

THE IMAGES OF GOD OF MIDDLE SECONDARY SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS

Submitted by

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

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

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACBPRP Australian Catholic Bishops Pastoral Research Projects

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