have been a readily evident influence on specific God images.

⁴⁵⁶ Includes feminist theology.

⁴⁵⁷ These images come about not because the nuns embodied them, but because they were so awful to Marie that Marie had no one else to turn to for these things but God.
Table 9-9 continued

Influences on God Images for Better or Ill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Better</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For the Better by the Given Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Ill</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For Ill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Friend, Help, Love, Presence</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lack of development,( \text{458} ) Induces Guilt, Judge, Parent, Fear, Duty, Authority, Nonapproachable, Distant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>6 (from home, school, church)</td>
<td>Help, Cares, Loving, Friend, Complex, Jesus, Creator, Body of Christ</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Judge, Non-existent or non-loving, String-puller, Triumphantal/ watching/ demanding man, male, king, father – non-specific male images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8-10( \text{460} )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>In people, Love, God's family, God who loves all</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fearful-powerful, Judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Help, Friend, Love, Wisdom, Nurturer, Rock, Unfolding, Calling women</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Allows me to change,( \text{461} ) Someone to talk to, Love, Presence, Meaning of existence-love, There, God of being beside, Friend, Rock, Creation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Childhood God,( \text{462} ) Not loving,( \text{463} ) next page</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \text{458} \) In Marie’s case, parental traits and the trauma of her home and school life influenced God image for the better not through example but simply because she needed a reliable God as a substitute parent. At the same time, it is assumed that lack of parents who were truly present and good examples contributed to the lack of God image development generally. Marie’s parents were counted both as positive and negative influences.

\( \text{459} \) Teaching which resulted in childhood images like Our Lady, saints, and Trinity was not evaluated for better or ill for lack of sufficient information on the nature of what the images meant to the women as children.

\( \text{460} \) While male images in themselves are not considered for ill, solely male images are (due to demonstrable effects on women’s self images), and the latter images were given to most people in the 1940s and 1950s. Ten women specifically spoke of God imaged as male in their childhoods, and eight of the women volunteered specific images.

\( \text{461} \) Not by example did Helen’s husband contribute to this God image, but by counter example.

\( \text{462} \) Clare’s husband’s inability to spend time with family partially due to his job contributed to such a stressful situation that she reverted to her uncaring childhood images of God.
### Table 9-9 continued

**Influences on God Images for Better or Ill**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Better</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For the Better by the Given Influence</th>
<th>Number Of Women For Whom Influence Was For Ill</th>
<th>Examples Of God Images Formed Or Reinforced For Ill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Love, No gender, Creation-sea, Cocreators-partners, Creator, Closer than church, She who is, God who loves all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreats</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Loving personal being, Feminine, Loves-cares, Creation, Darkness-mystery-suffers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fear-threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vatican II</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Love, Images expanding, Questioning, Searching, God who loves all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Love, Caring</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lack of development Father Fearful/powerful, Authority, Heavenly Father, Parent, Distant, Fear/duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Art</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Loving God-Jesus,</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Man, Guy with beard, Huge person, Old man, Distant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mary-comfort</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Distant, Rigid, Fear-threat, Triumphant-watching, Demanding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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463 Stems from experience of marriage breakdown.

464 Includes retreats and spiritual direction.

465 These images in themselves may not be for ill, but because most are solely male, children with no counterbalance are powerfully taught that God is male and usually old, and therefore unlike themselves.

466 All were Catholic schools: three of the four were boarding schools.

467 While theologically one might argue with this as an image of God, for Clare this was an image for the better when other God images she had been given were not.
imagery. Courses (theology, personal growth, faith development, spirituality) encouraged the finding of God in liturgy, love, as feminine or of no gender, and calling women. Mentors were influences for eight women’s God imagery, and for seven women they were considered major influences. Mentors were important as influences toward images of God as love, presence, in searching, compassion, responsibility, as energy, justice, challenge, in suffering, mystery, integrity, wholeness and more. The influence of feminism and feminist theology led to understanding God as androgynous or of no gender, feminine, love, calling women, enabling and birthgiver.

3) Seven to four women’s God images were influenced for the better by *nuns, mothers, teaching* (especially as children), *priests, scripture, husbands, reading, retreats, Vatican II,* and *fathers.*

Regarding influences for ill:

1) The most common one was *teaching* received as children, which resulted in images of God mostly as controlling (six women), i.e., as judge, non-existent or non-loving, string-pulling, triumphal, always watching, demanding, and the multitude of solely male images (ten women).

2) Other common influences for ill were the women’s *mothers* (for seven women) and *fathers* (for six women), whose personalities, attitudes, actions or situations contributed to their daughters’ understandings of God as guilt-inducing, judge, parent, authority, non-approachable, distant, fearful, heavenly father, powerful, and inducing fear and duty. (Marie’s traumatic parental situation also contributed to lack of God image development.)

3) The next most common influence for ill (for five women) was church art, which influenced images of God as male, aged, huge and distant – images which do little to create connection with young girls/children. For four women, school and nuns

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468 Some of the influences for ill may be themselves partially traceable to the particular cultural milieu in which New Zealand Catholics growing up in the 1940s and 1950s found themselves. The Irish and French Catholic spiritualities (3.5.4) of the time tended to be fairly rigid and narrowly defined. Marie, Susie, Catherine and Rose (Chapters 4, 5, 6) all describe various aspects of the school culture which reflect wider New Zealand Catholic culture. A vignette of Irish subculture is given by Mark Williams, ed., *The Source of the Song: New Zealand Writers on Catholicism.* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995), 15. Different attitudes toward parent-child roles fifty-sixty years ago and the fact that Catholic families traditionally had larger families meant that there was more pressure on parental time. It is interesting that of the women who had the least influences for ill on their God images (Helen, Mary, Annie and Diane), Mary and Annie were Methodist and Annie and Diane were brought up outside New Zealand where the above ethnic and spiritual cultures would not have affected them. Diane did mention teachings received (from a French order of nuns) which temporarily gave her similar ideas of God as many of the Catholic New Zealanders. Helen’s parents were of English and Scottish ancestry (rather than Irish)
influenced them for ill as children, mostly reinforcing images of God derived from parental traits - a God who induced guilt, fear and duty, was distant, threatening, demanding and rigid. For Marie, however, this same influence of nuns resulted in a turning to God for lack of human closeness (as well as a lack of God image development).

It is evident from Table 9-8 that the numbers of influences on God images increase as one moves from the women whose images have always been positive (deepening in more cases rather than broadening) to the women who have multiple God images. This would suggest that the wider the experience and horizons of a person, the more stimulation and opportunity for meeting people and events which potentially influence God images.

As would be expected, most of the women whose images have always been positive have few influences for ill in their images, a possible exception being Marie with four such influences. Her God imagery managed to remain positive despite influences for ill, perhaps partially because those influences were at the same time both for better and for ill.

Clare, followed at a long distance by Susie, had proportionately the highest number of influences for ill/influences for good on their God images. Consistent with this, both have previously been noted for the control evidenced in their God images (9.2).

While, as noted above, eight women's God images were influenced for the better by the traumatic experiences of illness, accident and death, all the women experienced suffering in some way (including marriage breakdown - their parents or their own - or suffering of others). For all women except Clare there was growth in God images through that suffering. As noted in 9.4, Clare didn't feel that suffering had touched her to a major extent. She also perhaps had too many other things to cope with, including other influences on God images for ill and lack of solitude, which prevented her from integrating those experiences into her images of God.

Some influences on God images were considered catalysts (Table 9-8) if they provoked a sudden or rapid change in God images. The most common catalyst (in eight of the eleven women) was some form of suffering - deaths, serious mental or physical illness or accident, marriage breakdown with spouse or of parents, and living with the suffering of others. Suffering is usually beyond one's control, and causes the sufferer to push the boundaries of understanding in order to come to terms with the suffering. In this process, the women also

and her mother (Chapter 4) was outstanding for her ability to be ahead of her time in terms of common sense in things familial, ecclesial and spiritual.

469 The degree of seriousness and length of time the influence for ill lasted is perhaps even more important, but is not possible to do here. The number of influences gives some indication.
pushed the boundaries of their understandings of God. This is at the heart of the research by Martha Robbins who found that the deaths of women’s mothers was a catalyst to change in many areas of their lives, including God images.\textsuperscript{470}

Other influences which catalysed more than one woman’s God image changes were experiences of motherhood, work, groups, mentors, courses and individual encounters with the presence of God (which for Susie and Miriam - and in a similar retreat experience for Catherine - were preceded by severe trauma).

While parents, husbands, and friends were common influences on God images, none were seen to catalyse image change. The people or experiences which seemed to catalyse change are those which introduce new or different ideas and experience into women’s lives, cause challenge or change, provoke reflection and discussion, and at the same time provide some means of support and love.

It has already been noted (9.5.3) that a number of women, when speaking of the relationship between changes in their understandings of God and self, understood their images to have changed because of their life experiences. This understanding has been proven correct for the many God images traced here to life experiences, and is shared with feminist theologians who agree that experience is and should be at the root of God imagery,\textsuperscript{471} for how can one know or speak of God except in the language and history of self and community?

What then of the church, which in teaching and liturgy hands women images of God shaped largely by other than contemporary female understandings of God? The following section examines the women’s relationships with church as yet one more influence in shaping their understandings of God.

\textsuperscript{470} Martha Robbins, \textit{Midlife Women and Death of Mother}, 173-174.

9.7 God Image and Church

What are women's attitudes toward church, and how are they related to women's God images?

For most of the women, adolescence was the first time they began to think on their own about church, staying connected out of duty (Susie, Catherine), for the ritual (Helen, Susie), because they could meet other young people (Marie, Clare), out of intellectual interest (Rose), because of role models (Diane), or as a haven (Marie, Helen). Four women - Helen, Catherine, Anne and Diane - all explicitly mention questioning and/or being unhappy with aspects of church teaching or practice.

By early adulthood, all the women except Susie (preoccupied with travel, children and husband's accident) and Miriam (just entering the Catholic church) came to understand that church and God were often very different. The church was recognised as a fallible human institution marked by hierarchy and male domination (Annie), lack of caring (Rose, Clare), teachings that were not necessarily central to Christianity (Clare), and exclusivity (Diane). Helen, Marie, Mary, Clare, Rose, Anne and Diane specifically mention realisations that God and Christianity were not always associated with church or were to be found outside the church. Mary put it succinctly: "My Christianity and my relationship with God ... I still try not to have [them] contaminated by the church." Even Marie, who is perhaps the most loyal to church in the traditional sense, holds her faith and God relationship apart from the church: "I never associated the changes in the church with my relationship with God ... I don't believe in a priest, I believe in God ... Whatever is happening in the parish community doesn't change the relationship I have with God."

By middle adulthood, all the women had been involved deeply in church organisations and had formed opinions about what the church was and what they would

472 Attitudes toward church are tabulated in Appendix J in more detail.

473 For Catholics at this time, it would have been unthinkable not to attend Mass on Sundays.

474 Divergence between images of church and God seem to occur when life experience leads to a significant engagement with church attitudes or organisations in conjunction with meeting people who model different attitudes and modes of behaviour. For example, Helen's mother, the priest who kept Catherine scruples under control, the role model Anne met, and Diane's nun - role models and father offered such different perspectives.

475 Women not Catholic as adolescents were not directly concerned with such issues at this time. Mary made the decision at the end of adolescence to become Catholic because her fiancé was Catholic (but uses the metaphor of changing sport to describe it), while Miriam went to Protestant services out of desire, though she was not allowed to attend Bible study at school. Annie had little connection during this period of time.
like it to be. While some said they ‘enjoyed’ the church for opportunities it gave them like Eucharist and various groups, most women were clear that the church was in many ways - structures, ministry, doctrine, as gathering - not a mediator of God for them. All women by this time had drawn distinctions between how they understood God and how they perceived church. Diane says, “I think that the idolatry of the past - of church becoming God - is totally wrong and a distortion of the truth.” Rose would agree: “God is not the church ... the church is not God. God is bigger than the church and God will exist outside the church. And I’m not giving God away.”

Table 9-10 selects common perceptions of and hopes for church voiced by the women. Middle adult God images were searched to see if any matched women’s hopes for church, and also God images from childhood were searched to see if any were related to women’s current perceptions of church.

It is evident from women’s hopes for church that they expect equality, caring/support/nurture/love, responsibility, sharing/community, acceptance, openness to questions, empowerment and freedom/growth. The vision of church voiced by this group of New Zealand women is echoed by surveyed groups of North American and Australian women. Many women refer to Jesus and the gospels or to Christian ethics and values as measures which the contemporary church (as institution, structure, ministry and all they entail) as a whole has not lived up to. Every one of those major hopes for church is matched by images of God held by at least one and often many of the women.

476 Mary struggles with this contamination problem, finding that the word ‘God’ conjures up two images, the one associated with authority and church, and the one associated with Jesus and love.

477 The literature also indicates that many people maintain their belief in the goodness of God even when they have not found church or organised religion supportive for them. A major North American study explored women’s alienation from church, and excerpts from interviews with women are very similar to those above in the present study. See Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis and Allison Stokes, Defecting in Place, 67, 85. See similar findings in Rick L. Williamson, “Images of God Among Persons With AIDS, 57; Donna Kane et al., “Perceptions of God,” 235; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God,” 3. Journal online. Accessed 5 July 2001. http:/ /www.crosscurrents.org/ african.htm. A major Australian study also indicates findings of alienation among women, and these were verified by an independent study done under the auspices of the Australian bishops. See Denise Desmarchelier, Voices of Women, 126.

478 Similar hopes are voiced by many women. Hopes for enabling and nurturing are reflected by Anna Holmes, “The Dark Night and the Motherhood of God,” in With Heads Uncovered. Enid Bennett, ed. (Auckland: The Women in Ministry Network, 1988), 38. Hopes for the church to be non-hierarchical, nonpatriarchal, inclusive, open, embracing, accepting, loving, gender-equal, are shared leadership are voiced by the women interviewed by Miriam Therese Winter and others, Defecting in Place, 192. A similar vision is found in the survey of Australian women by Denise Desmarchelier, Voices of Women, 51-75.

479 Similar references are found in the study previously referred to; see Miriam Therese Winter and others, Defecting in Place, 69, 85. See also Erice Webb, “Patriarchal Church,” in Women and ... A Vashti’s Voice Supplement. Erice Webb, ed. (Auckland: Women and Ministry Conference Committee, n.d.): 18.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood Images of God</th>
<th>Perceptions of Church</th>
<th>Hopes for Church</th>
<th>Middle Adulthood Images of God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solely male</td>
<td>Male-dominated, sexist, inequality of clergy - laity, and women - men</td>
<td>Involvement of laity, women - men as equals</td>
<td>Increasingly inclusive gender images, calling women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unapproachable, distant (Cares, helps, presence, eternal giver, love)</td>
<td>Not caring</td>
<td>Caring, sharing, small groups, with the people, supportive of members as they go out to wider community, nurture, loving</td>
<td>All-encompassing presence, cares, helps, family of God, in people, friend, being beside, positive energy, eternal giver, justice, suffers, nurturer, heals, love, loving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent, (Parent Creator)</td>
<td>Hierarchy, politics, not fully participative, patriarchal</td>
<td>Less hierarchical structure, sharing responsibility, participating, community, working together</td>
<td>Cocreators / partners, community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge</td>
<td>Can’t find God there, excludes, restrictive</td>
<td>Acceptance of all, welcoming</td>
<td>Acceptance, compassion, gracious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority, authoritarian, induces guilt, fear, duty</td>
<td>Defining, not open to questioning, rules, doctrine, thinks it has all right answers</td>
<td>Receives questioning, poses possibilities not impose answers</td>
<td>There to talk to, creator of opportunity, wisdom, challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Enabling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisoning, watching</td>
<td>Confining, block to faith / relationship with God</td>
<td>Freedom, encouraging growth</td>
<td>Unfolding, growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To compile this table, perceptions of church and hopes for church were derived from words associated with church and vision for church in Table J-2, Appendix J. To reduce the volume of words, only words mentioned by at least two women were used in Table 9-11. Perceptions and hopes which seemed to match each other (insofar as the hope would mend the wrong mentioned in the perception) were placed opposite one another in the table. Then women's middle adulthood images of God which seemed to match their visions for church were placed in column 4, and on a hunch, women's childhood images of God which seemed to match what they were rejecting (or affirming, in some cases) in church were placed in column 1. Not all of the women's God images are included in this table. The way hopes and perceptions are matched with God images may be done in slightly different ways, but knowing what the women meant by their images, I have matched them as best I can for this exercise.

Images in parentheses are positive God images. Parent was considered in both positive and negative lights.
Likewise, when perceptions of the existing church (sexist, not caring, hierarchical, exclusive, defining, concerned with maintaining power, confining) are examined, all of them are reflected in images of God which have mostly been amended, rejected or transformed by the women over their lifetimes. Two women who were both Protestant as children and adolescents (Mary, Annie), seem to have met these perceptions through the Catholic church, for such attributes were never part of their God images. Just as women’s God images have evolved and grown as the women have grown as persons, so women expect the church to meet their maturity and expanding experience of the world with corresponding adult roles, responsibilities, community and spiritual nurture. It is not surprising that women (and men) often leave the church if they grow beyond its ability to nourish them and/or it will not allow them roles and serious questions that might change it.

Most women were well aware, when questioned, that their vision for church is related to their images of God. As was true for the relationship between self image and God image, some women understood some of their expanding God images to have come partially from their struggles with church, while some felt that their expanding God images caused them to re-examine their understanding of church. Rose, for example, noted that “my experience of church tended to make me look at my experience of God,” while Anne, Diane, Miriam and Catherine felt that it was more their God images which affected their perception of church. In Catherine’s case, her early experience of what she called ‘spiritual abuse’ by the church, indeed coloured her God images, but later in life the transformation of her God images through experience then allowed her to perceive the sad reality of church and to separate God from it. Miriam said that, at first, her understanding of God had “deepened my relationship with church ... [but] now I’m on vacation with God.” Anne said that at one time her relationship with God had led to more involvement, but at the time of the last

482 Perceptions of church from two Catholic women’s groups in New Zealand are similar to those found here. They are reported by Marg Gilling, Where Do We Find Our Meaning? (Palmerston North, New Zealand: The Futures Group of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, 1999), 31, 33. Other New Zealand articles concur: See Neil Darragh, “Liturgy and Hope,” in Proceedings of the Theological Symposium on Hope, Mary Eastham, ed. (Palmerston North, New Zealand: Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, 1999); Mary Scully, “Why I Decided to Leave the Church,” in Empowering to Transform: A Resource Book for Women, Margie Lovell-Smith, ed. (Auckland: The Planning Group, Women’s Ministries and Spirituality Conference, 1988), 75. Perceptions of church by groups of women in other countries are very much the same. See Carolyn Louise Sharp, “Listening to Women and Speaking of God,” 271-271; Miriam Therese Winter and others, Defecting in Place, 104-105; Denise Desmarchelier, Voices of Women, 5,20.

483 The attributes were not part of Marie’s or Helen’s stated God images either, but control was shown to be an underlying attitude. Although Marie’s reported God images were all positive, her imagery revealed a controlling attribute after listening to her speak about suffering (9.4). Such imagery seems largely unconscious, although part of her may have chosen to ignore/minimise that God attribute because of her need for security in her overwhelmingly insecure childhood and its aftermath. Helen’s understanding of suffering also revealed controlling aspects to her God image not evident elsewhere.
interviews it had led to "no involvement at all" because "I no longer have any hope in the church." Most women acknowledged that as much as church was difficult to deal with on the whole, their relationship with parts of church (groups, liturgy, scripture or sheer hope) enabled them to still keep company with it.

Although all women evidenced some kind of standing-apart from church, the positive things said about church decrease and the number of women with only negative church attributes increase as one moves from women with fewer and less developed God images to those with multiple and highly developed midlife God images.484 In Winter's study,485 it was those women who used predominantly male imagery who seemed to be happier in the church, while those who used female imagery were more critical of church.486

In 2.2.2.2 it was noted that sociologists and political scientists understood changes in God imagery as reflecting (or being reflected in) the predominant socio-political systems of different periods in history. Evidence for this perspective is seen in church perceptions and hopes in Table 9-10, particularly in the desires for equality among genders and life-states (lay-clergy), a less hierarchical, more participatory structure,487 openness to questioning and freedom - all of which are paralleled in western contemporary society by increased participation of women, democracy and civil rights (including freedom of speech). As pointed out by one author, however, the church grew up in Mediterranean society, one in which concepts of authority are rigidly gender-based and any questioning of rights and power is considered a serious threat to unity and stability.488 As long as the universal church continues to operate out of this kind of culturally-rooted hierarchical model, conflicts will remain with those who live with a different participatory/ freedom-based paradigm.

The women in this study have all taken issue with some aspects of church, some women to a more active and vocal degree. By midlife, most women's God images reflect that position in a clear movement from a God and church identified with power, men, hierarchy,

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484 Refer to Table J-2 in Appendix J and 8.4. The order of women in Table J-2 is from fewer and less-developed God images to multiple and better-developed God images. The table indicates a movement from top to bottom of fewer positive comments about church and, in general, more women with solely negative comments about church.

485 Miriam Therese Winter et al., Defecting in Place, 179.

486 It is possible that if the present study had been larger, it might have shown this trend. It is also possible that if Winter's study had looked overall at God images, the conclusions of the two studies may have converged.

487 The conflict of values between hierarchy and equal participation in the church is illustrated in the sphere of liturgy by Sandra M. Schneiders, "Liturgy and Spirituality -The Widening Gap." Spirituality Today, 30 (September 1978): 201-205.
judgment, authority/fear, uncaring and constraint to a God and vision of church known by empowerment, equality, participation/community, acceptance, openness to questioning, caring and freedom.  

9.8 Evaluation of the Methodology

The present research is evaluated in terms of the aims of the methodology identified from the feminist theological literature and the criteria for soundness drawn from the social sciences (3.3.2). The merger of these has produced six aims/criteria which include emancipation, drawing on women’s experience in context, subjectivity and participation, confirmability, an interdisciplinary nature and a concern with seeking truth (credibility).

The participatory methods and respect for difference in the presentation of findings in this study contribute to the emancipatory task by giving voice to women’s understandings of God and the influences in their social context which encourage or constrain them. The research has promoted reflection in participants and researcher, and, it is hoped, will continue that task in readers by publication of parts of the research. Awareness (conscientisation) in individuals that they have the freedom speak about God in different ways - and that to do so is a part of human wholeness - is a great gift. No less a gift is the hope that stories of these women lives, struggles and values offer to others, including the researcher.

This research was focused on relating each woman’s experience of faith and life in her individual context. The uniqueness of each woman’s story was preserved, while at the same time commonalities of women’s experience were drawn out both among women in the study and others from different contexts. This was enabled, in part, by contextual similarity to the researcher and by researcher attentiveness to difference.

The research methods are highly subjective, and as participatory as possible given the constraint that the analysis had to be the researcher’s own. A relationship was developed


489 Carolyn Sharp (2.2.2.2) noted that the Quebecois women she studied who had been through institutional struggles (including struggles with church) had God images which emphasized empowerment, sustenance, presence, and connection. The images she found and those found in this study have similar characteristics. See Carolyn Louise Sharp, “Listening to Women,” 265-269.

490 Chapters 4-7 contain researcher interpretation and analytical commentary which were seen and verified by the participants. The women did not participate in or respond to the rest of the analysis (Chapters 8-9).
between researcher and participants over months and, in some cases, years, involving hospitality and dialogue. Social location and researcher bias are reflected in the methods (derived from feminist theological methodology), the avenues explored (gender and power issues, self image, church), and in some of the findings (e.g., that women who use gender neutral and feminine God images also have stronger self images).

Confirmability is in some tension with subjectivity. While subjectivity in terms of establishing relationship creates the greater likelihood of openness and depth in participant responses, researcher bias has made it important that interpreted findings can be tracked to their data source and that conclusions are supported by both. Participant checks have been crucial here, tables relied on in the text as bridges between life stories and more analytical interpretation, and self-criticism and supervisors relied on to challenge interpretations or unsupported conclusions.

The nature of this research has been interdisciplinary. Its primary focus on God images is in the realm of spirituality, a discipline involving the whole person. While addressing theological questions, the study methods are derived mostly from the social sciences and the answers were viewed through each woman's known life and socio-cultural context. As might be expected in an interdisciplinary endeavour, this one experienced the tension between expectations of theologians and social scientists in terms of both methodology and findings.

The concern with truth-seeking or credibility was facilitated by use of multiple methods to draw on both intellectual and emotional aspects to each person, by the establishment of trust relationships between researcher and participants over a relatively long period of time, by participant verification of transcripts and life stories, and by use of the women's own words to ensure faithfulness to their meanings. Any discrepancies in the final analysis lie with the researcher. The ultimate truth criterion, according to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, is the potential for emancipation, which brings full circle the evaluation of methodological aims and research soundness.
CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: WHO IS GOD FOR US?

The group of New Zealand Catholic women who participated in this study have given not only portraits of the divine from various stages in their lives, but provide a window into ever-evolving understandings of God throughout their lives. From relatively simple and often unrelated and contradictory images of God in childhood, most women have, by middle adulthood, developed rich, complex and integrated God imagery. From childhood God images based mostly on parental traits and images gleaned from church, school and home teaching, middle adulthood images have evolved following many years of experience with people, events both joyful and tragic, involvement with communities including church, and a greater knowledge of self.

This conclusion will briefly summarise research findings in the framework of the aims of the research (1.2), articulate the major implications of the research, and point out avenues of potential endeavour.

10.1 What are the Women’s God Images and What Influences their Formation and Change?

10.1.1 Women’s Images of God

10.1.1.1 Women for Whom God Has Always been Love/Friend

God has always been understood by this group of four women as positive and loving. These women had God images which became more developed and integrated in middle adulthood, but retained the same essence of God as love/friend as in their childhoods. These lasting primary images were usually based on parents and other significant adults who modeled loving behaviour, although in one case, God became friend by default because of a childhood experience of having no one else. The women’s subsequent life experience with motherhood, friendship and even suffering served to reinforce their loving God images. Moreover, women’s experiences of education, courses, groups, other role models, illness,
death and so on (8.5.1) provided the raw material for other nascent images of God such as
God in nature and stillness, love, more to know, in sacrament, internal well and in others.

God images thus change and grow, even when they may appear to stay the same.
God images may be changed - or nudged into change - by any person or event in life (and
sometimes fertile combinations thereof).

10.1.1.2 Women for Whom God Images were in Restless Transition

The childhood God image history of two women was weighed down by images of a
fearful, powerful, guilt-inducing, removed, imprisoning, ordering and authoritarian God -
images derived from parental traits which scarcely had a chance to be balanced by relatively
affect-free ‘taught’ images of God as creator or the ‘huge guy with the beard’. Both women
made huge strides in transforming their God images, to the point where each in middle
adulthood has multiple well-developed mostly positive images. They had primary images
of God as friend, in people, all-encompassing presence, peaceful being, community, and
creator; and secondary images of God as wisdom, of no gender, both genders and a bright
light. Both women still struggle with earlier God images, including God as parent, judge
and the meaning of existence (not only God as love but a force for order), which indicate that
their God-image transformation is still in process.

The experience of negative God images in childhood did not result (in these women)
in either permanent negative God images or the conclusion that such a God was not worth
knowing. Rather, through exposure to loving family, community, nature, courses, women’s
groups, their work - and in one case an encounter with God - they were shown a God who
had many different faces, and attributes far removed from some they had learned in
childhood.

10.1.1.3 Women with a God of Infinite Imagery

Two other women also had a legacy of much negative childhood God imagery but in
middle adulthood have a wealth of fully developed and integrated images. From a God who
was a non-approachable judge and distant judging string puller, they have, through very
different circumstances, found a God who is loving, healing, in people, trusted, in creation, a co-creator, calling women, being beside, creator of opportunity, birthgiver, nurturer, painter of sunsets, feminine, paradox and humorous.

The God image path for one was a gradual one through much reflecting and searching and marked by many tragic deaths. For the other, her God images did not really begin to develop until after her marriage broke down, she was alone bringing up her children, and she had a ‘St Paul’ experience in middle adulthood. That experience was followed by new contact with mentors, families and friends, and the courage to begin a new career - and in all this her God images exploded with life.

These two stories and patterns of God image development demonstrate that significant God image change can happen gradually over time, or very rapidly and at later stages in life. In both lives, the number of influences on their middle adulthood God images points toward the observation that exposure to many and varied life experiences (mentors, friends, groups, feminism, suffering including divorce and death, motherhood, etc.) is a factor in broader God imagery.

10.1.1.4 Women Who Found Once Clear Images Fading

This group’s middle adulthood God images resemble those of the latter group in that they are many, rich, positive and deeply developed. Their childhood imagery varied from mixed with many positives to heavily negative. The stories of these three women differ from the others in that, after having come to know a God who in rich and varied ways, they came to experience God as mystery, lack of clarity, and with no more clear images.

Like most of the other women, each of them has experienced deep suffering, including keen awareness of the suffering of others. Their God images have been influenced by some of the same influences as the others - motherhood, friends, work, mentors, women’s groups, overseas experiences, solitude, and nature. Some of their images include God as friend, rock, within, creator, in creation, gracious God, eternal giver, acceptance, positive energy, nurturer, creator, she who is, light, challenge/storm, in darkness/who suffers, integrity/wholeness/compassion, and unfolding.

These women's experiences show that God images may not always continue to grow in breadth. For some women there is a time – variously described as haziness or like a cloud of aim 5; and 10.5 addresses aims 6 and 7.
- during which they cannot see around or ahead. The God who was once visible and in
everything appears to vanish, leaving traces everywhere but no clear path.

Each woman interviewed had a different spectrum of God images at each stage of
life, and each woman at any stage was different from any other woman. The ways in which
each woman understood God at a given time in her life depended on the influences of the
people, ideas, groups and events which made up her life experience. The relationship
between God images and personality may be a productive and fascinating direction to
explore. People of different personality or temperament react differently to given
circumstances, and seek out different persons and activities in life, which may very well
influence their God images in similar ways. This study involved pakeha women of a similar
age who all were or had been married. Compiling similar stories and God image
development patterns in single women, older women, women of younger generations or of
different ethnicities, and men would add much breadth for comparison.

As most pastoral theologians and practitioners are aware, God images are core to a
person’s understanding of the world and of self. To involve people in any meaningful kind
of public prayer, education or community, respect and acknowledgment of their
understanding of God is paramount. Thus liturgy, education and other faith community
gatherings require use of inclusive God imagery and cognizance of where individuals are in
their understandings of God.

10.1.2 Factors and Patterns of Development in God Image Formation and Change

10.1.2.1 Childhood Images of God

Childhood God images were usually formed from the attributes of parents (and
sometimes other significant adults). Mothers’ attributes first, and then fathers’, were the
most often drawn on for God attributes. When one or both parents exhibited controlling
traits, they were likely to be translated into the child’s God image. Even if those same
parents had caring traits, the positive traits were not reflected in the child’s God image if the
parent appeared to the child to be too busy or unapproachable. A positive (associated with
loving and caring traits) image of God in these women as children was most likely if at least
one significant adult had a close caring relationship with the child, especially if that
relationship was with her mother or another female carer, and if that person was also
associated with God in some way (through prayer, teaching or church).
The second major source of childhood God imagery was teaching from parents, school, church, catechism, art (statues, murals etc.), songs, and stories and prayers from Bible stories and children’s books. 'Taught' images sometimes lent support to those 'caught' from adults, and at other times were more obviously derived from 'taught' sources, e.g., images like trinity, king, bearded old man in the sky, person with a white nightie, etc. Children who were Catholic from birth usually had an understanding of Mary and often the saints as part of their God images. Two women from the Methodist tradition had childhood God images associated largely with Jesus. All childhood images of God, as would be expected from the 1940s and 1950s, were male.

Giving children a positive image of God as someone they can turn to depends largely on the modeling which parents and other important adults give them. If the adults in children’s lives are involved with them, spend time with them, are accepting and caring – then children are likely to develop an understanding of a close and trusted God. ‘Taught’ information about God is also important because it affects children deeply, even though the taught images of God usually fade over time if they are not reinforced by ‘caught’ experience. Thus the way God is portrayed in music, prayers, Bible stories, statuary, paintings, drawings and in religious education curriculum will deeply influence children – especially if that God is reflected in the persons and situations around them. A God who is not frightening or far away, a God who loves and cares about each child (as in examples of Jesus in scripture) is of great importance.

10.1.2.2 Adolescent Images of God

Images of God in adolescence were those most difficult to recall for most of the women in the study. In most cases, largely parental-trait influenced and taught images were still in place, but the opening up of the world to these young women began to have some impact on how they thought about God. For many, mid-twentieth century church groups like CYM were formative opportunities offering relationships, learning, and fun which both implicitly and explicitly gave young people glimpses of a different God. For most women, adolescence was a time where for some time there was a ‘moratorium’ on who God was in their lives. The moratorium may be seen as a time when so many new experiences were opening up that old beliefs were held in abeyance while God (consciously or unconsciously) was being experienced in many new people and places. Moratorium periods were noted into early and even middle adulthood when women were searching and reflecting.
It is important that parents, teachers of religious education, leaders of youth ministry and tertiary chaplains are aware of and respect ‘moratorium’ stages as a usual occurrence, especially in young people. Religious education and formation at this stage can aim to help adolescents discover the God who is meeting them in the new situations and people they encounter, rather than expecting their older God images to always fit their new stage of life or assuming adult God images would speak to adolescent experience. It is at such searching times, however, that new images, opportunities and resources for questioning minds must be provided, and that encouragement, acceptance and trust are given to young people. It is evident from the attraction of Lifeteen, Hearts Aflame, many diocesan youth programmes, World Youth Day, and even Firepower, that knowledge, community and liturgy relevant to their experience are being sought by young people. It is incumbent on Catholic schools and the church at parish and diocesan level to provide opportunities for young people to search for and to express their understandings of God.

10.1.2.3 God Image Development Patterns throughout Adulthood

When women’s development patterns were compared (8.5.2), it was noted that women with positive childhood images (usually ‘caught’) were more likely to carry their images into adulthood, and women with negative childhood images were more likely to transform their images into positive ones or develop new positive images. There was a clear movement among all women toward the development of positive God imagery over their lifetimes.

One could ask whether there are women who have mostly negative images of God. If so, were they simply not among the CFLE graduates who formed the volunteer pool for this research, or have they left the institutional church? What paths would their God image development have followed, or did their negative God become an unhealthy or irrelevant burden which was let go?

Seven of the eleven women in this study came from backgrounds where home, school and/or church left them with some seriously deficient and often deleterious images of God (authoritarian, demanding, judging, nonapproachable). Yet all of the women have, by middle adulthood, met a God who was overwhelmingly love and friend, and often much more – a nurturing, creating, empowering God in people and all creation. Although two women still had some lingering negative attributes from childhood, and the images of two
others showed some aspects of control in God attributes, most middle adulthood God imagery was highly positive.

Whether their childhood images were positive or negative, all women met a loving God in their life experiences (whether joyful or painful) since childhood. Many met affirming and compassionate friends, accepting and loving husbands, empowering mentors. They took courses where they were introduced to new ideas or met in groups where they found God in community and often discovered their own giftedness as women. They experienced God in pregnancy, birth, and caring for children. They also discovered God in the midst of depression, cancer, mental illnesses, marriage breakdown and the deaths of children, parents, friends and mentors. Some experienced an encounter with the divine.

The implications from these findings are fairly straightforward. Parents are our first teachers. Not 'what they say' but 'who they are' is how children have their first introduction to who God is. How parents exercise authority, how they share decision making as children grow, how they listen, how they react to adversity, how they love - many of these things children apply to their nascent God images. As this study showed (8.5.2), positive 'caught' God images are more likely to stick than 'taught' ones, and led to proliferation of positive God images in the later lives of the women in this study.

The greatest potential influences (9.6) for the better on the God images of the women in this study (for between eight and ten women) were friends, motherhood, nature, groups they were part of, their work, solitude, suffering through illness and death, courses, mentors and feminism. For between four and seven women, influences for the better included nuns, mothers, teaching (mostly as children), scripture, husbands, reading, retreats, Vatican II and fathers.

The most common influences for ill on God imagery were teaching of solely male images (ten women), mothers (seven), fathers (six), teaching of controlling God images (six), church art (which for five women portrayed God as old, male, distant and fearful), and school and nuns (who promoted an atmosphere of fear, duty, rigidity, etc.) It is somewhat disconcerting that in this group of women, the very persons and institutions entrusted with children’s care and passing on faith – teaching, parents, church and school – are the ones who most influenced God images for ill. It is of some comfort that these persons and institutions influenced the women (mostly in childhood) for good in almost similar numbers.

By far it is people and relationships which seem to shape the God images of this group of women – their families, friends, mentors and groups to which they belong. Even influences like the work they do, much of the suffering they have experienced, and the church art they absorbed as children all involved people and relationships. Nature plays an
important role as does solitude – and in these women the two are often linked as much of their solitude was found in nature (although some also found it in their homes or the dark quiet of a church building). A third grouping of influences includes ideas and events through teaching, courses, reading and events like Vatican II (which offered new ideas). All these sought and unsought experiences of adult life shape images of God, and in this group of women, experiences have shaped influenced women’s God images – at least in adult life - mostly for the better. As Anne says, “I can now put in place in images, the experiences I’ve had of women who have been influential in my life. You … add them to God’s cloak as it were.”

This research fully supports John McDargh (2.2.1.3) who concluded that an intellectual meeting alone with an image of God is insufficient to change an image – experiencing God in that way is also necessary. This study has shown that is true for both the initial formation and later changes of God images. No image of God will be truly accepted unless persons have experienced God that way in their lives. God can only be known as God is revealed to us in the persons and experiences of life around us.

Some life experiences also have the capacity to cause accelerated development in God imagery. The most common catalyst to change for the women in this study was suffering – an unsought experience (9.6) – which stopped ordinary life for a period of time and pushed the women to reorient their understandings of God to fit with this new, usually unwelcome and sometimes devastating experience. Martha Robbins’ research (2.2.1.3 and 9.6) showed that mother’s deaths had this effect, but the present research demonstrates that other forms of suffering – mental or physical illness or accident in individuals or those close to them, marriage breakdown, and living with acute awareness of the suffering of others – can also be catalysts to the growth and development of God images. Other influences which seem to have been catalysts for some of the women’s God image development include motherhood, work, groups, mentors, courses and individual encounters with the presence of God.

While some influences and catalysts are usually unsought and unexpected (suffering, encounters with God), many are often encountered or sought out in the normal course of women’s lives – motherhood, solitude, friendship, mentors, groups, courses, nature, feminism and so on. It has been noted that the more varied a woman’s life experience is, the more breadth in her images of God. This is not to say that all these influences and catalysts should be sought after indiscriminately. The cult of suffering has had a long history in the church, to the detriment of psychological, physical and spiritual health of persons. It can be said that the well-being of the whole person as well as one’s God image can be broadened and enriched by engaging with the world in many different ways. It can also be said that life
experiences both joyful and painful (with adequate support) have shown the potential to reveal God to those who are searching.

10.2 How are Gender and Power Attributes in Women’s God Images Related to Women’s Self Images and Understandings of Suffering?

The inclusion of gender and power attributes in women’s God images is sometimes conscious and deliberate, and sometimes unconscious.

Gender attributions in most of the women’s God images have changed over time from solely male language in the women’s childhoods to more gender balanced and often feminine language in middle adulthood (9.1). Gender attributes in language have become more conscious with the availability of feminist theological literature and the general trend in western society toward inclusive language. Women who have moved to gender balance, gender neutrality or feminine language in their God images have done so consciously because they want to understand God in a fuller way and because this enables them to better understand themselves as reflecting the divine image.

Power attributions are sometimes less conscious, and required not only an analysis of God language and images (e.g., Lord, parent – 9.2), but a look at women’s understandings of suffering (9.4.2) to gain a fuller picture. While many women have deliberately rejected God images extolling controlling power and consciously choose empowering images, some women are not as aware or concerned about the possible implications of controlling language in their own lives or in society in general. While only two women were found to have aspects of controlling power in their stated images and understandings of God, another two were discovered to have such aspects when questioned about God’s role in suffering.492 When the use of Lord was probed as a potentially controlling image, it was found, however, that some women who place more emphasis on the sound of words than their meaning instil it with a more innocuous understanding. Such usage could be explored in more depth in future research.

492 Women’s understandings of suffering were important not only because they revealed underlying images of control, but because they revealed that for nearly all women, suffering (as reviewed in the previous section) was important as both an influence on the kind of God images women developed (God who suffers, in darkness, compassion, beside, etc) and as a catalyst to development and growth of God imagery generally.
When gender and power attributions were tabulated (9.5.1) with information on self image, a clear pattern emerged. Women with stronger self images were less likely to use male God language and more likely to use gender balanced and female God language. They were less likely to have controlling attributes in their God images or use parental images, and were more likely to understand God's power as empowering rather than as power to plan or act. The same women were more likely to have experienced acceptance from significant persons as a child, and empowerment from a friend, husband or mentor as an adult. Whether or not a woman had had controlling God images or parents as a child did not prove to be a factor in adult self image or the gender and power of adult God images (although it would be good for a larger study to test this).

Courage and initiative to act for the better in one's own life and for justice in the world are associated with stronger self images in the women in this study. The relationships among good self images, acceptance and empowerment, gender balanced, feminine and empowering God images have wide implications (9.5.3). The more women are encouraged to understand God in language and images which are gender balanced, gender neutral and feminine, the stronger their self images will be – and the more they will be empowered to work for change in society. Conversely, the more empowerment and acceptance given to women, the more likely they are to explore and grow in their God images, and to use God images which reflect transformative and empowering rather than controlling or parental power. In these aspects, the intuitions of feminist and other theologians are vindicated – changing traditional gender and power images of God has the potential to transform lives and, ultimately, society. For some persons, however, changes in God imagery may require self growth first, or for the two to happen hand in hand.

Always McDargh’s axiom must be kept in mind – that people will adopt a new God image only if they experience that God image to be true in their lives. The women in this study found God to be listening, compassionate, a friend, a birthgiver, a nurturer, in creation, and much more because their experiences of persons, events and nature reflected those images of God back to them. To encourage more loving, compassionate and empowering images of God, we have to become more loving, compassionate and empowering people.
10.3 How do the God Images of this Group of Women Compare with Images Documented Elsewhere?

With regard to traditional God images, most women recognize God as eternal, good, true, giver of life, God of all creation and powerful (though with varying meanings). Some dispute attributes like immutability, impassibility and omnipotence. In the end, traditional terminology simply is not the way the women in this study speak about God.

There are, however, remarkable similarities in New Zealand Catholic women’s God images compared with God images in contemporary literature and studies - as well as distinctive differences (9.3.2). The similarities with God images in other studies are that five of the ten most common images used by the women in this study are also among those in the three other studies cited: God as liberator/power, friend, presence, healer/helper and creator. But then the similarities fall away.

Nature images of God were the most common images of the women in this study (as they were in the literature), unlike American and Australian studies which did not identify nature images as important at all. The second most common image for this group of women was God as love, which while mentioned briefly in the literature, was not a major image there or in other studies. That these are central images for this group indicates opportunities to experience God in creation, and also to experience God in the context of relationship. It is possible that New Zealand geography and culture are more conducive to these opportunities, but this would have to be tested with a standardized study across cultures.

Three other God images among the ten most common for the women in this study - suffering, compassion, indwelling - did not appear in the ten most common in the other studies, and of these, only compassion was mentioned to the same magnitude in the literature. God who suffers, is compassionate, and who dwells within are images which seem to have come into being through reflective time and solitude, two resources which perhaps persons in the other cultures studied may not have available to the same degree.

While the images of eleven women cannot be generalized to all women, the facts that half the most used images which were also used in other studies, and that all were found to some degree in the literature, suggest some reliability. The implication, if these images are able to be generalised to a larger group of New Zealanders, is that their use in prayer, Eucharist, music and religious education within the church would be imperative. A larger study focused on current God images would be able to determine the prevalence of such images in the wider population.
All the women in the study made a clear distinction between who God was for them and what church was for them, and were also clear that the church would not ever come between themselves and God.

As children, God and church had been lumped together, but at various times between adolescence and middle adulthood, women began to associate different characteristics with church than they did with God. God was increasingly understood as inclusive, a caring presence, co-creator and community, accepting, listening and wisdom, enabling and encouraging growth. Church was increasingly seen as male-dominated and clergy-centred, uncaring, hierarchical, excluding, not open to questioning, wielding power, and blocking or confining in human relationships with God.

In a significant and perhaps not surprising way, women's vision and hopes for church matched well with their understandings of God. They wanted the institution to be more like who they image God to be - a church of equal involvement, caring community, participation, acceptance, possibilities, empowerment, freedom and growth. Also significantly, women's perceptions of the church of the present bear striking similarity to the God images women rejected or transformed over their lifetimes - those images of solely male, distant, parent, judge, authority, power and restriction (which are often associated with more traditional God attributes).

Sociologically, there are parallels with women's present understandings of God and with their vision for church in western society's moves in past centuries toward participative democracy and human and civil rights (including gender equality and freedom of speech). Geographically, studies and writings by women from many countries - particularly those from North America and Australia - have shown other Catholic women to be thinking in similar directions about God and church. How is the church to respond?

Ideally, the church could become the vision women have of it. But the church is a human institution, one whose structures, doctrines, liturgies and ministerial roles have thus far been shaped largely by men, and one which usually changes slowly - except through the combined vision and action of people like those who shaped the changes of Vatican II. There is hope in the many reform movements overseas - We Are Church, Call to Action, FutureChurch, Women's Ordination Conference, Association for Lay Catholics, Voice of the Faithful - working toward greater lay participation, women's ordination, justice inside and
outside the church, and accountability from bishops. As this is written, there is also a
growing wave of priests’ groups calling for optional celibacy.493

All such movements, including Christchurch’s Catholic Women Knowing Our Place,
many lesser known women’s liturgy and discussion groups, and some parish communities
in this country offer opportunities for those who are not sufficiently fed by the institutional
church as a whole to find community, a place to pray to God as they understand God, and
avenues of new learning, ideas and hope.

My hope is that people like the women in this study will increasingly make their
voices heard within the church, including their images of God. To have an image of God as
birthgiver, compassion, inclusivity and empowerment, yet to try to participate in Sunday
liturgy which addresses God as almighty father in a church which disallows many members
from its communion meal and ministerial roles, is extremely difficult. Liturgical prayer, like
all God language, has the capacity and responsibility to both shape and reflect the
understandings of God of the assembly gathered (2.1.2). While congregations are
increasingly aware of inclusive language, at least for human persons, the whole area of God
imagery in prayer, music and homilies has a long way to go. Additionally, adult faith
formation and education (which are critical vehicles for introducing people to alternative
images of God - whether from scripture, the history of spirituality or their own experience)
are essential for everyone and yet not adequately provided or funded by dioceses, or
supported by many clergy where they do exist.

Crucially, this research reminds us that behind and accompanying any new God
imagery must be the new experiential understandings of God through the people, nature,
groups or life events of individuals. God will not be understood as loving, accepting,
empowering, inclusive and co-creator if laity, clergy, women and men do not witness those
attitudes and attributes among themselves.

Have the women in this study made God in their own image? It seems that
understanding God is a mutual process of unraveling old images that no longer fit and
allowing God to reveal God’s self by attending to both the routines and wonders of everyday
life. After growing up with images of God which belonged to other people, and few that
related to their experience as women, most of the women in this study discovered that they
were made in God’s image only in adult life. It is the birthright of all Christians to know
they are made in God’s image from birth, and to be treated as such by all who influence them, especially the church which purports to mediate God to them. Adding the richness of God images like those revealed in this study to the church’s Sunday and everyday God vocabulary and its internal and external witness in action would most truly mediate God to God’s people.

10.5 Has the Methodology been Faithful and Successful in its Aims?

This research, in addition to contributing its findings on God imagery, developed study methods based on feminist theological and related methodologies which called for the study to be emancipatory, rooted in women’s experience, subjective and participatory, confirmable, interdisciplinary and concerned with seeking truth (credible). The research was faithful to each of the aims, while holding some of them in tension.

These aims were enabled by the merger of theological inquiry with social science methods; relational, reflective, subjective and participatory interview and transcript checking methods; upholding women’s experience and difference in the analysis and presentation of findings; contextual familiarity of the researcher; reflexivity and internal data trackability to address researcher bias; and the articulation of images of God which are freeing and life-giving for women. It is expected that the emancipatory task will be carried on by both researcher and readers as research findings are disseminated through subsequent publication.

Future studies of God images may wish to use the range of God images found here in more broadly based and less subjective studies which would aim to meet other criteria such as applicability and consistency. The result of this trade-off would be that common ground (as opposed to uniqueness and depth) and generalisability in God images among more diverse groups could be established.

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493 See, for example, Bill Thompson, Churchwatch: Progress Report on the Call for Reform in the Catholic Church. (October 2003). This issue has articles which mention a number of these organisations and their work, and also the groups calling on the US Bishops’ Conference to discuss optional celibacy.
10.6 Who is God for Us?

This thesis has presented the life and faith stories of a small group of New Zealand Catholic women. Its analysis has highlighted the uniqueness of the God images of each woman, yet also demonstrated shared imagery among the study group and with others across geographic and cultural boundaries. Women’s understandings of God are often different from those offered by the church, and challenge it to be a place which can support the growth of women’s spirituality and faith expression. The research stands apart in its documentation of patterns of God imagery development and the influences on God image formation and change in women’s lives. It also supports much of the work or intuitions of social scientists and theologians who have called for changes in God images. Finally, the study has developed and faithfully used a new research methodology based on criteria suggested by feminist theologians.

While historians warn that God images alone cannot make a society equal, sociologists note that changes in social structures and God images occur together. While feminist theologians intuit that the world would be a better place with a change from traditional God images, psychologists and this study have documented the increased well-being of women with positive and gender-balanced or feminine God images. Sallie McFague and others—myself included—believe that “language and the ‘world’ are coterminous ... changes in the one will involve changes in the other, and such changes are often revolutionary.”

This research plays its part by giving voice to a group of New Zealand Catholic laywomen, invited at last to say, ‘This is God for us:’

- The rock which is solid, and ... the hollow in the rock where you take shelter.
- Whenever love is being expressed, that’s God in action.
- He/she ... is an all encompassing presence ... around me ... with me all the time.
- I place a lot of emphasis on being a friend, and that’s why I think of God as my friend.
- The person who is always there for me ... a friend ... someone I can always talk to.
- God as love ... and God as the meaning of my existence.
- [The God] relationship is ... being present within the presence, and that presence is outside and within.
- It’s a desert-like place ... I can’t find any markers ... any real familiar signposts ... I trust that I’m being led somewhere.

- In situations of pain and suffering there is an element of mystery which is about God ... a God who suffers with us ... I have let go of the sense of a God who is outside tinkering in.
- God is giving birth all the time, to new and wondrous things, which are ideas ... people [and] situations.
- God is love ... service for/to others ... I think there’s damn all use in a God that’s just kept private for my own purposes.


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APPENDIX A

PREVAILING GOD IMAGES CRITIQUE AND ALTERNATIVE GOD IMAGES

In an effort to organise the voluminous material and to demonstrate the evolution of the discussion, the critique is traced roughly by decade.

1968-1979

Since 1968, when Mary Daly questioned prevailing “conceptualizations, images and attitudes concerning God,” countless theologians (feminist theologians in particular) have critiqued traditional God images for the dangers inherent both in understanding God as male and in believing traditional ‘attributes’ of God, primarily omnipotence. Daly felt that imaging God as male harmed women’s self esteem, because women were unable to see themselves as imago dei through male images of God. Additionally, understanding God predominately as ‘father’ upheld and reinforced society’s existing patriarchal tradition, which by definition includes assumptions about women’s more subservient place in the world. Ascribing omnipotence to God by repeated use of ‘almighty’ and ‘powerful,’ Daly

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495 The critique includes the writings of biblical scholars, theologians and spiritual writers, most of whom do or would identify their perspective as coming from feminist theology. The validity of the critique is not evaluated here. Section 2.2, however, presents psychological and social research findings which lend validity to much of the critique. In addition, it must be noted that the critique presented here is largely that of English-speaking white middle class educated women in the developed world, which is also the milieu in which the New Zealand women in the present study find themselves. Thus, Womanist, Mujerista and Third World women’s theologies are not included, nor are critiques of European women which do not appear in English translation.

496 Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, 180. Mary Daly was by no means the first person to be critical of God images, but her work marks the beginning of the contemporary feminist critique. David Nicholls examines the theological and philosophical critique of God images from the early twentieth century in the United States, including images of God as monarch, changeless, self-sufficient and so on. See David Nicholls, “Federal Politics and Finite God,” 373-400.

497 Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, 181.

498 Literally, ‘rule by the father’ - the male head of the household. For further discussion of the institutionalisation of patriarchy, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk; Chapters 7 and 8 of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her; or Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 34-36.

499 Mary Daly, “After the Death of God the Father: Women’s Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness,” in Womenspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 56. Womenspirit Rising was the first comprehensive collection of feminist theology, so its contents are used extensively on the following pages.
felt, would result in “paralyzing the human will to change evil conditions.” If God can do everything, people need not themselves work toward social justice.

In the 1970s, Catholic, Jewish and Protestant theologians expanded the critique of traditional God-images. Like Daly, Catholics Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza understood the exclusively male, dominating, absolute authoritative God images as debilitating for women. Ruether connected the “exclusively male God who creates out of nothing, transcending nature and dominating history” with the “world destroying spirituality that projects upon the female of the race all its abhorrence, hostility and fear.” Schüssler Fiorenza pointed out that the theological tradition maintained a theoretical stance of God images as analogical language, only to confine God, in practice, to male language. The combination of male language, which gives women the message that they are “nonentities, subspecies of men, subordinated and inferior to men” and “the stress on the sovereignty and absolute authority of the patriarchal God has sanctioned men’s drive for power and domination in the church as well as in society.”

Protestant theologians Sheila Collins, Carol Christ, Nelle Morton, Elaine Pagels and Douglas Meeks also argued against the continued use of traditional God language. There was general agreement that traditional language kept women from “claiming our rightful personhood” and had become a justification for the powerful in socio-political situations of oppression and “cultural imperialism.” Carol Christ emphasised the importance of the psychological power of symbol, and understood traditional God language as keeping women “in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same time legitimating” that authority in the institutions of society. Pagels argued that groups in the early church which described God in both feminine and masculine terms carried the principle of equality over “into the practical social and political structures” of

500 Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex, 182.
their communities. Implicit in her writing is the idea that exclusively male images for God are at the crux of patriarchy. Meeks critiques traditional God attributes, aseity and impassability, from the political and socio-economic perspective, arguing that they support a "peculiarly capitalistic vision of the human being ... Speaking of God as the impassable private self in possession of itself" protects the wealth of human beings who are "divinely private" and self-sufficient.507

Jewish theologian Rita Gross, like Daly and Christ, was concerned about exclusively male God images legitimating male oppression of women. She raised the issue (a few years before Schüssler Fiorenza) that religious language is analogical and metaphorical. She argued that if statements about God assume only the 'it is' quality without the 'as if' or 'as it were,' then such statements become idolatry.508 Her point is that God language really tells us more about those who use it than about God: when only one segment of society's understandings of God (perhaps based on how that group understands or idealises itself) are understood as God - and literally at that - idolatry shows its face.

1980-1989

This point is well elaborated in the 1980s, especially by Sallie McFague in both Metaphorical Theology and Models of God. Images of God which have lost their metaphorical dialectic have become idols instead of models. McFague's understanding of the failure of the metaphor 'father' is that its literalisation into an idol has brought about patriarchy rather than the reign of God.509 McFague also suggests that language and the world are "co-terminus:" that is, "changes in [either] one will involve changes in the other."510 She reinforces the views of 1970s writings that "imperialistic, triumphalist metaphors for God" may endanger all life on earth by assuming that "by looking to either divine power or


509 Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 45-54.

providence,” humans shift the burden of responsibility to God. A powerful divine may be seen to support militaristic solutions to the world’s problems, and even a providential God, if understood as One owed total dependence, may encourage passivity and escapism.

Dorothee Sölle agrees that personal power is destroyed when God is imagined as mighty or omnipotent God. Sölle asks, “Why should we honor and love a being who does not transcend, but only stabilizes, the moral level of the current male-dominated culture?” In addition, reflecting on Auschwitz, she questions the image of God as impassible: “it was simply impossible for me to think of a mighty God who looked at this, who tolerated it, participated, looked on, whatever. If he is omnipotent, then he does not love ...”

A similarly terrifying image of God is highlighted by Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, who look critically at the image of God as presented in atonement theology: “The image of God the father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse ... Until this image is shattered it will be almost impossible to create a just society.” Brown and Parker see the perpetuation of such theology - in which links are made between God and sacrifice, obedience, suffering and faithfulness - as a sanction of abuse.

Rita Nakashima Brock, drawing on the work of Swiss therapist Alice Miller, likewise speaks of the “devastating” combination of the elements of love and kisses with punishment, suffering and humiliation: when a “child receives both painful punishment and loving support from the same parent ... the child links the two together, confusing abuse with love.” As an adult, the child will be unable to know real intimacy because the bonds of an abusive ‘love’ are so strong - unless the “self is able to differentiate the two.” These authors believe that the image of God as all-powerful controlling father, especially in combination with atonement theology in which God’s son was sent to earth specifically to suffer and die, is an image which has done incalculable damage to families and individuals over the centuries.

511 Sallie McFague, Models of God, ix.

512 Sallie McFague, Models of God, 17.

513 Dorothee Sölle, “Mysticism, Liberation and the Names of God,” 182. See also Dorothee Soelle, Suffering, 41-45. The problem of God and suffering is discussed in 9.4.


The conclusions of Catholic pastoral theologian JoAnn Wolski Conn are similar to some of McFague’s, but from a psychological perspective. Conn argues that a dominating and controlling image of God tends to promote psychologically unhealthy dependence, reinforces authoritarianism and causes suspicion of pleasure: such images stall personal as well as spiritual growth.\(^{516}\) She understands prevailing God images as distorting the understandings people have about men, women and God; encouraging them to think that to be male is more like God; and causing people to understand that women are dependent on men for the “liturgical mediation of God’s presence.”\(^{517}\)

Sandra Schneiders makes the same point about liturgical mediation, noting that at many important passages in life as well as in weekly Eucharist, most sacramental access for women is through male priests, reinforcing the connection between maleness and God. Male God images also exclude women from the divine, encourage women to serve men and God in a similar way, and justify male superiority and patriarchy.\(^{518}\) Schneiders makes the point that human metaphors for God are much more easily literalised than metaphors from nature,\(^{519}\) for example, and a literalised metaphor\(^{520}\) “paralyzes the imagination.” An image meant to be an “ever-active incentive to affective reflection...[instead] traps the mind in a limited and therefore untrue conception of God.”\(^{521}\)

Five other Catholic writers point toward traditional God images as sanctions of patriarchy: theologians Elizabeth Johnson, Rosemary Ruether, Anne Carr, and Kathleen Fischer, as well as New Zealand doctor and writer Anna Holmes. Johnson notes that God imagery taken consistently from the “roles and relations of men” has such “pervasiveness and tenacity” as to at least “raise the question of the success of the first commandment.” Combined with dualistic theological teachings on the subordination of women, received


\(^{517}\) JoAnn Wolski Conn, “Women’s Spirituality: Restriction and Reconstruction,” 14. This idea, from Sandra M. Schneiders’ “Christian Tradition on Women,” in *SIDIC*. 9 (Fall 1976): 8-13, was confirmed in forty autobiographical essays written for a course given by Conn.


\(^{519}\) The point was also made by Gustav Aulen, *The Drama and the Symbols*, 91.


\(^{521}\) Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word*, 27.
understandings of God shape and orient the way of life and understanding of the world which is patriarchy. 522

Rosemary Ruether’s critique is all-encompassing, one of her main points being that “male monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule ...”523 Like Johnson she cites the role of male-female dualism as it has existed in many cultures, and connects it with investing in woman a psychological inferiority. Consistent with Johnson, McFague and Gross, she finds the literal equating of God and father idolatrous, believing that this idolatry has compounded into a justification of oppressor: “To the extent that such political and ecclesiastical patriarchy incarnates unjust and oppressive relationships, such images of God become sanctions of evil.”524 Ruether also critiques the parent model for encouraging a permanent human - divine relationship of dependence: “Patriarchal theology uses the parent image for God to prolong spiritual infantilism as virtue and to make autonomy and assertion of free will a sin.”525 Basically, our images of God have generated “wrong relationships among living beings: dominating, impoverishing, destructive relationships, not life-giving relationships.”526 It seems a contradiction, but this truth “lies at the heart of the symbols [we] have used to express hope for redemption from evil ... [They have] generated the very evils from which we longed to be delivered.”527 Although Jesus offered us freedom from all that enslaves and oppresses, many of the symbols and structures Christianity has developed have actually functioned to perpetrate psycho-social-political injustices.

Anne Carr’s analysis of both male and power in God images is similar to Johnson’s, and she too underlines the way the images reinforce male power, holiness and superiority. Carr notes that popular piety as well as the theological tradition are responsible for speaking “perhaps too simply, of God’s omnipotence, omniscience, aseity (absolute independence), immutability, impassivity,” and are rooted in “naïve and crude perceptions of God as the epitome and ultimate personification of masculine stereotypes of power as domination.”528

522 Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God,” 244-245, 256-257.
523 Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 53.
524 Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 66.
525 Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 69.
By defining and restricting God to these inhuman qualities, qualities to which males have aspired to or have bequeathed themselves, we not only associate God with men and disassociate God from women, we deny ourselves the opportunity of truly knowing God.

Kathleen Fischer’s concerns are that traditional symbols for what is most sacred in life are male (God, saviour, church leaders). Divine maleness in images of God as father, lord, judge and king make it difficult for women to believe in their own sacredness or to have a sense of self-worth.529

Anna Holmes echoes Ruether, Johnson, McFague and Gross in her naming of the traditional powerful father ‘god’ as an idol, which she feels may have been “suited to the social and political needs of its peoples and times but now is a stumbling block as are all attempts to codify, contain and enclose a God who is beyond all ideas and words.”530

1990-Present

The critique of God images continued unabated through the middle 1990s, after which it slowed markedly. Some writing has repeated the criticisms in earlier work, albeit often with variations due to the focus and context of the writer.531 Other works offer new insights to the God image critique.

the Hebrew or Christian scriptures for the claim that God is immutable (it comes, he presumes, from Aristotelian philosophy). Miles says that God appears more to be unpredictable, with a “welter of personalities.” See Jack Miles, God: A Biography. (London: Simon and Schuster Ltd., 1995), 12, 401.


530 Anna Holmes, “The Dark Night and the Motherhood of God,”36.

531 The major issues addressed (reiterated from earlier works) are that traditional God images: are patriarchal and oppressive (Johnson et al., Oduyoye, Fischer, Ruether, Schneiders, Wainwright, Kelly-Johnston); are a cause of low self esteem in women (Johnson et al., Reilly, Goldstein); encourage a limited and unhealthy spirituality (Johnson et al., Reilly, Schneiders, Kelly-Johnston); are taken literally and have resulted in idolatry (Johnson et al., Ruether, Schneiders); sanction imperialism and militarism (Ruether); and glorify suffering, sacrifice and obedience of women, and self-sufficiency, power, and dominance in men (Ruether, Fischer, Goldstein). See Elizabeth A. Johnson et al., “Feminist Theology,” 348; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God,” 497-498; Kathleen Fischer, “An Image of God beyond Violence,” 37-39; Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Divine Wisdom and Christian Fear”; Sandra M. Schneiders, “God is More than Two Men and a Bird.” U.S. Catholic. (May 1990): 20-27; Sandra M. Schneiders, Beyond Patching; Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Bible and Feminism in the Catholic Church,” in Freeing Theology, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 39; Elaine Wainwright, “What’s in a name?, 107; Carolyn Kelly-Johnston, “Can a Feminist call God ‘Father?’” Stimulus. 2 (February 1994): 6; Patricia Lynn Reilly, A God Who Looks Like Me, 3; and Alyse Goldstein, ReVisions: Seeing Torah through a Feminist Lens. (Toronto: Key Porter Books Limited, 1998), 172.
Katherine Zappone's work comprehensively includes the issues raised previously, as well as the indictment that traditional God imagery impoverishes not only ourselves and our world, but also the Sacred\(^{532}\) - or at least our understanding of the Sacred.

New Zealand theologian Neil Darragh similarly writes that "our common liturgical symbols of God appear impoverished" in comparison with the richness he demonstrates is readily available in symbols accessible through the senses.\(^{533}\) All images are inadequate, and not even preferred biblical images should monopolise language to and about God.\(^{534}\) Justice and peace writer David Tutty argues that prevailing God images are inadequate to challenge social injustice.\(^{535}\)

New Zealand Maori women have begun to question the implicit cultural association of the warrior image of Maori men with God image. Te Rua Winiata reflects on the violence of Maori men in recent news, and writes, "In our theological shifts what images of God are we taking with us? That of the mighty king vanquishing the foe - drinking blood and dying to save sins?"\(^{536}\) Jenny Te Paa sees a "Gospel critique which seeks to end exploitation, domination, and oppression," and dares to suggest that it should critique her own Maori tradition: "How many of us as Maori insist that Maori tradition is sacrosanct, that we have no right to re-interpret it and certainly no right to reject what has been handed down by our tupuna."\(^{537}\) For Maori women, the questioning of God imagery gives the impetus to question the prevalence of violence and domination in their culture.

New Zealand pakeha women also question the power inherent in many traditional images. Catherine Benland\(^{538}\) challenges the power-over image of God which encourages society to group into those who exercise control and those who are controlled. June

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\(^{533}\) Neil Darragh, "Imagine God," 18. Alternative symbols like the ones Darragh suggests are explored in 2.1.4.


\(^{535}\) David Tutty, "Our Images of God Limit the Poor's Imagining of God," *Living Justly in Aotearoa* (Catholic Diocese of Auckland). (May 2003) :2


MacMillan looks to the strength of women in making connections in order to change how power is defined, from controlling to enabling.

Several writers cite psychological effects of traditional God images. Anne Marie Hunter finds that the all-seeing, all-knowing God is intrusive into women’s private spaces, and in the context of a social system whose norms for women are often shaped by how men want women to appear or act (or how women think men want them to appear or act), the gaze of a male God destroys personal freedom. Leona Stucky-Abbott traces daughters’ difficulties in relationships with mothers to the appropriation of a male God image: because female identity is other than the male father/son, girls may desire to be nothing like their mothers and be pulled toward the male father God and their own father, feeling they must defy femaleness in favour of autonomy and growth. This may inflict a “life-sentence” on the daughter as a woman and on her relationship with her mother.

Other authors consider the effects of traditional God images they have noted in pastoral counselling. Daniel Louw says that “the naming of God has become a crucial issue for a hermeneutics of pastoral care,” and proposes a criterion: “An image of God is problematic if it makes a person rigoristic, feel trapped, inhuman, or anxious, and if it creates delusions.” Michael Cavanagh observes that a significant proportion of problems people bring to ministers are caused by “a perception of God that is psychospiritually unhelpful, if not damaging”; for example, God is vengeful, needy, our caretaker, and our tutor.

Judith Plaskow brings a critical Jewish feminist theological perspective to the issue of God images. The concerns she raises are inclusive of those raised by Christian theologians, but she traces the roots of God images evoking maleness and power into Israel’s history, paralleling the growth of patriarchy: “Israel’s choice of male language is consistent with the gradual marginalization of women within the religious realm and serves as a partial...


540 Although empirical psychological and social research is covered in Section 2.2, theoretical articles which have appeared in the theological literature are included here.


ideological justification for their subordination." Like McFague, Ruether and others (2.1.2), as well as Australian Elaine Wainwright, Plaskow understands language as forming our social reality. She believes that "religious symbols do not simply tell us about God; they are not simply models of a community's sense of ultimate reality. They also shape the world in which we live, functioning as models for human behaviour and the social order." God language lends justification to domination and subordination in society, authorising "male-dominated social structures by making women's oppression appear right and fitting."

Akin to Plaskow's exploration of male God images, New Zealand biblical theologian Judith McKinlay traces the evolution of the figure of Wisdom in Jewish and Christian writings, raising the question of where in the biblical text women find a divine model. Wisdom has a long history, possibly from Canaanite ancestry through Judaism to John's gospel: originally female, the figure was first merged with Yahweh, then into the Logos, both divine males. Not only was the female image lost, but also any connotation of sexuality, and these losses have implications for a holistic understanding of God, thus for experiencing God's life in our own situations.

In Theology for Skeptics, Dorothee Soelle's major new contribution to the discussion of God images is to question whether discontinuing the use of traditional images can really substantively change the pervasiveness of patriarchy and oppression. Soelle would challenge the ideas of McFague, Pagels, Plaskow, Ruether and others who explicitly believe that, as root causes of patriarchy, changing God images will change the ways of human individuals and society for the better. (Pagels, McFague and Plaskow, for example, cited research on societies which historically [or anthropologically] exhibited a close relationship


546 Elaine Wainwright, "What's in a Name?," 102.

547 Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 126.

548 Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 126.

between God images and social relationships.) Other theologians have at least implicitly cherished the same hope of positive change when God images change.

Soelle, however, feels that there are new idols which are already replacing the idol which is our traditional understanding of God: economics, science, power, militarism, and all forms of violence and coercion. The problem with these new gods is that they objectify people, considering them as means or as objects to be manipulated, studied and controlled. Soelle fears that “the most dangerous traits of the old God - his omnipotence and his demand for absolute submission - are only transferred to the new idols, only they have better means of implementing them.” Despite her fears, Soelle is certain that old images (as Rita Gross and Anne Carr noted) tell us more about “the projections and wishes of the men who use them than about God,” and that the God who has been “self-sufficient, changeless, eternal, beyond need and vulnerability, can answer the question of human suffering either not at all or only cynically ... [this] God must be indicted.”

Like Soelle, Gail Ramshaw doubts whether changing male God images will change society, and notes that androcentric cultures are not necessarily changed by worship of a deity with female referents, and language changes alone are insufficient. She nonetheless is critical of many aspects of traditional God language, particularly its use of ‘Lord,’ its perpetuation of the ‘myth of the crown,’ and its personalness. Although ‘Lord’ was a circumlocution of YHWH, it is now “androcentric and archaic,” and “hearkens back to an economic system in which vassals were pawns of the power of the ruling class.” This connotation does not correspond “to the gospel of mercy that the Scriptures proclaim.” Similarly, the ‘myth of the crown,’ which was established by Israel (and countless other societies) to bring a semblance of security to a world threatened by nature (and human

553 Gail Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 45. Interestingly, her evidence points both to Sophia in intertestamental times, and to the Marian cult in Catholicism as an example, and she refers readers to Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. (New York: Knopf, 1976). See also Judith Ochshorn’s example of classical Greek worship of Athena and circumscribed roles for women in *The Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine*. (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press), 181; and Ruth Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 41-42.
554 Gail Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 52.
nature), now only serves to reinforce hierarchical social structures, and invests the gospel with a triumphalist tone.555

Contrary to exploration of the terrifying images of God mentioned by writers such as Brock, Brown and Parker, and Soelle, Ramshaw finds that, in today's scientific community, God has become rather hapless, "a benign older relative who thinks pleasant thoughts without effecting much good."556 Through Reformation hymnody, she traced a movement from mighty to relational imagery for God and Christ, and feels that present God imagery has become too personal and human, contributing to the depiction of God as "two men and a bird."557 This criticism also runs counter to theologians like Soelle and Ruether who, while critiquing literalised metaphors, maintain that God has become too 'other'.558

Catherine Mowry LaCugna's comprehensive work on the Trinity has implications for the way in which God is imaged, but she is aware (as Darragh is regarding God symbols in general), that "trinitarian theology is an incomplete, partial and broken statement about the mystery of God's eternal being."559 She points out that our inherited Augustinian "substance ontology is never entirely able to overcome the bedrock values of patriarchy: autonomy, nondetermination by another, self-possession as prior to self-donation."560 When the Cappadocian doctrine of the Trinity, which affirmed the equality yet uniqueness and diversity of each person, "was 'defeated' (in the early church) by the return to a concern for

555 Gail Ramshaw, God beyond Gender, 59-74. The issue of anachronistic language is mentioned by other authors. Johanna van Wijk-Bos mentions both king and lord as titles for God that are problematic today because there is no connection with contemporary experience for many Christians, thus the images malfunction. See Johanna van Wijk-Bos, Reimagining God: The Case for Scriptural Diversity. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 40. Johann Figl likewise warns that religious life (in general) has to "refer to everyday praxis" or else "it is forced to the periphery and thus becomes irrelevant." See Johann Figl, "The Divine in a Godless Society," in Concilium: The Many Faces of the Divine. Hermann Häring and Johnannes Baptist Metz, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 120.

556 Gail Ramshaw, God beyond Gender, 14.

557 Gail Ramshaw, God beyond Gender, 15. This description was used by Sandra M. Schneiders in "God is More than Two Men and a Bird."

558 Ramshaw's historical findings parallel those of Mary Collins and Ruth Duck, and the sociological theories of Nicholls would similarly help explain them. While many of the theologians (Ruether, McFague) who criticise the use of 'father' do so on the grounds that it is too male, has unhelpful parental overtones, or supports patriarchy, Ramshaw's main argument against it is that it is too relational or personal. As will be seen in the next section, other theologians would be happy to see mother, lover, midwife, etc. added to common God imagery, but Ramshaw will argue for mostly non-anthropomorphic images.

559 Mark Medley, "Becoming Human Together: Imaging the Triune God," Perspectives in Religious Studies. 23 (1996): 297. The idea that God cannot be contained is by words is in many theological discussions. See, for example, Kenneth Leech, Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 8.

God’s inner life rather than with God’s life with us in salvation history;”\textsuperscript{561} personhood and community were lost as an idea within God as well as models for how humans may live together. She understands the present monarchical and hierarchical images of God and society as reinforcing one another: “The ways in which we address God are a gauge not only of how we view God, but of how we view ourselves.”\textsuperscript{562} Thus, a return to a person and community understanding of God, while in itself not enough to change society, would no longer sanction hierarchical society, and might spur the human imagination in a different direction.

Elizabeth Johnson’s \textit{She Who Is} is the most thorough feminist theology of God to date, and explores God language, its effects, and its future. Like LaCugna, Soelle and Ruether (and unlike Ramshaw), Johnson believes that classical theism presents us with a nonrelational God - in W. Norris Clarke’s words, “an indifferent metaphysical iceberg.”\textsuperscript{563} Because classical theism presents God as an ideal who is a potent, all-sufficient ego in charge of events and independent of the need for others, then to be connected in mutuality with others introduces ‘deficiency’ in the form of interdependence, vulnerability, and risk. Genuine mutuality threatens any form of domination, including the paternalistic ordering of things ... Unrelated and unaffected by the world, such a theistic God limns the ultimate patriarchal ideal, the solitary, dominant male.\textsuperscript{564}

This (classical theist) God is dressed in male language, and has been used exclusively, literally and patriarchally, with subsequent detrimental effects which manifest themselves as (now familiar from previous discussions) patriarchal social structures in society, family and church - domination and subordination; debilitation of women’s sense of dignity and self esteem; and idolatry - the violation of the first commandment.\textsuperscript{565}  

A number of theologians have described in detail the images they hope will come to be recognised as worthy of use in speaking to and about God. The vision of several theologians\textsuperscript{566} for alternative ways of speaking about God are presented below, intermingled with discussion of the major God images found in the above survey.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{561} Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us,” 93.
\item \textsuperscript{562} Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us,” 106-107.
\item \textsuperscript{564} Elizabeth A. Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 225.
\item \textsuperscript{565} Elizabeth A. Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 33-38.
\item \textsuperscript{566} Judith Plaskow, Sallie McFague, Anne Carr, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson.
\end{itemize}
Judith Plaskow has identified two kinds of ‘God-naming’ which together would reflect women’s experience and a hope for egalitarian community. First, she looks to images of God such as lover, friend, companion and co-creator to evoke a God who is “with us instead of over us, a partner in dialogue who ever and again summons us to responsible action.” God as lover and friend are images suggested by many theologians because they are metaphors that image God and humanity in a mutual loving relationship. Co-creation is mentioned by another Jewish theologian, Adele Reinhartz, and gives motivation and assurance of a God who works in tandem with us.

Plaskow’s second kind of naming reminds us that we are only friends and co-creators when we are a part of the community of life which God is the ground of existence: “Images of God as fountain, source, wellspring, oceanbed, rock of refuge or ground of life and being remind us that God loves and befriends us as one who brings forth all being and sustains it in existence.” Nature metaphors shift us from a God in the heavens to a God who walks with us and is the sacred ground on which we stand: they call us to a reverence

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567 Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 164.
568 For God as friend (or similar meaning), see, for example, Anne Carr, Transforming Grace, 150-152; Sallie McFague, Models of God, 125-180; Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Search for the Living God,” 10; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Why Not a Category Friend/Friendship?” Horizons 2 (Spring 1975): 117-118; Adele Reinhartz, “Jewish Feminist Theological Discourses,” in Conclium: Feminist Theology in Different Contexts. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 68; Margaret Schrader, “Women’s Spirituality,” 23; Jann Aldredge-Clanton, “Great Physician, Wisdom, Friend,” 12, and In Whose Image, 64; Daniel Louw, “God as Friend,” 233-242; Patricia Lynn Reilly, A God Who Looks Like Me, 90-91; Kathleen Fischer, Women at the Well; and Helen Goggin, “Postmodernism and Images of God,” 25. For God as lover, in addition to some of those above (especially McFague), see Bridget Mary Meehan, Exploring the Feminine Face of God, 63; Charlie Westfall, “Images of God,” 65; and Martha Robbins, Midlife Women and Death of Mother, 261.
569 Adele Reinhartz, “Jewish Feminist Theological Discourses,” 68.
570 For water images of God, see, for example, Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 165; Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 22; Dorothee Soelle, Theology for Skeptics, 28; Gail Ramshaw, God Beyond Gender, 114; Kathleen Fischer, Women at the Well; Miriam Therese Winter, Woman Prayer Woman Song: Resources for Ritual. (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), 38-47; Jann Aldredge-Clanton, “Great Physician, Wisdom, Friend,” 12; Margaret Schrader, “Women’s Spirituality,” 23.
571 For earth and other nature images, see, for example, Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 22; Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 165; Gail Ramshaw, A Metaphorical God: An Abecedarium of Images for God. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995), 79-81, 99-103, particularly for birds and trees; Mary Ann Beavis, “‘I Like the Bird’: Luke 13:34, Avian Metaphors and Feminist Theology,” Feminist Theology, 12 (2003): 119-128, for birds; Kathleen Fischer, Women at the Well; Sallie McFague, Models of God, 69-78; Dorothee Soelle, Theology for Skeptics, 28; Miriam Therese Winter, Woman Prayer Woman Song, 25-28, 49-57, especially for Mother Earth and Fire; Carroll Saussy, God Images and Self Esteem, 70-76; and Gail Ramshaw, God Beyond Gender, 115-119 for Tree of Life.
572 Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 164-165.
Shekhinah reminds us of God’s presence in our midst (as the cloud and fire were present with the Israelites on their desert journey).

Sallie McFague suggests understanding the universe as God’s body, and complements this model with a trinity of images for God: mother, lover and friend (the latter two of which she shares in common with Plaskow). If humans who are entrusted with the care of earth image it as part of God’s body, would they not treat it more respectfully? The image also brings God’s presence to earth, intricately involved in every aspect of human life; and also brings an understanding of God (the earth) as vulnerable, and capable of suffering and joy. Being God-like is to bring forth and nurture life, love and befriend the earth and its peoples, related to the metaphors of God as mother, lover and friend. McFague offers these metaphors to point toward God’s connectedness and ours, with all life.

The image of God as mother is the single most explored image for God among feminist theologians. Not only does it find its source in the birthgiving and nurturing images of God in the prophetic tradition (especially Isaiah), but the Christian mystics found it particularly intriguing. The God who is mother is variously loving, faithful, strong, nurturing, pregnant, in labour, giving birth, and grandmother, among many images, and also has much in common with the God who is creator or creatrix.


McFague’s model is critiqued by Joseph A. Bracken as “somewhat lacking in terms of a systematic approach,” from his perspective of “preserving the integrity of theology as a reputable academic discipline” and maintaining a “strong appeal to reason as well as an expression of personal belief.” He perhaps misses the point that his preferred model also springs from personal belief (his) and his preference for a “single governing image” over images from others’ experience which may be more tolerant of image proliferation. See Bracken’s “Images of God within Systematic Theology.” Theological Studies. 63 (2002): 370, 373, 373, 372, respectively. The metaphorical work of McFague is included in a summary of other feminist images of God in Mary Grey, Introducing Feminist Images of God. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

See Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, The Divine Feminine, 20-24; Bridget Mary Meehan, Exploring the Feminine Face of God and Delighting in the Feminine Divine. While many women identify strongly with mother imagery, Mary Collins cautions that male writers (probably most of the biblical writers and some of the mystics) tend to stereotype, and women writers tend to project, so that the resulting images may be an idealised image of human desire. The nurturing aspects of the mother metaphor are important, but need to be balanced with others like justice and courageous use of power to be most enriching. Mary Collins, “Naming God in Public Prayer,” 302-303.

One of the most quoted references to God as mother comes from John Paul I: “God is a Father. More than that, God is a Mother.” See “Praying for Peace” (Sept 1978 speech), in The Pope Speaks. Matthew O’Connell, ed. (Huntington, IN: Sunday Visitor, n.d.) 314. For other authors on God as mother, see, for example, Johanna van Wijk-Bos, Reimagining God, 50-59; Bridget Mary Meehan, Exploring the Feminine Face of God, 3-6, 11-13; Julie Donovan Massey, “God as Mother.” America, 183 (Dec 23-30, 2000): 17-18; Leonard Swidler, Biblical Affirmations of Woman; Margaret L. Hammer, Giving Birth: Reclaiming Biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Elaine Wainwright, “What’s in a Name?” 111-113; Anna Holmes, “The Dark
Two other images for God are connected with the image of mother in the scriptures, the images of God as womb-love or compassion (rahamin) and the image of God as shaddai (breasted God). God’s compassion is often drawn from the metaphor of the love of a mother for the child of her womb, the two words in Hebrew (compassion and womb) coming from the same root. Phyllis Trible gives exhaustive treatment to the development of the womb/compassion metaphor in the Hebrew scriptures, and suggests that the “semantic journey from the wombs of women to the compassion of God is not a minor theme on the fringes of faith. To the contrary, with persistence and power it saturates the scripture.”

The second image, shaddai, is translated in contemporary Bibles as God almighty, God most High, or God of high places, for one of its possible meanings has to do with mountains. But the Hebrew word shad means breast, and often shaddai occurs in contexts where ‘God with breasts’ offers the more plausible meaning.

Anne Carr offers several interwoven images of God. She draws together the images of liberating God from the Exodus tradition, and incarnational God (in not only Jesus but all creation), which both hold the idea that “God’s power is resident in human power” through working for justice. In this God there is “irrevocable union, reverence, and


577 Images related to God as Creator (in addition to Co-creator, earlier note) can be found in Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 23-24; Patricia Lynn Reilly, A God Who Looks Like Me, 90-91; Martha Robbins, Midlife Women and Death of Mother, 255, 257; and intermingled with images such as Shaddai, Womb and Spirit in Miriam Therese Winter, WomanPrayer WomanSong, 25-29.


581 Johnson’s incarnational God is an indwelling, described by others as the inner God or God within, or even ‘the woman who dances within our hearts.’ See Dorothee Soelle, Theology for Skeptics, 50; Margaret Schrader, Women’s Spirituality, 23; Carroll Saussy, God Images and Self Esteem, 74; Joyce Rupp, A Star in My Heart. (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1990), 61.
compassionate love." Carr also understands God as relational and capable of suffering images drawn from the scriptures: God is neither removed from the world nor immovable, but participates in it and is affected by it. God is also future and mystery. God who is future does not counsel endurance with a promise of heavenly rewards, but invites us to envision a just future and bring it about. Lastly, God is unknown and hidden, because as much as we understand God, we never fully grasp the mystery that is God.

Many theologians speaking about a relational God will speak of the Trinity in the same breath. The traditional trinitarian formula of father, son and holy spirit can be understood in relational terms, but usually hierarchical ones. There are models for Trinity which attempt to formulate a more egalitarian understanding between the persons, as has been seen with McFague’s mother, lover and friend. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (as mentioned in 2.1.3.3) has proposed returning from an Augustinian model of Trinity to a Cappadocian understanding:

The radical move of the Cappadocians was to assert that divinity of Godhood originates with personhood (someone toward another), not with substance (something in and of itself). Love for and relationship with another is primary over autonomy ... Thus personhood, being-in-relation-to-another, was secured as the ultimate originating principle of all reality ... The identity and unique reality of a person emerges entirely in relation to another person.

LaCugna concludes that being relational is at the very core of God and that, in fact, God would not be God if God were not in relation within Godself and with creation. Further, if God is the highest expression of love, self-giving and freedom, then there is no inequality or hierarchy in God. God as a relational God with triune life can become an icon for the

582 Anne Carr, Transforming Grace, 121.

583 Other authors speak of God in relational terms without using anthropomorphic language, for example, God as love and truth. See David Tracy, “Analogy, Metaphor and God-Language,” 255; Miriam Therese Winter, Woman Prayer Woman Song, 185-192; Neil Qarragh, “Imagine God,” 23. See also God as Trinity.

584 For other discussion/examples of a suffering God, see Marcel Sarot, “Pastoral Counseling and the Compassionate God.” Pastoral Psychology, 43 (1995): 188-189; Dorothee Soelle, Suffering, 119; Colleen Fulmer, “The Stricken Deer” and “In Her Poor,” in Her Wings Unfurled, cassette. (Albany, CA: The Loretto Spirituality Network, 1990); and Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 246-272. A particularly succinct image is one drawn from the psalms and second Isaiah by Douglas Meeks, who speaks of God’s identification with the oppressed as shown in the flaring of God’s nostrils: see Douglas Meeks, “How to Speak of God,” 145.

585 For God as mystery or unknown, see also Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 6-7; Bernadette Farrell, “God Beyond All Names,” in God Beyond All Names; and Miriam Therese Winter, Woman Prayer, Woman Song, 59-64.

586 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us,” 86-87.

587 The thinking of philosopher and theologian Charles Hartshorne complements LaCugna’s: “If God is truly personal by nature he must have real relationships beyond himself and be affected by these relationships.” Charles Hartshorne quoted in David Nicholls, “Federal Politics & Finite God,” 381.
Christian community. Any names we give to the trinitarian persons should reflect the communal and egalitarian nature of God.

Elizabeth Johnson’s theology of God is trinitarian, relational, egalitarian, mysterious and full of life. She names God ‘She who is’ to identify the divine with being itself, the God who is revealed by the tetragrammaton, YHWH. Her understanding of Trinity is based on the image of wisdom-sophia, a God who is “exuberant relational aliveness in the midst of the history of suffering, inexhaustible source of new being in situations of death and destruction, ground of hope for the whole created universe.” She traces the lineage of sophia with each of the persons of the Trinity. Sophia God is the “mother of the universe, the unoriginate, living source of all that is.” Sophia is also incarnate in the person of Jesus, who like sophia of the Wisdom tradition, bids all come, eat and drink. The Wisdom tradition has also closely identified sophia with spirit; ruah and hokmah being symbols of “God’s energy involved in universal cosmic quickening, inspiring the prophetic word of justice, renewing the earth and the human heart.” Johnson’s imagery is full of the life, energy, wholeness, mystery, and compassion which she understands sophia to be and to offer to all.

588 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us,” 106.
589 A number of theologians offer alternative namings for the Trinity. See, for example, Ruth Duck, Gender and the Name of God, 143-150; and Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 24. Darragh notes several formulae from a recent Anglican prayer book, for example, “Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver” and “God our creator, God in history, God in revelation.”
590 Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 236-245. Another worthy translation of the tetragrammaton is ‘the Living One’, discussed by Gail Ramshaw, God beyond Gender, 57.
591 Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 243.
592 Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 179.
593 Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 94.
594 Both Johnson and Joan Engelsman note that feminine imagery is not a new thing, especially for Catholics, who have previously channelled the feminine into its understanding of Mary (Engelsman adds Church as well). Thus there are many elements in the Marian symbol (maternity, compassion, liberating power, intimate presence, and recreative energy) and of ecclesiology (wisdom, mother) which can be restored to an inclusive understanding of God. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God.” Theological Studies. 50 (Sept 89): 526 and Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, The Feminine Dimension of the Divine. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 121.
Rosemary Radford Ruether and Kathleen Fischer both call for alternative images of God that heal and transform. God as healer, binder of broken hearts, and helper are not new images, but could be used more often in a world in which nations, families and individuals are in need of so much healing. Allied to the image of God as healer (as well as to God as liberator) is a God of justice who brings peace, healing and freedom.

Other authors have come to understand God in more unusual ways. Carolyn Bohler’s God as jazz leader does not lead from a grand plan, but has an arrangement and a score, allowing the band freedom to improvise within the score. Margaret Butler’s armchair God supports and gives rest, greets and welcomes with open arms. God has also been likened to a threshold which cannot be perfect or enclosed, which encourages movement, flow and connection between different peoples and ideas. Robert Farrar Capon tracks his “divine suspect” through images ranging from a box of chocolates to a divine bowler to a mousetrap.


597 For images of God as Healer, etc., see, for example, Mirian Therese Winter, Woman Prayer Woman Song, 91-98; Jann Aldredge-Clanton, “Great Physician, Wisdom, Friend,” 10-12; Gail Ramshaw, A Metaphorical God, 43-46; and Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 23.

598 For God as justice, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is, 131-186; Neil Darragh, “Imagine God,” 23; and Colleen Fulmer, “Judge’s Dilemma,” in Cry of Ramah.


600 Margaret Butler, “The Armchair God.” unpublished poem, Bluff, NZ.

601 Betsan Martin, “Luce Irigaray,” in Women and Church, 53.

APPENDIX B

ALTERNATIVE GOD IMAGES FROM THEOLOGICAL/ SPIRITUAL WRITINGS

God as Mother

Hebrew Scriptures - especially Prophetic Tradition, e.g., Is 42.14, 49.15, 66.11-12, Hos 11.14, Num 11.12-13; Lukan tradition, e.g., Acts 16.26-28; and Christian mystical tradition e.g., Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostem, Augustine of Hippo, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, etc.

Mother - MR, AC, KZ, KF, SM, DS, MTW, BMM, MS, AH, EJ, JAC, LS
Loving/ unconditionally loving mother - LS, CS, JDM
Nurturing mother - CS, BF
Mother God/who gardens - SA&PH, MC, CF, PLR/ CF
Nursing mother - MW, PT, LS, PLR
God who rocks me gentle - CF
Gramma God/Grandmother - CF, EJ
Great mother - CF
Mother giving birth - CF, BF, MH, CW, PT
God who gives birth - BMM, LS
Breastmilk of God - BMM
Strong mother - RRR
Comforting mother - JWB, LS, PLR
Faithful mother - PLR
Holy mother - ND
Maternity - EJ
Gracious mother - ND
Jesus as mother - BMM, MTW
Christ as nursing foster mother - BMM
Labouring one/woman in labour/birthpangs - PLR/ BMM, CW, JWB, EW, PT/ LS
Pregnant woman/ and woman who conceives - KF, CF, BMM/ PT
Feminine love births creation - BMM
Mother of all living - PLR

God as Womb/Compassion

Prophetic Tradition, e.g., Jer 31.20, Is 46.3-4, Is 49.13-15
Womb of compassion - PLR
Rahamin/ rahem - CF/ PT
Divine womb/ of darkness - CF/ PLR

Sources surveyed are those theologians (including systematic, pastoral theologians, pastoral counsellors, spiritual directors, liturgists, liturgical musicians, artists, and some social scientists whose work is discussed and footnoted in Appendix A. Initials refer to authors' names, see list on the last page of this appendix. Many other sources could have been surveyed as well, as there is an ever growing, supply of books and articles from the theoretical to the hands-on offering alternative titles, names and images for God. This list is therefore not exhaustive, but it is inclusive of examples from some of the works of major theologians writing in the area plus a number of practitioners in related fields. Images have been clustered according to similarity of content/meaning and probable origin. Information in italics indicates some probable origins for each category of God images. The list of images was compiled in 2000.

See Virginia Ramey Mollencott, The Divine Feminine, 20-24; Bridget Mary Meehan, Exploring the Feminine Face of God; and Bridget Mary Meehan, Delighting in the Feminine Divine.
Womb - CW, PT, MS, JAC
Womb love, divine compassion - BMM
Yahweh's womb - LS
Compassionate one - PLR
Compassion - EJ, HG, PT
Dark womb - AH
Womb of creation - ND
Womb of God, mother - LS
Fertile womb of all, womb centre - PLR
Womb of Wisdom - BMM
Mercy, compassion - EW
Mercy, comfort - BF

God as Sister
Wisdom Tradition
Sister - AC, DS, JAC, EJ
Eternal sister - ND

God/Jesus as Wisdom/ Sophia (see also Trinity)
Wisdom and Prophetic Traditions, e.g. Prov 4.5-13, 7.4-9.6, Wis 6.12-11.1, Ecc 6,Bar 3-4.4,
Ben Sirach 1, 24.1-10; Pauline and Johannine Traditions, e.g., 1 Cor 1.23-30, 2.6-8, John 1;
also Mt 11.18-19 and Lk 11.49
Holy wisdom - Sophia - KZ, CW, EJ
Sophia - SA&PH, EW, PLR, CRT, JCE
Wisdom - BF, RRR, JAC, JWB, BN, DL, MTW, GR
Wisdom Sophia - CF, EB
Baker of the Bread of Life - MTW
Bakerwoman - CW, BMM
Sophia as counsellor - BMM, BN, MTW
Sophia as hostess - EB, EJ
Sophia as teacher - BMM, EW
Sophia as tree - EB, CRT
Jesus/Christ Sophia - EJ, CRT/BMM
Spirit Sophia - EJ, EB
Mother Sophia - EJ
Sophia as craftswoman, mother, lover, creator, woman of Justice - BMM
Sophia as homebuilder, rare gem - EB
Sophia as law - EB, BMM
Lady Wisdom - LS

God as Presence/ Shekhinah
Ex 24, 40; Rabbinic Tradition; Acts 2.2-3
Shekhinah/Shekinah - JP, CF, PLR/ SA&PH, DS, BMM
Fire - CS, KF
Living wind - DS
Place - JP
Presence - JP, MTW, PLR
Ever present God - CF
She who dwells within - AR
Intimate Presence - EJ
Encompassing Presence - MTR
The Still Presence - PLR
Encompassing Matrix - RRR

**Shaddai (as God with breasts, or Breasted God)**

*Hebrew Scriptures, e.g., Ruth*

Shaddai (my breasts) - AR,

El Shaddai - KF, BMM, MTW, CF, CW, JWB

God with breasts like mine - PLR

**God as Goddess**

*Ancient Near-Eastern Traditions*

Goddess/ God/dess - CC, RG, MTW, PLR/ RRR, CS

Goddess who is creator, mother, virgin, maid, crone - KZ

**God as Woman/ Female / Feminine (other than above)**

*Jewish Scriptures - Prophetic and Wisdom Traditions; Christian Scriptures - Lukan, Pauline and Johannine Traditions, Contemporary*

Midwife - BMM, MH, CW, MS, EJ, LS, PLR

Washerwoman God - BMM, CF

Woman - KF

Female - JP

Aunty - ND

Divine feminine - PLR

Mistress - LS

Queen of heaven - GR, PLR

**God as Spirit**

*Throughout Jewish and Christian Scriptures and traditions*

Spirit - CS, CF, CW, EW, JAC, EJ, MTW, JWB

Great spirit - SA&PH

Ruah - PLR, CF

Breath of God - MTW

Breath of Life - RRR, PLR

Paraclete - DL

Sustainer/ of joy - JAC/ ND

Sanctifier - ND

Wind blowing where it will, Dwelling at the heart of the world - EJ

Comforter - JAC

other Spirit images - PLR

**God as Creator**

*Hebrew Scriptures, e.g., Gen.1-2, Prov 8.22-31*

Creator - JAC, MTW

Creatrix - MR, BN

Cocreator - JP, AR

Creating/ Creative - MR/ CS, MTW

Primal matrix - MR

Maker and Mender - JWB

Recreative energy - EJ

Creator - Destroyer - MTW

Source - JP, DS, SA&PH

Source of all my life/ Source of Life - PLR/ AR, EG
God as Friend

*Wisdom and Johannine Traditions, e.g., Wis 7.27, Jn 15.15, Yom Kippur liturgy*

- Friend - SA&PH, AC, KF, SM, EJ, JP, ESF, AR, MS, JAC, DL, MTW, PLR
- Companion - JP, AR, MS, HG, PLR
- Welcoming friend - PLR
- Relational God - AC
- God with us - KF
- God who lives with us KZ
- Partner - EG

God as Lover

*Hebrew Scriptures, e.g., Song of Songs*

- Lover - SM, JP, CW, AR, ND, MTW
- Beloved - EJ
- Divine eros - MR
- Heart of my life, Burning love - PLR
- Male lover - KF
- Feminine passionate love - BMM

God Dwelling Within

*Johannine tradition, e.g., Jn 15.4-7*

- Self - AMR, SA&PH
- God within - AMR, MS
- God indwelling - SA&PH, DS, BN
- God residing within - KF
- Incarnational God - AC
- Woman who dances within our hearts - BMM
- Inner female voice speaking truth - CS

God as YHWH, I am

*Hebrew Scriptures, Johannine Tradition*

- Yahweh, I am who I shall become - RRR
- I am - KF
- She who is
- The unpronounceable name - JWB
- The living one - GR

God who Suffers

*Prophetic Tradition, e.g., Is 42.14*

- Powerless, suffering God - AMR
- Suffering God/compassion poured out - AC, DS/EJ
- God who suffers - KZ
- God of defeat and pain - DS
- God in her poor - CF
- God suffering with - CF
- God as co-suffering - MST
- God who trembles with our tears - BF
- God's love as passion, power is to suffer - DM
- Nose of God which flares at the stench of slavery - DM
- God of pathos participates in suffering of world to transform it from within - DM
- Sufferer, Painbearer, Victim - ND
God who Rejoices  
*Hebrew Scriptures*
- God of gladness - BF
- God who shakes with laughter - BF
- God who laughs with glee - CF
- Laughing spirit - BMM
- Exsultet, Jubilee - GR

God as Liberator/ God of Power  
*Exodus and Prophetic Traditions*
- Liberating God - AC
- Liberating Sovereign - RRR
- Liberating power - EJ
- Liberator/ of the poor - ND, MTW/ ND
- Freedom - BF
- Power - MTW, BF, JAC
- Higher power - CS, JAC
- Empowers/ Empowering - JWB/ MTR, PLR
- Incarnates power in persons - BF
- Strong - CS

God as Healer/Helper  
*Prophetic, Wisdom and Synoptic Traditions*
- Healer/ of the wounded - MTR/ ND
- Healing - BF, JAC, MTW, PLR
- Great physician, Teacher, Educator - JAC
- Healing, empowering with and ethic of justice and care - MTW
- Health - GR
- Binder of broken hearts - GR
- One who wipes away tears - PLR
- Consoler, Provider, Embracer, Nourisher, Gift-bearer - ND
- Nurturer - PLR, JAC
- Help/ Helper - MTW/ PLR, MTW
- Seeker of the lost - PLR
- Guide - PLR
- Servant - DL, ND
- Shepherd - DL

God as Justice  
*Prophetic Tradition*
- Justice - BF
- Eternal justice - ND
- Passionate for justice and peace - EJ
- Prophet - EJ, ND

God as Father  
*Hebrew Scriptures, Synoptic and Johannine Traditions*
- Father - JAC, LS, MTW
- Father who is gentle, loves nature, is warm and affectionate - KF
- Father not in origin but who will never be separated from us - DS
- Loving father who carries a little child in his arms - RRR
- Abba - HG
Other Anthropomorphic Images for God

Scriptures; Contemporary
Weaver - MS
Potter - CW
Jazz band musician/leader - EJ, CB
Father-mother - MTW
Child, Grandfather - ND
Brother - JWB, JAC
Good person - SA&PH

God in Nature Metaphors
Throughout Hebrew Scriptures; Johannine Tradition; Contemporary
Fountain/ Fountainhead/Fountain of Life - JP, ND/ DS/ EG
Bath - GR
Wellspring - JP, DS
Spring of all goodness - DS
Rain on parched earth - KF
Ocean and oceanbed - KF
Water of life/ Living water - DS/ MTW, JAC
Flow of life - AR
Water/ Waters - MS/ RRR
Ground/ Ground of life and being - ND/ JP, DS
Rock - JP, KF, GR, CW, MS, JWB, ND
Shelter/from the storm - KF/KF, PLR
Protection - KF/MTW
Mountains - RRR
Volcano - GR
Trees/ Tree of Life/ Tall evergreen tree - GR/ JP/ KF
Nature/ Mother earth - JP/ MTW, BMM
World as God’s body - SM
Warm gentle sun - KF
Light - JP, DS, JAC, ND
Clean brightness, radiant light - KF
Splendour - ND
Fire/ and flame - MS, RRR/ MTW
Fire and rose are one - KF
The colour purple - KF
Darkness - JP
Mist with arms - CS
Elemental force - MTR
Air - DS
Mother bird (eagle, hen) - RRR, JAC, CS, PLR, JWB, MTW, CF, MTW
Pinions, Peacock, Paradise bird, Pelican, Phoenix - GR
She-bear/ Ferocious mother bear - CW/ PLR

God as Food
Christian Tradition
Bread/ Bread of Life - RRR, ND/ JAC
Food, Feast, Famine - GR
God as Human-made Objects
Wisdom Tradition, Contemporary
Door - JAC
Threshold - BM
Armchair - MB
Fortress - JAC, GR
Stronghold, Fastness, Tower - GR
Refuge - JAC
Shield - ND
Kuphar (boat), Cup, Necklace, Oboe, Xat, Yoke, Zion - GR

God as Trinity
Christian Tradition
Trinity - CML, MTW
Mother Sophia, Jesus Sophia, Spirit Sophia - EJ
Source, Word, Spirit - KR

God of Abstract Images
Johannine Tradition, Contemporary
Love/ Love of Life - CS, KF, MTW, JAC, DT / EG
Truth / Source of Truth - KF, SA&PH /ND
Law - GR
Strength, Hope, Source of Equality - ND
Peace - JAC
Way - ND
Future - AC

God of No Images, God of Mystery
Non-Yahwist Traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures, Christian Mystical Tradition
God of no words or images - KF
God beyond all names - BF
Who are you - BMM
God as mystery - CS, MTW, AC
Great mystery - JAC
God as unknown and hidden - AC

Other God Images
Scripture, Contemporary
Holy one - JAC
Holy one of Israel - JWB
God’s Gaze - GR
Jesus - MTW
Woman Christ - BMM
Incarnation - GR
Tangible, soft - CS
Mary - BMM
Anna, Miriam, Monica, David, Uriel - GR
Emerging connection - MTW
Beating heart - KF
Ordinary women’s experience - BMM
Initials and Authors’ Names

AC - Anne Carr
AH - Anna Holmes
AMR - Ana-Marie Rizzuto
AR - Adele Reinhartz
BF - Bernadette Farrell
BM - Betsan Martin
BMM - Bridget Mary Meehan
BN - Barbara Newman
CB - Carolyn Bohler
CC - Carol Christ
CF - Colleen Fulmer
CML - Catherine Mowry LaCugna
CRT - Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig
CS - Carroll Saussy (and participants)
CW - Charlie Westfall
DL - Daniel Louw
DM - Douglas Meeks
DS - Dorothee Soelle [or Sölle]
DT - David Tracy
EB - Enid Bennett
EG - Elyse Goldstein
EJ - Elizabeth Johnson
ESF - Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
EW - Elaine Wainwright
GR - Gail Ramshaw
HG - Helen Goggin
JAC - Jann Aldredge-Clanton
JCE - Joan Chamberlain Engelsman
JDM - Julie Donovan Massey
JP - Judith Plaskow
JWB - Johanna van Wijk-Bos
KF - Kathleen Fischer (women’s reflections)
KR - Karl Rahner as noted by Ruth Duck
KZ - Katherine Zappone
LS - Leonard Swidler
MB - Margaret Butler
MC - Meinrad Craighead
MH - Margaret Hammer
MR - Martha Robbins
MS - Margaret Schrader
MST - Marcel Sarot
MTW - Miriam Therese Winter
ND - Neil Darragh
PLR - Patricia Lynn Reilly
PT - Phyllis Trible
RG - Rita Gross
RRR - Rosemary Radford Ruether
SA&PH - Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins (their study participants)
SM - Sallie McFague
APPENDIX C
SOCIAL LOCATION OF THE RESEARCHER

Patti Lather acknowledges that "research approaches inherently reflect our beliefs about the world we live in and want to live in," and that postpositivism has "cleared methodology of prescribed rules and boundaries." Similarly, feminist theologians, especially those in the area of spirituality, suggest guidelines but not prescriptions for methods to be used. Thus, while a researcher in spirituality may feel free in use of methods which seem appropriate to the study question and resonate with the researcher's own epistemological framework, any method chosen will in some way influence what the researcher finds. As Pamela Dickey Young cautions, "one's theological method in large part determines one's theological outcome." Anne Carr elaborates:

It is now a principle of contemporary hermeneutics that all interpretation is conditioned by the presuppositions and prejudgments of the interpreter and feminist thinkers usually identify their social locations and presuppositions. This move is taken in an effort to be as clear as possible about the perspectives that govern particular lines of thought and argument ... The perspective that informs a particular theological effort colors the whole discourse and is usually apparent in its starting point. In feminist theology that starting point and perspective is often women's experience.

True to Anne Carr's words, and indeed as other feminist theologians expect, the present research began with my own experience within the faith community (1.1), and it progresses by telling the faith stories of other women. My whole approach to doing this is inevitably coloured by my own experience and values. I am a middle class well-educated Catholic woman living in New Zealand, but the first two-thirds of my life were spent in the United States and Canada. Ethnically my background is fifth generation western European. I have been educated and have worked both in the sciences (psychology and environmental impact assessment) and theology (parish ministry, university chaplaincy, adult faith education). I have been single, married, divorced and remarried, suffered economic hardship, church discipline, social stigma and personal loss. I have belonged to environmental, social justice, church and women's groups. I find rest in the bush, peace in kayaking, wonder in travel and different cultures, joy and sustenance from those persons

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605 Patti Lather, Getting Smart, 51-52.
606 Pamela Dickey Young, Feminist Theology/Christian Theology, 17.
close to me. My experiences with people, church and my own journey have influenced the choice of God images for this research, and also my preferences for a study which is participatory, respectful of individuals, cognisant of context, and will give voice to women's understandings of what is core to their being. It is my hope that the research would invite the institutional church to listen and support women's faith journeys. More important is my hope that the research will be gift to women who have given so much to me - that it will be a public articulation of the spirituality of a group of contemporary Catholic women, both for those whose voices are directly heard in this thesis, and for other women who need the encouragement of these voices to carry on in their faith journeys.

I identify in 3.3.2 that I have biases toward the valuing of women's equality, integrity, freedom and autonomy; mutuality in relationships with others including God; personal growth and awareness; breadth and depth in God imagery; feminine and gender-neutral images of God; good self esteem; education; and environmental and social responsibility.

It is important to note that these biases (and any unconscious ones which have not been identified) inevitably affect every aspect of this research, from the topic itself, to the literature I read and included in the review, to the ways in which interviews were set up and conducted, to the material selected from the transcripts for inclusion in the women's stories in Chapters 4-7, to the aspects of God images I chose to discuss in Chapters 8-9, to the attitudes I bring to my interpretation and conclusions.

My biases will also affect how I identify and interpret the participants' words and understandings. For example, my portrayal of the women's stories is selective, focussed on where God was in their lives, but also includes life experiences which I felt affected their God images. My reading of the evolution of God understandings in their lives is based partially on their understandings from the interviews, and partially on my own intuition and understandings of what can or might shape God images. These stories were vetted by the participants as part of their involvement in this project, and also as a check to guard against undue researcher bias.

The place where researcher bias potential is greatest is in the way I shaped the already interpreted material of the women's stories to discuss formation and change of

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608 The importance of declaring a researcher background and stance is that research results can have as much to do with the researcher as the participants. Awareness of one's background and biases are part of reflexivity, reflecting on the whole process of research. An example of researcher stance is from Peter Reason, "Three Approaches to Participative Inquiry," in Handbook of Qualitative Research. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1994), 324-339. For reflexivity, see Virginia Olesen, "Feminisms and Models," 165 and Patti Lather, Getting Smart, 13.
imagery, possible links of images with experience and conclusions in Chapters 8-10. It is quite possible, for example, that the figures depicting the sources and development in Chapter 8 would have different shapes, names and letters if I were to ask the participants themselves to construct them. My understandings of their image changes are based not only on the information they gave me but on my understanding of the image changes in my own life: this is sometimes very helpful, but at other times it may lead to a misinterpretation. My feminist theological and personal bias towards images of God which are I think are positive may lead me to discount the images that I consider negative.609

The feminist theological lens is nowhere in more evidence than in discussions of gender and power in Chapter 9. However, it was set aside to explore with some of the women why even some of them, who otherwise use inclusive language for God, call God 'Lord'. Mary McClintock Fulkerson's admonitions to feminist theologians about honouring the wisdom in other women are well taken in such situations.610 Likewise, the lens was in evidence in the discussion of God images and self image, in my interest in autonomy and empowerment. As a mother, I was sensitive to the impact of children and motherhood on the participants in the study. As someone who has benefited from solitude, I was quick to notice the opportunities in the participants' lives for solitude. But there may have been other aspects to life that I missed because I was not sensitive to them, perhaps things pertaining to New Zealand heritage which are not in my background. The socio-political lens I looked through in my exploration of church was one not only of a Christian feminist but someone with twenty-first century democratic organisational expectations.

Although I have made explicit the lenses I am aware of which will affect my interpretation in this thesis, there will undoubtedly be others which remain unconscious, and are best detected by readers from other social locations.

609 For example, while control may be a negative trait for me, it may not be for others. Ann Belford Ulanov explores this issue in Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 52-53.

610 Mary McClintock Ferguson, Changing the Subject, 390.
In deciding how to choose participants for the study, one supervisor suggested looking to an existing Catholic group, CFLE, organised in the 1970s to promote Christian Family Life Education in New Zealand. Because CFLE members went through a two year training programme, they were accustomed to the kind of reflection on and articulation of faith ideas that they would be asked to do. The composition of the group was weighted with teachers, and the age range was from about 25 to 60, precluding younger and older women from the study. An advantage was that the group was a mainstream Catholic church group, and would not give the study a label (too liberal or too conservative, feminist or not) which might prevent some church people from being open to its findings.

Knowing that a maximum of twelve women could be interviewed, and that three interviews with each woman would have to be arranged over the course of a year (although it stretched first to eighteen months, and then to 4-5 years!), time and expense logistics dictated that interviewing be limited to two locations. Two cities were chosen whose CFLE membership included sixteen and twenty-seven people respectively who were both lay and women, a total of forty-three potential study participants.

Each of the forty-three women was initially sent two letters under the same cover: an introductory letter from the supervisor, then dean of the theology faculty; and a letter from the researcher describing the aims of the study, what would be required of those who volunteered, an invitation to participate, and a brief initial survey which included a consent form. The initial survey was intended to give enough background information on volunteers, so that if more than twelve women volunteered, participants could be chosen who seemed to have backgrounds that varied from one another. Within three weeks, thirteen consent forms were received, and later three more either consent forms or offers to participate. These volunteers were then phoned in order to establish times for the first of three interviews. One of the women could not be reached during the time interviews were being scheduled, so she was written a letter thanking her for her offer, as were the women whose offers to participate were received after the first set of interviews. Thus the study began with twelve women.

611 Copies of these documents follow on the next pages. Names of participants’ cities and dioceses have been deleted to protect their anonymity.
25 August 1995

Dear C.F.L.E. Graduate

I am writing to you in association with Mary Betz, a student who is enrolled for a PhD in the Faculty of Theology here at Otago. I am one of Mary’s supervisors for her research and thesis. Mary may be known to you as the author of the commentary on the Sunday readings in the Tablet. She is the mother of two daughters. Mary graduated BSc in 1975 [Toronto], MSc in 1977 [British Columbia] and MTS (Master of Theological Studies) in 1988 [Vancouver].

Mary is embarking on a research/thesis entitled: Images of God in Roman Catholic Lay Women in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Personally I think this is a pivotal topic in our Church today, and it promises some excellent and significant outcomes. Mary has already done some interesting pre-doctoral writing, particularly in her research essay Changing Images of God as Revealed in Some Contemporary Christian Feminist Writings and Related Empirical Research. Her doctoral thesis should be a significant contribution to women’s studies and theology in our country.

Mary’s research will be done with a group of New Zealand women. I myself have encouraged her to base her research in a group of theologically informed women here in New Zealand. I have worked with CFLE Diploma and post-graduate groups for some years, and I remain a confirmed enthusiast for CFLE programmes and the spirit of CFLE [and, dare I add, some of the more interesting parties that I have attended during CFLE courses!] I believe that CFLE graduates are a significant and “theologically literate” group in our Church, who have done a lot of processing of theological ideas, and who have also made a notable contribution to the reflection on women, their sexuality and their spirituality. Consequently, I am convinced that CFLE graduate women would be a very apt group to serve Mary’s study. Mary’s enclosed letter will explain the details of her request. I would warmly commend her work to you.

With thanks for your consideration,

Tony Russell
Dean, Faculty of Theology, University of Otago
24 August 1995

C.F.L.E. Graduates

Dear

As the covering letter from Tony Russell has explained, I am about to begin the research portion of a thesis project on Catholic women's images of God. Tony has suggested that you and other women C.F.L.E. graduates in the areas may be willing and able to contribute to this research. I hope that you will read the information below and that some of you will be able to volunteer to be interviewed for this project.

Project Description

The main question I hope to answer is "Who or what is God?" for Roman Catholic lay women in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Within this question are others, such as: What are women's ideas, images, and concepts of God? What words do we use to describe God, and who is the God we talk to in prayer? Further, what people, events and experiences in our lives affect and have affected how we think of God? How do our images of God at any point in time affect our relationships with ourselves, God, others, church and society?

1) Initial Survey/Questionnaire

If after reading this information, you would like to be involved in this research, please fill out and return the attached survey in the enclosed pre-addressed, stamped envelope. This will give me a broad and general sense of the variety of backgrounds of Catholic women in the areas, and also an idea who may be able and willing to participate in more detailed interviews. I would appreciate return of the questionnaires by 1 September, 1995, as I would like to begin interviewing in 7-9 September 1995. Please phone me collect at (you can try anytime between 8 am and 10 p.m.) if there are any questions you would like to ask before consenting to participate.

2) Interviews

Approximately twelve women, among those who indicate they are willing, will be asked to participate in interviews. (Time, financial support, and the nature of the project precludes involving more women at this time.) Participants should be willing to be interviewed three times, with interviews occurring in or at least a month apart. The interviews will probably each take two to three hours. It is anticipated that the interviews will take place between early September 1995 and late January 1996. The venue for interviews would be the participant's choice: their home or office, my home, or any other meeting place
reasonably quiet and temporarily without distractions.

During the interviews, participants will be asked questions about what or who God is (and has been in the past) for them, as well as about their own life history. They will also be asked to do some creative reflection, writing, listening and drawing. The interviews will be sound-recorded, and the transcripts made will be available so that participants can later check them over for accuracy, and add to or clarify statements if they wish. In the second and third interviews, participants may also be asked to comment on some of the researcher's interpretations and theories. Because the interviews will involve talking about and reflecting on significant life experiences, women who volunteer to participate should understand that some sensitive parts of their lives may be touched upon.

**Participant Consent**

This research is bound by ethical guidelines established by the University of Otago, and has been approved by the Faculty of Theology, University of Otago. In line with such guidelines, survey participants will note that their signature is asked for on the bottom of the questionnaire, giving consent to participation in the project and publication of its results, with the understanding that anonymity of all participants will be preserved.

**Participant Personal Information**

Information collected in the surveys and interviews will be used solely for this research project. Each participant will be asked at the first interview to choose a pseudonym to be used in association with the information she provides. Only the participant and researcher will know the actual names of those who provide given pieces of information. Any other information which may identify a participant can be noted and disguised if used in the actual thesis or subsequent publications. The raw survey and interview information will be seen only by the researcher (Mary Betz), possibly by a secretarial assistant when it is transcribed from tape to printed page, and occasionally by the researcher's university supervisors in the course of consultation as the thesis and other related publications are written.

Each participant may request a copy of any information she provides. The researcher will keep tapes and paper transcripts until the thesis and any relevant other publications are completed, approximately two - three years. At this time audio tapes will be erased (or given to participants, if requested) and paper transcripts destroyed. Survey and interview transcripts on computer disk will be stored at the university for five years before being erased, and a disk copy will also be kept by the researcher for further research use assuming there is no objection from participants.

**About the research and the researcher**

Although my Ph.D. research is the immediate cause for my wanting to interview women about God, my interest in this particular topic has been fuelled by my own
involvements in the life of the Church; in liturgy and music, in sacramental preparation, in faith-sharing groups, in my children's education, and in considering women's participation in the church. My hope is that as well as providing an opportunity for me to gather information, the interviews will also be opportunities to exchange information, times of reflection for both participants and researcher, and occasions for mutual sharing.

Further to Tony's introduction, here is some basic information about me. I am the mother of two primary school girls and have lived for 7.5 years in ... after having lived 17 years in Canada (where I did my first studies in theology), and 18 years in the United States before that. I write part-time (usually in the area of Biblical Studies) for the Tablet. I also do some tutoring at the University of Otago and occasional lecturing for the University's distance education programme, both in church history. I like giving children's parties, flat-water kayaking, nordic skiing, quiet, books, baking, ethnic food, photography and travel. One of the goals in doing my Ph.D. is to show that good theological research can, in fact, be done (and should be done) while staying grounded in everyday life (which this winter seems to have been immersion in flus, colds and snow!).

I very much appreciate your consideration of this research project, and hope we will all learn from it. If you have questions, please phone me collect at ... If you would like to address questions to the project supervisor, you can contact Tony Russell via any of the addresses on his letter. I hope to begin interviews in between 7-9 September, so would need to have your survey form returned by 1 September in order to confirm an interview time. First interviews in would follow later in September. I will be in touch soon with everyone who volunteers to be interviewed. If I do not receive a reply to this letter, I will understand that you are unable to be involved in the research. Hoping to hear from many of you soon.

With many thanks,

Mary Betz
Initial Survey
Research on Catholic Women's Images of God

Any information you provide in this questionnaire or in future interviews will remain anonymous in subsequent publications. Your consent to participate in this project is requested at the end of this questionnaire. You may write on the back if you wish but answers can be brief as interviews will look at the issues in more detail.

Name
Mailing Address (include city)
Phone
Diocese

Who or what is God for you right now, at this time in your life? (use any images, names, attributes, symbols, etc.) which are part of your impressions, feelings, ideas and beliefs about what God is like).

If you have previously thought of God in different ways than at present, what other ways have you conceived of God, and at approximately what age(s)?

If your conception of God has changed, to what do you attribute those changes?

Please provide as much of the following information as is possible:
Your date and place of birth
Your present age
Circle as many as apply have ever applied to you: single married separated divorced remarried marriage-annulled widowed in-de-facto-relationship lesbian heterosexual
Number of your daughters (if any)__, and your sons (if any)__. Number of your brothers (if any)__, and your sisters (if any)__. Your ethnic group
Your cultural roots
Your educational background
Your religious background
Your occupational background

Places you have lived within New Zealand

Time spent (and in what place(s)) outside of New Zealand

What causes or beliefs have you actively worked for in church, your community, or society in general? Briefly, what was your involvement?

List briefly any events, experiences, people (names not necessary), etc., which/who have had a major impact on your life.

Would you be interested, able and willing to participate in three in-depth interviews as described in the covering letter? Circle the one that applies: Yes No

If yes, what are the days of the week and times of the day (morning, afternoon, evening) which are usually best for you?

women: Would you be available for a first interview between Thurs. 7 Sept. and Sat. 9 Sept., 1995? Yes No

I understand the nature of this research project and have had any questions I have at this point answered to my satisfaction. I am aware of what will become of the project tapes, transcripts and disks at the conclusion of the project (see accompanying letter). I shall be free to withdraw from the study at any time with no questions asked and without prejudice. I consent to the publication of the results of this project with the understanding that my anonymity will be preserved.

Signature

Thank you very much for contributing to this research project. Please return this questionnaire in the pre-addressed stamped envelope provided by 1 September 1995. (If the questionnaire is not returned, it will be understood that you are not available to participate in the study. Your interest has been appreciated.)

Mary Betz
In theory, the qualitative researcher works inductively, meaning that “categories, themes and patterns come from the data.”612 In practice, the researcher inevitably has questions which suggest categories and themes before the data is even collected, but this should not preclude new themes and patterns arising from the data.

Thus, over a period of more than a year before the interviewing process began, many lists of possible interview questions had been compiled. As each question was added to the final list, it was referred back to the thesis research questions (section 1.2) to ensure that it was necessary or helpful in answering them.613

At the urging of one of the university faculty614 with a breadth of knowledge in qualitative research methodology, it was decided to spread the interviewing over approximately three sessions, to allow for greater relationship building with participants, for clarification of uncertainties in answers to questions from previous interviews, and for some feedback to them of initial findings.

Although specific questions were set for the interviews, a middle ground was taken between structured and completely unstructured interviews.615 That is, the questions on the interview guide were neither followed rigidly nor were participants simply asked to talk about the subject at hand. All the questions on the guide were covered at some point in the interviews, although the wording and order varied depending on the participant’s train of thought. If in answering an early question, the participant anticipated a later question, the later question was skipped or brought into conversation at that earlier point. Freedom was also taken to ask clarifying or supplemental questions as necessary, or to rephrase questions if they had been misunderstood or not fully answered.

Although the questions themselves were reviewed several times before their final version, sometimes they needed to be rephrased during interviews. This did not happen so


613 This approach was advised by Corrine Glesne & Alan Peshkin, Becoming Qualitative Researchers, 16.

614 Graeme Webb, Higher Education and Development Committee, University of Otago, personal communication.

much in the first round of interviews, because the questions had been thoroughly reviewed several times and had been tested in a pilot interview\textsuperscript{616} with a woman who was not one of the participants. In the second set of interviews, however, the questions had not been as thoroughly vetted, and not all of the questions had been part of the pilot interview. It was realised after the first few participants’ answers that researcher assumptions were enmeshed in a few of the questions, and to some relief, the participants turned the assumptions around as they answered. After that, the questions were rephrased to make them less leading. In addition, in the third interview\textsuperscript{617} those particular questions were asked again from a different perspective to ensure that the original phrasing had not prejudiced the participants’ answers.

The interviews consisted of written and reflective exercises as well as oral questions and answers. The purposes of varying the method of asking for information were several. First, it seemed to me that oral questions and answers alone for an extended period of time, even on interesting issues, might be tiring, so some variation would be desirable. Second, oral methods might elicit mostly answers that had been previously put into words in some way, and use of reflection, writing or drawing might access ideas that had not been previously articulated. Third, other methods that did not specifically focus on the researcher as immediate hearer may be more likely to allow thoughts and attitudes to be articulated that the participant may have perceived to be less palatable to the researcher.\textsuperscript{618} Fourth, the drawing exercise was a “life story” drawing, which in addition to the other purposes, functioned as a focus as each woman told me about her life, and as together we went back through her life to look specifically at God images and what shaped them. Last, a variation

\textsuperscript{616} Suggested by Corrine Glesne and Alan Peshkin, \textit{Becoming Qualitative Researchers}, 68. This ensured that wording was clear, and questions were grouped in an order which was comfortable and logical. Factors taken into account were the placement of personal and theoretical questions, grouping of similar topics, and mixing oral questions and written exercises.

\textsuperscript{617} Fortunately this is one of the advantages of having multiple interviews. There is a chance to correct mistakes and also ask questions about issues that come to light in earlier interviews. Multiple interviews when used this way have the advantage of being able to make use of or respond to participant input. The adaptability of less structured and multiple interviews is discussed by Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, “Interviewing,” 368-369; and A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles, “Data Management and Analysis Methods,” in \textit{Handbook of Qualitative Research}. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1994), 431.

\textsuperscript{618} The researcher, by presence, tone of voice, dress, body language, etc., sends many unconscious signals to those being interviewed, and it is not possible to gauge their influence nor for the researcher to entirely control them. In this case, some of the participants knew of me by my writing for a Catholic newspaper, and a reading of them would likely have shown me to be sympathetic to Christian feminism as well as to biblical scholarship. It is not possible to know how that affected participants’ answers to some of my questions. For some, it would have encouraged them to speak out truthfully, but it is possible that some others less sympathetic to feminism may have been less able to speak openly.
in methods to examine the same issues is a type of validity check on participants’ answers. In qualitative research it is known as triangulation or multiple methods.619 If answers on the same issue differ, then one has to ask why: one possible answer is that the less verbal response is more deeply held, and has surfaced without being censored by considerations such as social, religious or political acceptability (this is similar though not identical to the third point above).

The less verbal exercises included the life story drawing, time for reflection and writing a prayer, two adjective check lists, and a fill-in-the-blank exercise.620 The prayer exercise was intended as a balance, or to be used in comparison with the oral direct questions about women’s God images. Were the God images they said they had used reflected in their prayer, and did their prayer include assumptions about their God images which had not been articulated in their answers to the oral questions?621 The adjective check lists could have been used in any number of ways (either quantitatively or qualitatively), but served two major functions in this research. One purpose was again to provide more information on women’s God images. In the first interview the women were directed to use the list to describe what God was like. In the second interview, the women were given the same words in a new list and asked to tick the words which described what they themselves were like. A comparison of the lists would function to demonstrate similarity and difference in women’s self and God images. At the end of the second interview, the women were shown a number of visual images of God and asked to comment on any that appealed to them. This was another facet of triangulation, in attempt to get a fuller idea of how women imaged God, and in a way that appealed to non-verbal faculties of the human mind.

The chosen oral questions and less verbal exercises were ordered622 in a way in which all elements of the interviews would follow naturally (grouped according to similar content),


620 The exercises used are included with the interview guides in Appendix G.

621 “Prayer is an important clue to helping people determine the way they perceive God. If the content of freely formulated prayers is analyzed one can discover one’s preferred God-image…” Martin A. Lang, Acquiring Our Image of God, 95. “Who one believes God to be is most accurately revealed not in our credo but in the way one speaks to God when no one else is listening.” Nancy Mairs, quoted by William Reiser, Looking for a God to Pray to: Christian Spirituality in Transition. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 136. Psychoanalysts explain this by theorising that what we verbalise normally when asked questions about God is only what we can consciously articulate. Some of our knowledge of God is unconscious, and that sometimes surfaces in the language of “wish, need, image and instinct.” See Ann Belford Ulanov, Picturing God, 168; and Mary Lou Randour and Julie Bondanza, “The Concept of God,” 304.

622 Useful suggestions for ordering questions are found in Corrine Glesne and Alan Peshkin, Becoming Qualitative Researchers, 71.
in which the questions and exercises would be distributed in a way that would break the potential monotony of continual oral questioning, and in which basic and more impersonal questions preceded personal questions or non-verbal exercises which may have been potentially anxiety-causing. It was also discovered after intuitively ordering the questions that there was a movement over the first two interviews from personal but oral questions about God in the present moment to personal (and potentially intimate) life story questions (concerned with the past) to personal but theological questions (in the present) to general theoretical universal future-oriented questions. The last interview, because it consisted of supplemental questions and clarifications, did not flow in quite the same way, but questions were grouped to follow as naturally and comfortably as possible. Throughout the interviewing, it was noted that participants would often anticipate the next question (that is, they would give an answer to one question which would include an issue in the next one), which demonstrated that for some of the time, at least, the questions were ordered in a comfortable and logical way.

In the initial letter which was sent to potential participants, they had been advised that three interviews of two to three hours each would be required. Thus, as the first interviews were scheduled, women were asked to set aside a block of three hours, assuming there would be some time at the beginning to become at ease with one another, and perhaps break in the middle for a cup of tea. Enough questions were prepared for three or more hours of interview time (in case the time the first interview would take was overestimated), and the researcher was also prepared to end an interview at any point when either time ran out or someone tired.

The first interviews began with a short explanation of how the overall project would proceed, and a reassurance of confidentiality, followed by questions on women's images of God. The interviews also included time for reflection and the writing of a prayer, ticking an adjective checklist for attributes of God, the drawing of the woman's life/faith story, and the beginnings of the telling of that story. There were several months between the first interview and the second, during which time the interviews were transcribed from tape onto the computer, paper transcripts generated, and transcripts sent to the participants for their correction. In some cases, the life story was not begun until the second interview.

During many interviews there was extended non-information gathering time (especially an interview which began with a meal), and in such cases that interview or a later one went longer than three hours. In retrospect, although the need for such hospitality for both physical refreshment and relationship forming was anticipated, the way hospitality functioned was probably more critical than originally realised. The time spent in meals, tea
breaks and the like was essential for establishing a relationship between the researcher and each participant. It is an element of many women’s natures or socialisation in this culture to offer hospitality and in so doing to ensure a comfortable environmental and interpersonal space for talking. Hospitality and conversation are thus used as the means to discern whether a relationship of trust is possible, or to build on an already-established relationship.

The assumption that a relationship of trust between the researcher and the participants was possible was an integral one to this project. Focusing as it does on issues that are close to the centre of faith and life, it would be impossible to expect rich reflection and information without such a relationship. Postmodern qualitative researchers, and feminist and critical theorists in particular, believe that the relationship must be a balanced, or non-hierarchical one. The power of the researcher as knower must be balanced by the researcher as learner, and vice versa. This kind of relationship is also helped to develop when the researcher is a good listener, because the listening tips the power balance: good listening by the researcher implies that the participant has knowledge, and the one who has knowledge has power.

On the other hand, the researcher, while listening empathetically within the relationship, must also listen critically as a researcher. As Ann Oakley notes, “a feminist interviewing women is by definition both ‘inside’ the culture and participating in that which she is observing.” This is a situation which leads Oakley (like other postmodernists) to demolish “the mythology of ‘hygienic research,’” replacing it with “the recognition that more than dangerous bias - it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.”

Thus the interviews all had non-information gathering spaces which were important (as was the information gathering itself) for relationship development and for then being able to focus on the issues of the study. Researcher attitude toward the women in interviews was not much different than if the meeting was at a seminar on similar issues: casual, warm, open. Researcher dress was simple, and the researcher was directed by participant suggestions on logistics of where to interview and when to have a cup of tea (as in most cases the researcher was a guest in their homes). The researcher genuinely looked forward

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624 See Corrine Glesne and Alan Peshkin, Becoming Qualitative Researchers. 69-82; and Ann Oakley, “Interviewing Women,” 33, 41.
to meeting the women as being interested in the project and anticipated mutual interests in faith and women’s issues. Although a body language check was made occasionally to see that it as well as verbal responses indicated an interest in the participants’ answers to questions, it was quickly found to be unnecessary. The women’s stories were so captivating that a warning was needed to women before beginning to remind the researcher when it was a good time to take a break. Once, in fact, absorption in the women’s words caused too much haste: the play button was pushed instead of the record button on the tape recorder (it was turned off during non-verbal exercises). Nearly twenty minutes of tape were lost, but some was able to be reconstructed with interview questions and notes, and with the help of the participant who later checked and elaborated on researcher reconstructions. Even though the interviews were taped, brief notes were taken for just this eventuality, and the notes also sometimes helped understand the recordings when the sound quality was poor.

Because of the need for tape-recording the interviews, at first a small recorder with no attachments was selected, and at interviews it was placed close but not too close to the participant (who would be doing more of the speaking than the researcher). The initial desire to save the study participants any anxiety over too much apparatus resulted in poor sound quality on a portion of the first interviews: a set of booster speakers had to be borrowed while transcribing. For the next interviews, a tape recorder with a separate microphone to improve the sound was used. In addition, batteries as opposed to a plug-in transformer for a power source were used because of the fear that transformers added to background noise: this led to an unnoticed (at the time) slowing of the recorder as the batteries ran out, so when transcribing the tapes, a playback machine which had variable speed control was necessary. (An inordinate number of batteries were also used for fear they would run out.) In the final set of interviews most of the logistics were right, but two different tape recorders stopped working (luckily there were three). The moral of the story is to get advice from an experienced interviewer on logistics before getting and using equipment!

First interviews began as described earlier, with some introductory time. Second interviews usually began (if not with a cup of tea) with whatever clarifications, corrections or changes (for the researcher or participants) were necessary on the transcripts from the first interview, then proceeded with questions from wherever the first interview left off. Usually this included finishing the recording of the women’s life/faith stories; an adjective checklist for self-attributes; a series of questions on the participant’s theology, spirituality, relationship

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with church and world; and a request for comment on a series of visual God images brought by the researcher. Second interviews were usually the longest, and lasted from three to four hours, again 'interrupted' by hospitality. In some cases, some of the material from the second interview was carried over to the third interview. Again, there were several months at a minimum between the second and third interviews, and the same process of transcribing and getting participant checks was followed as with the first interviews.

The third interviews usually lasted about an hour, consisting mostly of supplementary questions or issues that the first two interviews had brought to light. Such questions were intended to fill in missed gaps and to ask in other ways some questions which had been asked earlier, but which needed clarification. On some occasions, when the first and/or second interviews had not covered all the basic questions, these were finished at the third interview before the supplementary questions were asked.

Total time spent with each participant was about eight to nine hours, of which six to eight were spent directly on the information needed for the project. In addition, at the end of the interview process, women in one city requested and held a pot luck dinner in order to meet with one another and the researcher to share some of their experiences. (Written permission was sought from each of the women involved before giving the initiating participant the names of the others to contact.) This gathering gave me an opportunity to share preliminary findings with those gathered, and also gave the women a chance informally to give me feedback on their reactions to the whole project. Their comments were very affirming of the whole process as having been 'gift' to them, an opportunity to be deeply and attentively listened to, and ultimately of the potential for their voices to be heard in the wider church.

The locations for interviews were chosen by participants among available options. In the researcher's home city, women were offered the option of meeting in their homes or in the researcher's home, or in some other location if they wished. In the other city the options were to meet with women either in their homes or at an alternate location arranged for each visit. For the first interview in the other city, the alternate location was a small meeting room in a downtown location, for the second a house owned by the Mercy sisters, and the third (by which time the participants knew each other's identities) the home of one of the participants. Most interviews were indoors, two were outside when sunshine and warmth was too compelling (a condition which, in some areas of New Zealand one learns to take advantage of).

The latter venue leads me to speak of the transcribing process, for reasons which will soon become obvious. Transcribing, for me, was one of the most frustrating and time
consuming chores ever encountered. While there is some advantage in listening again to the interviews, the listening becomes tedious if the sound quality is so poor that it becomes necessary to listen to sections of a recording five or ten times over in order to recoup the conversation. Occasional sentences in some of the first interviews were irretrievable because of poor sound quality. Once the sound quality was improved, transcription of an interview took about four and a half to five hours for every hour of tape.

In addition to improving the sound quality by the use of different recording and playback equipment, it is necessary to choose locations with care. Background conversations in nearby rooms or noise (particularly aircraft passing overhead in landing or takeoff patterns) make the transcribing process difficult, and at times impossible.

The interviews were transcribed almost verbatim, although if a section of conversation was not relevant to the issues under discussion, it was not transcribed, and a notation with the subject of the conversation was inserted in its place. In addition, any conversations which the participants offered but indicated at the time they could not be used in the study were not transcribed. Filler phrases such as “you know”, “kind of”, “sort of” and “actually”, which occurred often in some transcripts were also not usually transcribed, unless they seemed to add to the interpretation of the content.

As the project proceeded, one of the participants, and also the researcher, moved to different cities. Because some of the interviews had not been completed, some were finished by mail or by having a participant audio-tape their own answers to the remaining questions: other interviews were actually completed with gracious tolerance on the parts of the participants some four to five years later.

The changes, corrections or additions requested by participants to their transcripts were made on the researcher’s copy of the each transcript. The transcripts of the interviews, the information on the initial survey, and the information from the non-oral exercises formed the basis for analysis and interpretation contained in Chapters 4 through 9 of this thesis.
APPENDIX F
FOLLOW-THROUGH OF ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It was important that the participants in the study know as much as they could about it before they even volunteered, so the initial letter of approach was fairly detailed. During the interviews, there was no question about the study the researcher did not answer when asked, and only once was answering postponed until after the interview had finished, because the answer might have directly influenced the remainder of the participant’s answers surrounding the same topic. Thus, the participants were able to know as much as they chose to know (about both study and researcher) during the course of the interviews. At the completion of the thesis they will each receive a summary of the study findings, and a copy of the thesis itself will be available for those who wish to read in detail what their participation “hath wrought.”

In addition, it was important that the participants to feel no pressure to answer questions which were either too personal or disturbing in some way (they were told in the initial letter that some of the questions had the potential of bringing up sensitive issues, and at the beginning of the first interview, this was reiterated, and they were told they could feel free not to answer such questions). There were occasions with two participants where a question was skipped for this reason. Not knowing the women before the first interview (although some were known peripherally or by reputation), the researcher was prepared, if necessary, to refer them to others (in the fields of spiritual direction or counselling) if the interviews brought up issues they needed specific help with. As it turned out, most of the women interviewed were themselves in networks of people in those professions, or had supportive friends, and/or had already worked through the issues raised by the interviews. Occasionally the memories surfaced by questions would bring tears, and a break was usually offered at such times.

From the initial letter of approach, and at each interview, the issue of confidentiality was broached. The identity of the participants was to be kept confidential, and would only be known by myself and possibly supervisors, unless the participants themselves chose to tell others they were participating. In the thesis and any subsequent publications, they would be referred to by a nom de plume or pseudonym of their own choosing. Any personal background which might identify them would be disguised, unless they chose to leave it in.

626 The letter, along with the accompanying letter from the researcher’s supervisor, can be found in Appendix D.
The women received copies of their transcripts after each interview so that they could make corrections or additions as necessary. The summaries of their personal stories which appear in Chapters 4-7 were checked with participants before inclusion, and amended as requested.

The initial process of interviewing and transcribing took approximately sixteen months and with several participants, was not completed for 4-5 years, so the connection between the researcher and the participants was forged over time and with some depth due to the nature of the questions, and the process of talking, reflecting, reading, and writing which was involved.

Ethical considerations also come into the way women’s stories and points of view are presented in the chapters of the thesis. Each person and her story are sacred, and it is a considerable responsibility to attempt to articulate them in a small space. Even with hundreds of pages of transcripts from the interviews, each of the women is still only known by the researcher in a small beginning way, albeit in relation to issues that are considered at the heart of being. So to presume to portray them fully or even wholly accurately would be untenable. What the thesis does offer is a voicing of a portion of their lives and beliefs, as they have related it, and as the researcher has understood it, at this point in time.

In addition to researcher initiatives in considering the ethical issues involved in research with people, the University of Otago had draft guidelines in place at the time (1995) at which ethical clearance was sought for the project. The university’s requirements were met by filing an application cleared at departmental level proposing how to deal with any ethical issues the project raised. The issues which were important for the project centred mostly on ensuring that participants had full knowledge of the project and its methods, and that they were capable of giving informed consent, as well as a commitment to confidentiality regarding the personal information given by the participants and to researcher availability by phone or letter for a period of time after the interviews should any questions arise from the participants. Indeed, the application was basically a written commitment to the methodology and methods already embraced, and its principles were followed in personal and written contact with the participants, and in the subsequent protection of the information gathered from them.
Greetings, introduction, offer of tea etc. if in appropriate place, ensure comfortable seating, mutual becoming at-ease, etc., 10 minutes or so.

-Are you ready to start?

-Today's interview will take 2-3 hours, so we will probably want to break part way through. Please feel free to stop me and ask for a break if I forget to. What length of time is about right for you to sit and talk through questions and do some writing/drawing exercises before a break? Throughout these interviews I will be asking a number of questions about God and about yourself. Over the course of the three interviews I will also be asking you to participate in several other related exercises - some writing, some drawing, some prayer, some looking at art, and so on. If at any time you do not wish to answer a particular question or participate in a given exercise, please say so. Please also ask me any questions you want to if what I am asking is not clear. All of our interviews will be audio-taped, and then transcribed. When I make a written copy of each interview, I will send it to you so you can make any corrections or modification that you wish. This will probably be in about a month's time. Upon reading over the transcript, if you find anything that you do not want to be quoted or referred to in anything I write (thesis, article) about this research, it will be possible for you to indicate those sections as sensitive/not to be used. If you think that your life story would be too readily identifiable, some aspects of it can be disguised, but we can talk more about that at the next interview.

I just need to say a few things about confidentiality. No one except me, my supervisor and you know that you are being interviewed for this study. You may, of course, tell others if you wish. I will not be referring to anyone (unless they wish) by their real first names in my thesis, etc., but because I may be summarising individual life stories, I would like you to select a name by which you wish to be referred to in any written materials. I will ask you to write this pseudonym on any written work or drawings that you do during the course of the interviews. Have you got a name you would like me to use? (You can think about it until next time if you wish.)

I am also conscious that some of the questions I ask may cause you to reflect on times in your life that have been painful. If for this or any other reason you find you do not want to finish answering a question, you want a few minutes break, you want me to wait a few minutes, or need some other way of coping with feelings that come up, please let me know.

Do you have any questions you want to ask me at this point, before I turn on the tape and we begin?

1) I'm going to start right in on the key part of my whole study, and ask you about God. Who or what is God for you right now, today, at this point in your life?  
   a) would you say that you have a relationship with God? how important is it to you? how do you maintain your relationship with God? does this relationship with God change?
in what way? what causes it to change?

b) what names, attributes, titles, images, symbols, impressions, beliefs, ideas, feelings, come to mind when you think about God, talk to God, talk about God? can you say more about some of the images, names, etc. for God that you have mentioned? Which one or ones are most cherished by you? why? where did they come from? How long have you thought/felt about God this way?

c) are there any particular scripture verses, or hymns that seem to capture something of how you perceive God? Can you tell me some of the words or phrases you remember from those verses or hymns.

2)[1] I have here a list of adjectives that I would like you to look over. I would like you to put a tick by the words on one list which say something to you about who God is for you right now.

3)[1] At this point, I'd like you to take a few minutes to do some quiet reflection, and then write a prayer. You may reflect and write on anything you wish, some person or event or problem in your life that you have been thinking about lately, or just take some time to be in God's presence. You may write your prayer in any form you wish - letter, verse, prose, just phrases- anything. (give felt markers and sheets of plain paper). When you are finished, I'll ask you to share your prayer with me, and answer some questions about what you have written.

... 4)[1] Would you share your prayer with me - read it to me?..

a) looking over the prayer you have written, what does it reveal to you about who God is for you at this particular moment in time? what does it say implicitly or explicitly about God, God's attributes, and so on?

b) what does your prayer reveal about how you are feeling or who you are at this point in time?

c) does your prayer tell anything about how you perceive your relationship with God?

d) are there any specific images/concepts of God that you have used, that came to you as you were writing, or that come to you now as you read over your prayer? Can you say more about those particular images/concepts? What do they mean for you? Where did they come from? How long would you say you have conceived of God in this way?

e) is there anything else you would like to say about your prayer?

--Perhaps this would be a good place to break for a few minutes (turn off tape)

(turn on tape)

5)[2] I'd like to look for a while now at your own life. I'm going to give you paper and felts again, and ask you to draw in whatever form you wish something of your life story. It would be helpful if you could include on your drawing some of the events and experiences which have been most important in your life, and approximately what age you were at the time, or the year. If you understand your life as a series of stages and/or turning points, please indicate these as well. I would like to take your drawing away with me and make a copy of it if you are agreeable, and I would return the original to you at our next interview. Is that ok? (give large paper, pastels and felts, also sheet with keyword reminders of these instructions) Again, take about 10-15 minutes for this, and let me know when you have finished. After you have finished, we will talk about some of the things you have drawn and written.

...
6)[2] Would you tell me about your drawing, take me through the summary-story it tells of your life?
   a) I'd like to look at different points in your life, and ask you a few questions at each point. First, let's go back to your childhood.
      i) Where were you living at the time? Who was in your family? Who were the most important people in your life - people that you relied on, trusted, loved or looked up to/admired in some way? Briefly describe each person and why they were important to you. (For childhood, if father/mother not mentioned, specifically ask.) Would you say that any of these people formed you or changed you in any way? How? What things gave you particular delight or enjoyment at this stage of your life? What things were sources of fear or hurt for you at that time? Did any of these things (enjoyable or traumatic) form you or change you in any way? How?
      ii) how did you learn about God? who taught you? what did you learn about God? who or what did you think God was? If you remember praying, describe how you prayed. How did you come to think of God as ___ at this time? (from "who" or "what" answers)

b) (repeat (i) and (ii-altered slightly after childhood) for various stages of life, e.g., childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, etc. - perhaps once for each decade, but using life drawing as better indication of stages for each interviewee.)

c) is there anything else you would like to mention about your life story?

TURN OFF TAPE

Hopefully in about a month I can send you a written copy of this interview. You will have a few weeks to note any modifications you wish to make. At this time I am not certain how long it will be before our next interview. I suspect in would be in mid-November, and the last interview would probably be in late January. I will know better after I find out how long it will take me to transcribe the interviews! - So I will drop you a note when I send you the transcript. As for the tapes, although I will need them until the end of my thesis writing, you may have the tapes of your interviews at that time if you wish.

If you have any concerns about the project throughout the interview process, please write or phone me. Do you still have my contact address and phone number? Do you have any questions for me? Are you still willing to meet with me twice more? THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!
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lonely possessive  spiritual  static
lover potent steadfast  strong
loving powerful  weeping  whole
lowly powerless  wilful  wise
loyal spirit-filled  withdrawn  worthy

manipulated protective  suffering  zealously
manipulating proud  superfluous  subtle
marginalised providing  suffering  superficial
masculine punitive  superior  sure
male meditative quiet  teaching
meditative pure  thinking  transforming
mature protective  transparent  tyrannical
meek proud  trusted  true
merciful providing  trusting  truthful
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mothering pure  unemotional  under-developed
mysterious quiet  unformed  underlying
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near radical  unjust  uninvited
needy rational  unique  uninvolved
non-conformist receiving  understandable  uninvolved
not changing reflective  understanding  unconventional
not growing relational  underdeveloped  unconventional
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open responsive  unconventional  uninvolved
oppressed righteous  unconventional  uninvolved
oppressive royal  unconventional  uninvolved
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other-worldly scattered  unemotional  uninvolved
parental secret  unemotional  uninvolved
partaking self-effacing  unemotional  uninvolved
participative self-emptying  unconventional  uninvolved
passive self-sufficient  unconventional  uninvolved
patient separate  unconventional  uninvolved
patriarchal serious  unconventional  uninvolved
peaceful serving  unconventional  uninvolved
penetrating sexual  unconventional  uninvolved
perceptive silent  unconventional  uninvolved
perfect sincere  unconventional  uninvolved
Guide for Interview 2

In this interview, we will pick up where we left off last time in your life story, and then move on to some questions on how you see your ideas about God affecting various parts of your life. There will again be a few exercises that provide a break from talking into the tape recorder!

Most likely we will finish all my fundamental questions today. At our final meeting I will probably ask you for certain clarifications, and certainly for your feedback on my ideas. At that time I may also be able to indicate which excerpts from your transcripts I am likely to use, and insure that you are not identifiable from them. That last meeting would probably be for only an hour, unless we carry over some unfinished questions from today. I am currently thinking I might like to get a significant chunk of analysis done before I come back to you for the last interview, so the July school holiday seems most likely at present.

First we can go over the transcript from the first interview. Can you indicate to me any changes you want made.

Set finishing time and approximate break time.
Do you have any questions before we carry on with your life story?

Life Story Drawing out. Tape on. finish questions from Interview 1.

35. Looking back on the way your images/ideas/relationship with God have developed, what would you say have been the major influences/catalysts to such development?

Would you say that your cultural background has influenced your images of God, past or present? In what ways?

Tape off.

36. Adjective Check list - Self

Tape on.

37. Would you say that the growth in your relationship/ideas about God has changed the way you understand yourself, who you are as a person?

38. I'd like you to look at the adjective list you just ticked today, and the one you ticked last time, and ask you to compare them and talk about a few striking similarities or differences that you may notice.

39. Going back to the changes you've experienced with respect to God, have these affected your relationship with church in any way? Can you tell me about that? (Do you perceive differences in the way you understand God and the way God is understood by the church in worship and doctrine? Do those differences affect you in any way?) (Have your changes affected the way you understand worship, ministry, church structures?) Has your involvement with church changed? What is your vision of church (worship, ministry, structures)? Is your vision related to how you understand God?

40. In essence, you have been talking about your theology of church and of God in these interviews. I want to ask you now how you understand suffering, how you came to that understanding, and whether it has any connection with how you understand God?
41. Would you say that changes in your relationship/ideas about God have affected the relationships you have with others who are important to you - spouse, children, friends, parents? In what ways?

42. Have these changes affected how you see your role, goal or purpose in life?

43. Have they affected your views/attitudes toward society, socioeconomic or political structures in Aotearoa/New Zealand or elsewhere in the world?

44. Fill in the blank exercise

45. Do you ever find that in prayer or speech or attitudes, you return to your early images of God? In what kinds of situations does this occur?

Do you feel differently at worship or prayer if the God images used are male, female, or genderless? Is your relationship or attitude to God different if you pray with a specifically male, female or genderless God image in mind?

46. Are there any attributes or qualities that you have always wanted in parents, friends or partner that have not been fully realised?

47. How do you think you would talk to your grandchildren God?

In general, how do you feel about change in life, is it welcome, difficult, etc.?

For the last exercise, I want to ask you to do at least one of three things:
- draw an image of God that is important for you right now
- show me, if you have one, an image of God that is important to you
- look through the visual images I have brought with me and find one that you are interested in

Tell me about the image of God and what it represents for you.
Fill in the blanks (with as many or few words as you wish!)

When I feel thankful, I think God is

When I am suffering, or others I love are suffering, I say to God things like

When I am frustrated or angry, God seems

When I am in need of comfort, God is

When I am happy, I think of God as

When I really want something, I say to God

When I feel at peace, God is

When I am anxious, fearful or in despair, I think of God as
Guide for Interview 3

Background, if not already covered:

- pseudonym
- place in family of origin
- number of children still at home
- culture - where parents were born
  - parent’s cultural background
- husband’s religious affiliation
- parents’ religious affiliation

1) How important to you is the language (including titles, names and images) you use about God? How important is the language (e.g., the names, titles, images) of God to be used in public worship and church teaching?

2) In general, how do you understand the use of language about /images of God, that is, do the words describe what God actually is, or do you think of them as metaphors or analogies?

3) How has the awareness of or involvement in social justice or ecological issues influenced your understanding of God?

4) How important has feminist/Christian feminist awareness been in developing your understanding of God?

5) What meaning does the Trinity have for you? Perhaps you could describe for me your understanding of the persons in the Trinity as part of that.

6) Are Jesus and Christ the same for you or would you draw any distinctions?

7) The title “Almighty God”, what does it mean for you?

8) To say that God has power or acts powerfully, what does that mean for you?

9) How does your understanding of God both affirm and challenge you - your self, your values, your lifestyle, your involvements?

10) How do you understand the traits of autonomy/independence and dependence as applied to yourself in relation to others? As applied to your relationship with God?

11) When you make a decision, or form a judgment about a situation, who or what influences it (directly or indirectly) - who or what do you look to for authority or direction? (If God, where do you look/listen for God’s authority?)

12) Is there anything else you want to tell me about who or what God is for you?

-any transcript changes?
In order to make observations about the pattern of how the God images of the women as a group developed over time, Table H-1 pulls together information on childhood and middle adulthood images from Figures 8-2 to 8-12. The search for overall patterns in how God images change is assisted by a basic quantitative comparison of numbers of childhood images which have been caught or taught, then either carried into adulthood, left behind, or transformed by middle adulthood. Numbers of primary and secondary images in adulthood are similarly given and grouped according to whether they were brought forward from childhood, new adulthood images, or transformed from childhood. The contents of the table were used to construct Figure 8-13 and for the discussion in 8.5.2.
Table H-1
Relationship of Childhood God Images to Middle Adulthood God Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Child/Adult Feeling Toward God</th>
<th>Total Child Images</th>
<th>Childhood Images Carried Into Middle Adulthood</th>
<th>Childhood Images Left In One Of First Three Stages</th>
<th>Childhood Images Later Trans-Formed</th>
<th>Total Mid-Adult Images</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images Related To Childhood Images</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images New</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images Trans-Formed From Childhood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>+/+</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2/3 caught no taught</td>
<td>4/3 caught, 3/4 taught</td>
<td>1/4 taught</td>
<td>2/2 prim., 6 sec.</td>
<td>2/2 prim.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1/6 sec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>+/+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1/1 caught, 1/2 taught, 1/1 exper.</td>
<td>1 (1/1 retrospective reflection)</td>
<td>1/2 taught</td>
<td>2 prim., 3 sec.</td>
<td>2/2 prim., 3/4 sec.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/3 sec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>+/+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/1 caught, 1/1 taught</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1/1 taught</td>
<td>1 prim., 3 sec.</td>
<td>1/1 prim., 2/3 sec.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1/3 sec.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

627 Childhood and adulthood image totals are not always equal to the sum of other childhood or adulthood images, as sometimes a single image fits more than one category.

628 Childhood feeling from Table 8-1: adult feelings are not tabulated, but are surmised from middle adulthood images in 8.4.

629 In columns 4-6 and 8-10, the forward slash (/) is read “out of.” For example, in column 4, row 2, two of three caught childhood images were carried into adulthood.

630 Transformed images are those indicated by dashed lines (Figures 8-2 through 8-12). A childhood image is often altered (sometimes to its opposite) in later life stages.

631 Images are related if there is major content similarity from stage to stage (indicated by solid lines connecting images (Figures 8-2 through 8-12).

632 Images neither carried forward from childhood nor transformed childhood images.

633 Primary images (prim.) are middle adulthood images whose content is developed or well-developed in the women’s stories and/or images mentioned repeatedly. Secondary images are those which receive only one mention and/or are undeveloped. In Figures 8-2 through 8-12, primary images are in coloured ovals.
### Table H-1 continued

Relationship of Childhood Images to Middle Adulthood Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child/Adult Feeling Toward God</th>
<th>Total Child Images</th>
<th>Childhood Images Carried Into Mid-Adulthood</th>
<th>Childhood Images Left In One Of First Three Stages</th>
<th>Childhood Images Later Trans-Formed</th>
<th>Total Mid-Adult Images</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images Related To Childhood Images</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images New</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images Trans-Formed From Childhood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>+/+</td>
<td>1/1 caught</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/1 prim.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>+/-/-</td>
<td>3/3 caught</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1/4 taught</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4/4 prim., 3 sec.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>2/3 taught</td>
<td>4/6 taught, 1/3 taught</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4/4 prim., 2 sec.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2/4 prim., 1/2 sec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>0/2 taught</td>
<td>2/2 taught, 2/2 taught</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10+634</td>
<td>7/6 prim., 3+ sec.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6/7 prim., 2/3 sec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>2/4 taught</td>
<td>2/2 taught, 2/2 taught</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5/7 prim., 3 sec.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1/7 prim., 1/3 sec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>1/1 taught</td>
<td>2/2 taught, 2/2 taught</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8/8 prim., 3 sec.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2/8 prim., 1/3 sec.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

634 The '+s' in this box are explained by looking at Figure 8-8, in which the last middle adult 'image' is actually a group of images which are examples of others too numerous to mention.
Table H-1 continued

Relationship of Childhood Images to Middle Adulthood Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child/Adult Feeling Toward God</th>
<th>Total Child Images</th>
<th>Childhood Images Carried Into Middle Adulthood</th>
<th>Childhood Images Left In One Of First Three Stages</th>
<th>Childhood Images Later Trans-Formed</th>
<th>Total Mid-Adult Images</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images Related To Childhood Images</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images New</th>
<th>Mid-Adult Images Trans-Formed From Childhood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne +/+ 6</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>1/3 caught, 2/3 taught</td>
<td>1/3 caught</td>
<td>3/9 prim., 4 sec.</td>
<td>4/9 prim.</td>
<td>3/9 prim.</td>
<td>3/9 prim.</td>
<td>3/9 prim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane +/- 2</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>1/1 caught</td>
<td>1/1 taught</td>
<td>6 prim.</td>
<td>4/6 prim.</td>
<td>(1) 4 prim.</td>
<td>3/6 prim.</td>
<td>3/6 prim.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

635 'She Who Is' has been included as a new image because although Anne feels it is inclusive of all her other previous middle adult images, it is not derived from childhood images in the same way as other related images are.

636 Many changes in Diane's God images occurred in early adulthood (unlike most women whose major image change was only nascent then), and have had time to cross-fertilise one anther, so while they do not appear 'new' here, 4/6 of her primary images derive at least partially from images in early adulthood, rather than directly from childhood. More specifically, without the experience and image of suffering in early adulthood, four of the middle adult images would probably not have developed (challenge, God in darkness ... who suffers, God unfolding, and 'no more nice clear images'). Thus the figure four is felt to be more accurate than one in terms of new primary images.
APPENDIX I
GOD AND SELF IMAGE DEVELOPMENT

Table I-1 records summaries of God images for each stage of women’s lives, along with self images where volunteered. The latter two columns record specific kinds of relationships (and a few other factors) which may be related to women’s self images.637

Table I-1
God and Self Images from Childhood through Middle Adulthood with Reference to Controlling, Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants and Life Stages638</th>
<th>God Images639</th>
<th>Self Image640</th>
<th>Controlling Relationships 641 and Other Insecurity</th>
<th>Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships642</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen C A EA Ah</td>
<td>understanding</td>
<td>hard on self, mixed</td>
<td>- family</td>
<td>continued next page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>understanding</td>
<td>- uncertain about future, generally good</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>friend, help.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Lord)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

637 Carroll Saussy notes the importance of parental relationships (whether they were loving/caring or controlling) in the development of God images not only in childhood but throughout life. See her God Images and Self Esteem: Empowering Women in a Patriarchal Society. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 50-51.

638 C= Childhood; A = Adolescence; EA = Early Adulthood; Ah = Adulthood.

639 Mostly major images are recorded here (from chapter 8) in short form. Some minor images thought to be relevant to the discussion of self image are included in parentheses (from Tables 9-1 and 9-2).

640 Researcher assessment of self image (low, mixed, or good for adolescence; good, generally good, strengthening or needs to know self better for middle adulthood) is given in italics for both adolescence (the stage of life at which most women made some comment on it) and for middle adulthood, based on evidence from interview transcripts.

641 Relationships considered to be most influential are in bold. It is possible that not all controlling relationships are identified here, as there were no direct questions or observations. In particular, marriage relationships are ones that may not have been openly spoken about.

642 Relationships considered empowering (encouraging women to be themselves, beyond accepting, supporting), i.e., insofar as could be determined from what the women said about the relationships and people concerned, are in bold. Some may have been missed.
### Table I-1 continued
God and Self Images from Childhood through Middle Adulthood with Reference to Controlling, Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants and Life Stages</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Self Image</th>
<th>Controlling Relationships and Other Insecurity</th>
<th>Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>- helps, cares</td>
<td>- anxious (exams), began to believe in self, mixed</td>
<td>- nuns (cruelty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>- can trust, talk to</td>
<td></td>
<td>- mother pressured her (family trauma throughout childhood and adolescence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EA</td>
<td>- in community</td>
<td>- feels still needs to develop as person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ah</td>
<td>- help, friend, feels still needs to develop further, (father)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>- friendly, loving</td>
<td>- some anxiety re death, good</td>
<td>- fiancé’s ‘aunt’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>- more complex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EA</td>
<td>- love in people</td>
<td>- relationship issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ah</td>
<td>- love, (Lord)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>- loving, caring</td>
<td>- felt inferior, low</td>
<td>- only child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>- don’t remember</td>
<td>- felt some pressure to be Catholic, anxiety re number of pregnancies</td>
<td>- husband’s family, Catholic teaching (birth control)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EA</td>
<td>- loving</td>
<td>- others can see God through her, good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ah</td>
<td>- love, in people, within herself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>- fearful, watching</td>
<td>- not accepted, self doubt, inferiority, low self image</td>
<td>- father, nun, God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>- duty, blank</td>
<td>- acceptance of self blossomed, person in her own right:</td>
<td>- parents, nuns, God, relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EA</td>
<td>- help if demanded, presence, personal mentor</td>
<td>- made in God’s image, feels she has way to go, understanding self and God, strengthening</td>
<td>- teachers, sister, surrogate parents, horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ah</td>
<td>- all encompassing presence, in people, friend, judge/parent with love/ doubt</td>
<td></td>
<td>- husband, parents, women’s prayer group, mentor, nature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued next page
Table I-1 continued

God and Self Images from Childhood through Middle Adulthood with Reference to Controlling, Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants and Life Stages</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Self Image</th>
<th>Controlling Relationships and Other Insecurity</th>
<th>Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clare CA</td>
<td>- authoritarian - Mary, merciful - childlike, then justice, feminine, treating with dignity yet making decisions for her - love force, community, creator/parent, peaceful, (Lord master, heavenly father)</td>
<td>- decisions made for her, low esteem - began to know self, let God make her decisions - nervous about being judged for large family, perceived others strong, at times intimidated at work, &quot;wants to know self better&quot;</td>
<td>- parents, God - parents, shifts - charismatic renewal</td>
<td>- CYM - singing group, children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam CA</td>
<td>- big judge - to be obeyed - far away, unloving - loving, accepting, heals in people, trusted, creation, partner, light, calling women</td>
<td>- anxiety, felt a failure, low - attracted to self-assurance in husband - called by/partner with God, responsible for others, trust brought confidence, belief in self, good</td>
<td>- mother, God - God, major shift, parental pressure (success), shifts, marriage ended</td>
<td>- father, sister - friends, sister - in laws - nun (mentor), nature, solitude, women, God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose CA</td>
<td>- distant, judging - distant, rigid - God can be more, parent, talk to, questioned - opportunity, birthgiver, beside, painter of sunsets, nurturer</td>
<td>- grey, then free, mix - felt equal, respected, mutuality - God made me good, nurturing is a God-like action, good</td>
<td>- mother, God - mother, God, school</td>
<td>- father, aunt - nun, friends - employer, husband - friends, nature, God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued next page
Table I-1 continued

God and Self Images from Childhood through Middle Adulthood with Reference to Controlling, Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants and Life Stages</th>
<th>God Images</th>
<th>Self Image</th>
<th>Controlling Relationships and Other Insecurity</th>
<th>Accepting/Supporting and Empowering Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catherine C</td>
<td>- fear and duty</td>
<td>- inadequate, fearful</td>
<td>- parents, God, school</td>
<td>- sister, nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>- fear and duty</td>
<td>- fearful, low</td>
<td>- school, God</td>
<td>- priest, friends, fiancé, teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>- began change, questioned</td>
<td>- realising God loved her affected how she saw herself, easier to love others, strengthening</td>
<td></td>
<td>- husband, friends, soul-mates, wise older women and priest, God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah</td>
<td>- loved and cared for her, mystery, in creation, rock, creator, within, friend, light, God, (Lord)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne C</td>
<td>- judge, forgiving</td>
<td>- inadequate, didn’t measure up, low</td>
<td>- parents, only child, God</td>
<td>- grandmother, aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>- judge, compassion</td>
<td>- realised she had responsibility</td>
<td>- priest, God</td>
<td>- nun, role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>- questioning, in and about community</td>
<td>- positive, encountering God, knowing she’s accepted, God calling her on journey outward and inward, good</td>
<td></td>
<td>- nun, husband, mother, role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah</td>
<td>- justice, energy, creator, giver, gracious, She Who Is, nurturer, hazy, unclear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- role model, women, God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane C</td>
<td>- trusted, watching</td>
<td>- knew I was me, good</td>
<td>- nuns, God at cusp of childhood/adolescence</td>
<td>- whole family, nuns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>- watching, there</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- nuns, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>- sense of God in people, suffering, presence, loving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- husband, teachers, friends (including nuns, priest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah</td>
<td>- in darkness and mystery, God who suffers, in process of unfolding, light, integrity, challenge</td>
<td>- God and humans (self too) in process of unfolding and mystery, good</td>
<td></td>
<td>- friends, priest-mentor, friends, husband, God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Helen recalls a time during adolescence of resenting her parents and being hard on herself, but this appears to have been a temporary developmental issue. She has always had accepting relationships and positive God images, although her understanding of suffering (in which suffering was seen as something 'given' to her) indicates that there may have been
an underlying image of a ‘testing’ God, which implies a God who has some sort, if limited, of power-over her. Although she says she understands God as encompassing both male and female and would prefer the use of gender-neutral terms, she addresses God as Lord and refers to God a number of times as he. If the thinking of theologians, anthropologists and psychologists is correct, then Helen is still shaping her reality by her continuing use of male language for God, a reality in which she may not be able to identify herself as fully in the image of God. At this point in her life, she is facing uncertainty about her future, and feels some constraints from her husband and children. Helen has always expected and received strength, protection and help from the God she knows. She says that her understanding of God challenges her to be Christian and uphold Christian values, and her affirmation comes from seeing evidence, for example, in her children, that she has done the right thing. In the now trailing wake of the major grief of her mother’s death, she has had to adjust to living without reliance on her mother, and has tried to find a balance between relying on God and herself. Helen is beginning to see she faces new challenges as her children leave home and she gets older. She is beginning to conceive of God in new ways (Table 8-8). As she faces new challenges, she seems ready to expect more of both herself and God.

Marie, after recalling how a friend and teacher took notice of her, marvelled that they would, and noted in late adolescence that she finally began to believe in herself. Her home and school situation would have contributed greatly to her insecurity about herself and ability to relate to others, causing low self esteem in both childhood and much of adolescence: in late adolescence her affirming interactions with others helped her sense of identity. Her God images have changed little since childhood, and she is more comfortable with male nouns (including father) and pronouns for God. The familiar and comforting images of God and herself which enabled Marie to cope with early trauma, and which she used to as much positive advantage as possible in raising her family may now be holding her back from the new challenges of midlife. Though reported as positive throughout her life, Marie’s God images also have an underlying aspect of God as divine planner and as expecting human suffering, revealed in her attitudes toward suffering. When asked how her understanding of God affirmed and challenged her, she answered that the challenge was both to develop herself and know more about God, but she could not say how her

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643 To review the thought of McFague, Ruether, Geertz, Cunningham, Collins and others, see 2.1.2.
understanding of God at present affirmed her. With most of her children grown, Marie feels that both her God and self images need to grow, and is poised, although tentative and a bit unsure, to begin that task.

Mary has always had affirming relationships and no apparent self esteem issues. In late adolescence and early adulthood she was anxious, first about how her family of origin would get along without her, and later hoping she would not die before her children were grown, but this seems more to do with her sense of responsibility than with esteem. Her fiancé’s aunt was possessive of him, but the controlling relationship was not directed toward Mary herself. Mary’s God images have always been positive ones, and she now prefers genderless language for God (although she still catches herself using ‘he’, and addressed the prayer she wrote in an interview to ‘Lord’ - meaning Jesus). Like Helen, Mary is at a point in life where family relationships have been changing, which may cause ripples in her so far comfortable and secure images of God and self if she allows such change.

Although Annie was surrounded by acceptance and love, she felt inferior during adolescence, and felt it may have had something to do with being an only child. As a young adult she felt some pressure to become a Catholic, and anxiety about the number of pregnancies and children due to the church’s teaching on birth control. In midlife for the first time she was drawn to greater understanding and reflection on God and self, and her image of self as part of God and as Christ to others is strong and positive.

From accounts of their childhoods, neither Susie or Clare grew up with totally accepting relationships around them, and both had at least one parent who was authoritarian or controlling. Susie chaffed under such control, while Clare resented but accepted it. Not until late adolescence did either of them form relationships with people who were accepting of them. Susie has since found many such relationships, and her God images began in early adulthood to reflect God as all encompassing presence. She still struggles to trust the God who still ‘calls her to order’ - as she struggles to maintain her own integrity and goals with demands of her immediate family: but gradually her self image continues to strengthen, and her God images continue to evolve.

Clare’s temporary reversion to childhood God images in early adulthood was in a situation of severe stress, when familiarity was comfort in desperation. She has been exposed at many times to positive images of God, as she has been exposed to people and courses and groups - but internalising these has been difficult. Clare has had few close

644 Interview questions on self and God image whose answers are used in this appendix can be found in
accepting relationships, and her self image was not helped in early adulthood by her decision to be guided by the charismatic movement's admonition to let God make her decisions for her. In middle adulthood, however, she has made decisions for herself, pursuing the study and career that she had eluded her in the past, and she is also gradually working out who God is for her based on her own life experiences. God, although seemingly positive in her reported current images, still has elements of force and order that were controlling elements in her childhood. Although Clare is consciously trying to use some gender-neutral God images in her prayer and work, the words which still come naturally to her are Lord, master and heavenly father, reflecting underlying controlling male images still active in some ways from her childhood. If John McDargh's observations and theory are correct, Clare will need personal experience of close accepting relationships before her positive God images will become more fully internalised.

Miriam had a negative God image until middle adulthood, with its roots in the controlling relationship with her mother, parental attitudes toward God, and taught God images. Her adolescence, especially after the move to New Zealand, was fraught with anxiety and feelings of failure. Her marriage was to someone she admired for the self-assurance she did not feel in herself. Her understanding of both God and herself changed after (as Miriam would put it), God intervened as he did with St Paul. After her encounter with God, her understanding of God and thirst to know more increased, as did her contact with religious sisters and families who showed Miriam care and acceptance. That care and acceptance, as well as her feeling of being called by God enabled Miriam to feel confident and loved, to take on further education and a new career, thus building the strong sense of self and God which she has at present.

Rose too had a negative God image in her childhood, also traced back to her relationship with her mother, and reinforced by her dreary experiences of God and most of her boarding school environment in adolescence. Once in university and working, she felt freed, finding acceptance and mutuality in her relationships with friends, employer and husband. Her understanding of God began to change positively in early adulthood, but has become full and strong in middle adulthood, and Rose's adult self image is one of strong quiet confidence. Both her God image and her self image are supported by deep friendships with her husband and others, reflection, nature, and her work with people.

Appendix G, Interview 3, question 9; and Appendix G, Interview 2, questions 37 and 42.

645 See 2.2.1.3.
Both Catherine’s parents and her school environment shaped her feelings of fear toward God and feelings of inadequacy in herself throughout childhood and adolescence. Seeds of change were planted even then, as she met friends, husband and teaching career which gave her some sense of self-worth, and as she encountered ideas about God which were less threatening. Catherine’s many accomplishments in adulthood were not sufficient to completely overcome her early learnings, however. It was not until well into middle adulthood on a retreat that she finally realised how much God cared for her, after which time her positive God images blossomed in number and depth. Catherine feels that this realisation affected how she saw herself and made it easier to love others. These changes also led Catherine to seek psychotherapy to help her in further understanding herself, especially the effects which the early years of her life have had in shaping her. Catherine has been accompanied on her adulthood self and faith journey by her husband, many supportive friends and ‘wise ones’, and by her own abilities for creativity and reflection. Her God images and self image are both in a stage of active growth, imbued with increasingly more mystery.

Anne’s early God images were mixed, having received messages of judgement from her parents and acceptance from her grandmother and aunt. As an adolescent she felt she never measured up. But in late adolescence she found in an adult role model a respectful and caring relationship which was her first model for a new way of being in relationship with God and also influenced her own later actions as a parent. In young adulthood she met further people who with their acceptance and values instilled in her a sense of responsibility, and belief in her own competence, and at the same time further influenced her understanding of God as about community. Her middle adulthood was enriched by strong friendships, many positive images of God and her own call toward justice. At the time of the last study interview, her journey had led her into a hazy and unclear place in which both God and her future were shrouded: her confidence and her understanding of God and herself allowed her to continue to walk on in it sightless, but trusting and unafraid.

Diane has had the most consistently high sense of self of all the women in the study, remarking about her adolescence that “I always knew I was me.” Though exposed to negative God imagery in pre-adolescence, she quickly questioned it, having had experience only of caring and acceptance in her close relationships. Those relationships, and her understanding from an early age that God could be trusted gave Diane remarkable freedom to act and to speak where necessary, and to wholly involve herself in meeting the suffering she found all around her. She has had wide and deep support from family, husband,
mentors and friends, and is also sustained by guiding intuition and love of nature. Her once clear God images faded long ago, though she still regards God in many places (particularly darkness, suffering, challenge, mystery and still unfolding), but now she glimpses traces of God in everyone and everything.
APPENDIX J

WOMEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD CHURCH

The two tables which follow contain the background information on women and church which was used in the analysis in 9.7.

Table J-1

Women's Attitudes Toward Church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
<th>Early Adulthood</th>
<th>Middle Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helen</strong></td>
<td>engrained rituals kept her there, church as safety, God’s presence, questioned reconciliation and teaching on ecumenism, not all pope and church said right</td>
<td>mother shaped belief that ritual wasn’t always important, but ritual was in fact still important when she felt sad or in need, saw church as important community for her children, wanted to be known as a Christian who followed the Gospel - Catholicism incidental</td>
<td>enjoys church for opportunities to enhance God relationship, but it does not let doctrine and hierarchy get in the way of her relationship with God; church=mens, not God; involved in music, prayer, study groups, not in politics - not personally good at standing up to men; would support more change toward equality in church because God is being not male or female and created humans equal – should not be patronised by males; God does not judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marie</strong></td>
<td>CYM important</td>
<td>God and faith not always associated with parish, priests, community or changes after Vatican II - do not affect God relationship</td>
<td>has always enjoyed Mass, Passionist family group, main change for her is emphasis on community rather than as a private devotion - also that laity take more responsibility for pastoral care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mary</strong></td>
<td>became Catholic because of fiancé - like changing sport</td>
<td>God in people, not institution, so never bothered getting caught up in politics of church (which had little to do with being Christian), try not to have Christianity and relationship with God contaminated by church</td>
<td>Protestant background – doesn’t bring Catholic baggage; believes respect ought to be earned – gets up her nose when bishops automatically have authority and respect invested in their roles even when they make bad decisions – God not like that; male dominated hierarchical church doesn’t challenge who God is for her; real church is people, community, egalitarian groups sharing, caring, ministry – God’s love in action, liturgy, music; anger uses up energy she doesn’t want to waste on structures; a simpler gentler church not caught up in money, power, gender stuff, continued next page</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

646 Attitudes are taken from life stories as presented in Chapters 4-7 and from answers to specific questions asked about church – see Appendix G-Interview 2, questions 54-58. Childhood attitudes are not recorded as women made no real differentiation between church and God when they were young.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mary continued</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
<th>Early Adulthood</th>
<th>Middle Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>edifices; can't equate the hurt done to people - especially women - with a loving God, but sometimes in trial strength and change comes through, that gives hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>became Catholic to participate with husband and children even though Catholic=male domination, rules and regulations, felt church was saying she wasn't good enough as she was</td>
<td>love-hate relationship; disregards hierarchical church message, listens to people - church ideas confining - mystery of loving people is God; trouble with literal doctrine and scripture - are experiences of revelation of God; vision as people of God with full responsibility - priesthood's higher-than-thou-ness robbing people of responsibility - stop restricting laity; important communal dimension to worship (fabulous sensuality of worship) as well as in nature and personal life -structures get in way, little spiritual food; ministry in each vocation in life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>nuns ridiculed her for going to state school, going to church a duty, Redemptorists hellfire &amp; brimstone, other church - went for music</td>
<td>huge desire to have Catholic wedding ceremony be meaningful and correct</td>
<td>angry at church hierarchy - man-made structure does not tally with faith; need church to nurture faith in community; women second class citizens in male-dominated church; makes her feel dead, not as alive; church should be equal community, not define things or block things, should accept people who question and nurture people, not just expect good Catholic women to do Martha things - children's liturgy, marriage prep, hoofer church, flowers, beck and call of father, make him jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>CYM important</td>
<td>CFM - justice issues, church not caring enough (Vietnam, springboks, poor), learned from charismatic movement that learning from church not necessarily central to Christianity, read more than lectionary readings. realised church's interpretation of scripture not always same as hers</td>
<td>church repugnant male-dominated hierarchy not where she finds God - found God in people by associating with church; used to get angry with priests - now just washes over her; simple Christian ethics and values manipulated and misconstrued by would-be preachers and teachers in church, lost in materialism - church no longer relevant to most people; in 1970s vision was community where people took responsibility, priesthood could be married and part-time - now future in poorer areas of world where people still see need for God and each other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table J-1 continued
Women's Attitudes Toward Church

continued next page
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miriam</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
<th>Early Adulthood</th>
<th>Middle Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>allowed to go to church, not allowed bible study at school, father didn’t want her</td>
<td>baptised a Catholic (decided that Catholicism was not as negative as she had learned in childhood, attracted by liturgy and rosary), no change in understanding of God</td>
<td>used to think of God as boxed in and only accessible through church – now believes church is patriarchal powerful hierarchical structure embedded in clericalism and sexism which drowns out witness of love and unity; growth in God understandings first deepened relationship with church, now loosened it – stepped out of many roles, on vacation with God; vision of church of equal men and women, dance with Miriam, reclaim Genesis heritage – related to image of God as male and female - a community of love and unity of Jesus, Holy Spirit, God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intellectual interest</td>
<td>church (clergy and religious) gave her no support after loss of second baby - God not always found in church, experience of church in an overseas context - welcoming, community, read theology, ethics</td>
<td>church told one what was right rather than supporting people in their questioning and through the ethical decision process – priest told her “don’t worry about this stuff, just stay with the PTA; church hierarchy controlling, squashing potential – God beyond this; God not church and church not God – not giving God away; relationship with God, not just individual – involves community; church should be communities supporting one another and worshipping together to reach out to the wider community; belief in empowering God and vision of church where people are empowered and can grow – not where they are limited and controlled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>songs inviting Jesus into sinful heart nothing to do with me, mother not exempted from fast, duty - hard to think priests &amp; religious of institution had anything to offer</td>
<td>welcomed openness and questioning of theology and church encouraged after Vatican II, though hierarchy still had black and white views which she realised later she was part of in teaching natural family planning</td>
<td>church structure should never strangle; church should be being with people where they are; from hierarchical church where people obediently carry out orders to poem of bishop of St Deny – church of freedom, listens before speaking, welcomes not judges, announces not denounces, where Spirit can feel at home, everything not decided in advance, newness stronger than habit, praying in own language, people say not how organised they are but how they love; parallels God image change from big boss to God in all creation; lived experience has a lot to teach hierarchy; many people - married women and men – fitted to lead church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table J-1 continued

Women's Attitudes Toward Church
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
<th>Early Adulthood</th>
<th>Middle Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>meeting non-Catholics - others good, church does not have all answers, not necessarily only way, Vatican II hope that church could move beyond constraints</td>
<td>learned from CCD and nun on pastoral staff, not concerned with worship changes - more concerned with church in world - ecumenism, women's peace group showed her that God was active outside (any) church</td>
<td>no more hope in church at present - chooses to put energy into what is hopeful; angry that church defines and confines God rather than understanding God as bursting through boundaries; misguided church controls, restricts access to connectedness in Eucharist; anger at church block to good relationship with God; sense of God's presence now in social justice issues; church moving away from liberation that God has now become; church needs vision of searching, working toward - not a neat package of answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>nuns gave her feeling she wanted to stay connected to religion, appalled by institutional church, not attractive, monuments to power in Rome</td>
<td>- discussion after council, struggle to keep going to Mass, priest important in marriage prep, overseas missioners opened ideas of church - suffering demands change from cosy God images - other cultures taught the need for inclusiveness in worship and structures, unfolding people as they are themselves rather than demanding they become other, idea of Mary as strong and independent</td>
<td>idolatry of church becoming God distortion of the truth; say no when church tells people what they ought to do, certainly about boundaries it attempts to put around church and God; church tends to hedge itself rather than seeing itself pregnant with possibilities - people turned away instead of welcomed; church and persons all unfolding – need to let go of old patterns of thinking and seeing – fear of losing power rather than openness freedom, wholeness, possibilities and capacity to empower</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table J-2

**Diverging Descriptions of Church and God**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes Associated with Church</th>
<th>Attributes Associated with Vision for Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helen</strong></td>
<td>love to see it change, welcome married priests, more involvement and acceptance of women, equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enhance, doctrine, hierarchy, men, patronising, judging, politics, music, prayer, study, safe haven, patriarchal, pope and bishops say I must do, rules, human</td>
<td>caring, sharing, involvement of laity, people contributing, participating, small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marie</strong></td>
<td>nurture, like-minded people meeting in groups, sharing, less formality, less hierarchical structure, egalitarian sharing, equal, loving like Jesus, simpler, gentler, caring, process, grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community, emphasis on priests, sacraments, opportunities, politics,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mary</strong></td>
<td>people of God, taking full responsibility, priesthood of people - sharing it equally, demystify and deconstruct theological mystery and majesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contamination, controversy, politicking, detract, trial for women, hurt, bother, less a support, not caring, baggage, issues, parish trying hard, caring, losing impersonal hierarchical, community of people, power, gender stuff, money, edifices, trivia, male-dominated, negative, counter-productive, anger, structures hopefully self-destruct, atrophying, sadness, authority in roles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annie</strong></td>
<td>nurture of faith, equal community, time to express ideas and question, no hierarchy, people working together in different directions, acceptance without having to do so many Martha things, grow in faith not just by doing traditional women's work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human, communal, spiritual dimensions, little spiritual food, irritation with presider, structures intrude and get in the way, imposing, hard to take, angry, sensuality of worship, hierarchical, confining, restriction on laity, trying to separate us off, priesthood higher than thou, robbing people of responsibility, literal doctrines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Susie</strong></td>
<td>people's responsibility, involved in all ministry, work in groups, married part-time priests in smaller communities, future in poorer countries, simple Christian values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hierarchy defines and blocks things, doesn't tally with faith, man-made structure, angry, says 'you shouldn't think that' or 'don't question', dogma - not what Christ meant, guilt, attitude to women - feeling of being second class citizens - can't fully participate, male-dominated, makes me feel dead - not accepted or equal, ropable feeling, not as alive, wilderness, darkness, desert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clare</strong></td>
<td>continued next page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not where I find God, manipulates and misconstrues values, switch off, don't let priests worry me, turns back on married priests, male chauvinist, male-dominated, repugnant, wonderful priests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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647 Data is tabulated from transcripts, especially answers to specific questions about church. See Appendix G, Interview 2, questions 54-58. Positive key words are in **bold normal type**; negative comments are in **bold italics**,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Attributes Associated with Church</th>
<th>Attributes Associated with Vision for Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>God as he, authority figures, patriarchal, powerful, male hierarchical structure, clericalism, sexism, drown witness to love and unity, past God accessed only through church and boxed in</td>
<td>dance as Miriam did, men and women equal, community, chance to question, support, dialogue sermons, everybody contributes, groups that support each other and worship together, hierarchy supports groups, priesthood comes from community - men and women - not always for life, sustaining people to reach out to wider community, teaching that is empowering, supporting people through ethical decision-making, place where people empowered and can grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>isolation, long way from community, stressful, lack of caring, bother, didn’t deal with birth, death, or grief, sometimes found God, sometimes not, welcome, no help exploring questions, non-communicative, non-consultative, knows what’s right - no other answers, not a lot of use, controlling, sometimes good sermons, distance between church presented and reality, aging, God not church – church not God, tightening, hold on desperately to what they can control, feet set in concrete, used to be God only through church, power that stops us from worshipping the way we want to, directive about which moral teachings are priority, people limited, confined</td>
<td>community, chance to question, support, dialogue sermons, everybody contributes, groups that support each other and worship together, hierarchy supports groups, priesthood comes from community - men and women - not always for life, sustaining people to reach out to wider community, teaching that is empowering, supporting people through ethical decision-making, place where people empowered and can grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>hierarchical church where people obediently carry out orders, individual salvation, God big boss, spiritual abuse, unaccepting, excluding</td>
<td>structures that never strangle, joyful, being with people where they are, call to go to wider community, gentle or Jew – servant or free – woman or man no more, vision of bishop of St Deny (above table), married women and men priests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>no hope, defines and confines God, excludes people, misdirected, misguided, static image of God, women not worthy, Catholic social teaching amazing – but church doesn’t practicing that, angry, block to relationship with God, not relevant, away from liberation, presents package of neat answers, unjust</td>
<td>Eucharist, connectedness, justice, positive energy, women, walk with people, searching for – moving toward – hope of better society rather than a package presented, discovery ever new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>idolatry - church becoming God - distortion of truth, says you ought to do things, boundaries around church and God, sad, hedges itself, missed opportunities, people turned away. power, afraid to let go, frustration, irritation, used to feel threatened, pity</td>
<td>freedom to disagree, pregnant with possibilities, welcome people, embrace opportunities, unfolding, empowerment, wholeness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>