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The role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents attending
Catholic secondary schools

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Chapter 6: The imagination and religious conversion

Introduction

In the previous chapter the accounts given by four participants, Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen were used to illustrate aspects of religious conversion. This was done as directed by the research question: *Is it possible to interpret students' disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?* It was concluded that such an interpretation could be established with the four participants named above. The other participants did not describe situations that could be construed to be instances of religious conversion. In this chapter, the second research question will be addressed: *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* This research question focuses on the much broader issue of faith development, of which religious conversion is the aspect under consideration in the present study. Consequently, in this chapter, the role of the imagination in faith development will be considered first and then followed by a discussion of how it assists in religious conversion.

In chapter 2 of the present study, definitions of the imagination and religious imagination were developed. We should recall that it was stated that the imagination is that human faculty which makes it possible for people to have knowledge of what constitutes their world. Kant's understanding of imagination was adopted for this study. According to Kant (2007/1781), there are two types of imagination: reproductive imagination, which recalls images

drawn from experience, that is, from the past; and productive imagination, which produces images that are future oriented. Lothane (2007) referred to the former as “recreative” imagination and called the latter “creative” imagination (p. 152). It was stated in chapter 2 that the focus in the present study is on the latter form of imagination and particularly within the context of religious imagination which was defined in the same chapter as the orientation of the imagination towards what Fowler (1981) termed “the ultimate conditions of our existence” (p. 25).

In chapter 2 of the present study, the phenomenon of religious conversion was explained using James Fowler’s faith development theory. Recall that Fowler (1981) proposed that religious conversion could be described as the movement from one stage of faith to the next, for example, from a Synthetic-Conventional faith (Stage 3) to an Individuative-Reflective faith (Stage 4). To explain the role of the imagination in religious conversion, he outlined three movements that can be summarised as follows: when a person is confronted by experiences which cannot be assimilated in the present meaning structure of their world, but which “command” attention and “demand” acceptance, the old meaning disintegrates and is replaced by the “new” reality. In this chapter, Fowler’s model will be expanded to include various theories and models as outlined below for the purpose of providing some evidence of the role or function of the imagination in faith development and religious conversion.

A model of how the imagination assists faith development

It is much easier to identify the product of imagination than it is to describe how imagination achieves what is attributed to it as its work. Kant (2007/1781) wrote that people are “scarcely ever conscious” of its presence (p. 104). To achieve the task of describing how it assists the faith development of adolescents, a model of how the imagination works was sought. But what would such a model be like? McFague (1987) defined a model as “a metaphor that has gained sufficient stability and scope so as to present a pattern for relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation” (p. 34). In the search for something metaphorical that would serve as a model, the word “pattern” became a primary focus. Crime scene investigators typically lay down a pattern over a crime scene, to systematically search for clues that will reveal the identity of the criminal. In much the same way, a model was sought that would provide a pattern to lay over the data obtained from the transcripts of interviews and the journals written by some participants.

McFague’s (1982) development of a model to reinvigorate the relations between religious and theological language involved a survey of the use of models in many fields of human thought and endeavour. She discovered that good models make it possible for the unintelligible to be understood, because they provide a framework and a language by which the unfamiliar could be examined and insight generated. McFague noted that useful models revealed “a *dialectic* of simplicity and detail” (p. 74) which made possible the discovery of order in what appeared to be chaotic.

In the present study, the model that was adopted came from a statement made by Kierkegaard (2004/1849) about the work of the imagination. He wrote: “What feelings, understanding and will a person has depends in the last resort upon what imagination he has – how he represents himself to himself” (p. 60). It was recognised that the imagination works with more than the three dimensions identified above. The representation of self to self also involves memory. In the present study, then, the imagination was considered to be like two movements, the first characterised as “reaching back to gather data from the world of sense experience, typically through memory and emotion, and the second considered to be “leaning forward” to inform understanding and will (behaviour/action). Both movements can be represented graphically as shown below (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

The two movements described “reaching back” and “leaning forward” are like the two parts of a dialectic being held in dynamic equilibrium by the imagination. It can be likened to reflection and action being brought together and held in tension. One without the other would lead to either chaos or atrophy. To assist with the application of the model to the data in a pattern-like way, various theories and models were used to provide the detail that the model needed. Concerning the “reaching back” of the imagination: the imagination is stirred through mental and emotional conflict to use a person’s memories to produce new realities. Some findings from information processing theories proved useful in explaining how this work of the imagination can be initiated. People remember not only events, but also emotional states. It was established in the previous chapter that religious conversion and religious experiences in general have an affective dimension.

Figure 3

Reaching back: memory, emotion and the imagination

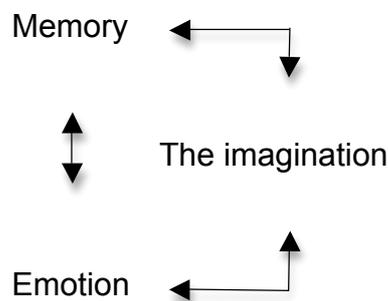
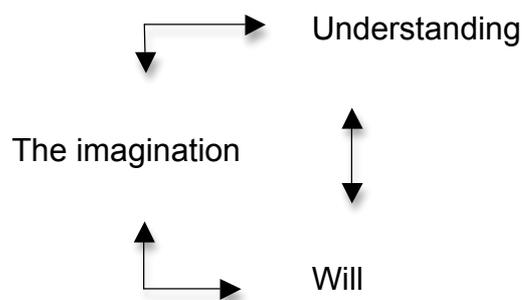


Figure 4

Leaning forward: the imagination, understanding and will



Fowler's (1981) model of religious conversion has as its second movement, the introduction of events that challenge currently held beliefs. Such conflict produces a form of cognitive instability—the imagination “reaches back” and takes hold of memories and emotions in a sense to “steady” the mind—that causes the imagination to “lean forward” to restore the balance, that is, to produce new images that either assimilate or accommodate the changes. Piaget's concepts of equilibration, assimilation, accommodation and particularly disequilibrium proved to be useful in describing how the imagination works in religious conversion to produce new understandings of how to relate with God.

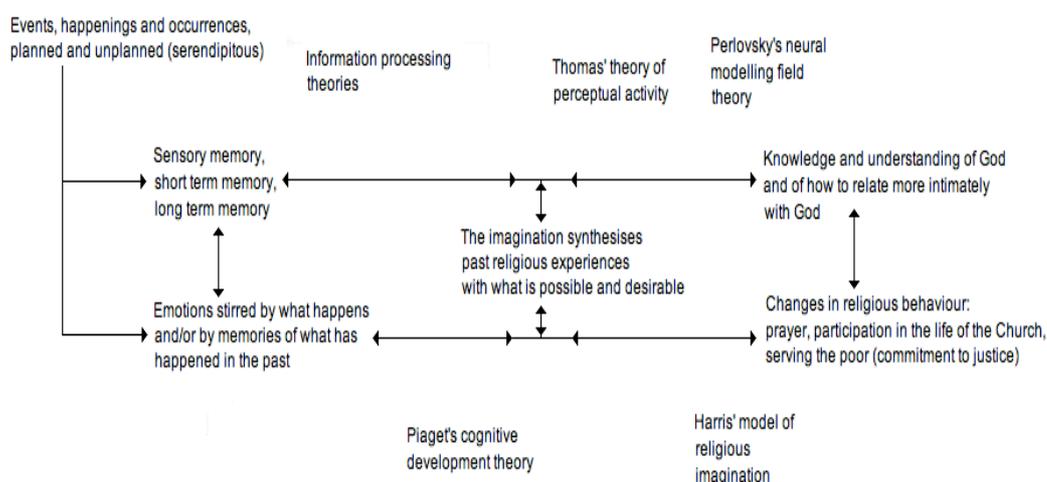
Concerning the “leaning forward” activity of the imagination, Thomas (1999) provided a way of considering how the imagination assists understanding. He described the work of the imagination as perceptual activity, the mind having an array of procedures it uses to actively interrogate the environment. It tests and re-tests percepts for adequacy or fit. Rambo’s (1993) model of religious conversion described the effects of conversion, one being a form of elation. It is one sign of the imagination’s work. Recognition of truth, that is, understanding, brings what Perlovsky (2002) called “instinctual satisfaction.” Finally, the contribution of the imagination to the operation of will referred to by Kierkegaard, which was taken to mean the influence of the imagination on religious behaviour, was examined with the aid of Harris’ (1987) model of religious imagination. She proposed four ways of considering the work of the imagination in a religious context.

In terms of the model outlined below, the imagination is defined as the process of synthesising cognitive and affective experiences in a way which produces new meanings. Such synthesising may result in a promoting of the metaphysical over the purely physical, the phenomenal over the nominal, the non-rational (but not irrational) over the rational. When the ‘other worldly’ is so preferenced, the experience may be closely aligned with what Rudolph Otto (1958/1923) termed an encounter with the numinous – that which “is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other’” (p. 28). To imagine is to touch the Holy, to reach out beyond the material, to experientially affirm that “... what we see was made by something that cannot be seen” (Hebrews 11:3, New Century

Version). The model, with its two movements of “reaching back” and “leaning forward” held in tension as in a dialectic, can be represented graphically in the following way:

Figure 5

A model of how the imagination assists the faith development and religious conversion of adolescents



Reaching back: memory, emotion and the imagination

The imagination processes information that is made available through the senses and stored in the memory; and it unifies or synthesises what has been or what could be experienced (Warnock, 1986; Harris, 1987; Green, 1989). In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (2007/1781), Kant wrote “By *synthesis*, in its most general sense, I mean the act of putting different representations together, and of comprehending their manifoldness in one item of knowledge” (p. 103). Bryant (1989) defined Kant’s term “manifoldness” as the many “originally unconnected sensations” (p. 67). Apart from the information provided by the five senses, these sensations include experiences of emotion,

the intellectual tasks of forming concepts and of creating symbols, and the historical dimension of human life, that is, the data of memory. Thus the imagination constructs or builds images from the undifferentiated data of experience, including memory and prior knowledge. Its function, however, involves more than just representing faithfully what has been experienced. Using Kant's understanding of the work of the imagination, Warnock (1976), Fischer (1983) and Harris (1987) identified in this power of the imagination to synthesise experience, the power to enable people, as Warnock described it, "to think of certain objects in the world in a new way, as signifying something else" (p. 197). Fischer stated that the imagination was "the human power that opens us to possibility and promise, the not-yet of the future" (p. 7).

Models are mental constructs that are created to facilitate understanding. The model outlined here was devised to guide the discussion of how the imagination assisted the religious conversion of adolescents. The image of "reaching back" and "leaning forward" illustrated something of the dynamic nature of synthetic function of the imagination. Because the product of its synthesis was also part of the synthesis, discussion of each part of the image included references to the other part of the image.

Information processing theories and the imagination: memory and emotion

A major focus of information processing theories is the role of memory in learning. Information-processing models and theories, such as the stage theory model based on the work of Atkinson & Shiffrin (1968), the "levels of processing" theory of Craik & Lockhart (1972) and the "connectionistic" model developed by Rumelhart & McClelland (1986) share some common principles

related to memory which could be applied to the present study, such as the principle that “the human organism has been genetically prepared to process and organise information in specific ways” (Huitt, 2003, p. 2). Changes in the ability to process information noted by some participants in the present study were taken to be evidence of the validity of this principle and of the imagination at work. For example, Alexandra reported in her first interview: “I believe a bit more now 'cause - um - when I was younger, I wasn't sure” (lines 39-40). In her first interview, Alyssa made a similar admission. She said, “I've always believed and just lately, as you get older an' stuff, you just ask more questions about it” (lines 13-14). Cameron reported a similar experience. When he was asked about the differences between God and Jesus, he replied:

When I was very young, around five an' six, an' just starting to learn all these sort of things, it was just an easier concept to see them all as one person, but as you grow up, you mature an' you sort of – logic takes hold an' it's – you can't just have questions that are unanswered an' that you just believe and you have to ask those sort of questions an' work it out for yourself (lines 51-57).

These examples point to the existence of cognitive development and how increased cognitive powers can assist the imagination in the work of constructing a new vision of reality that takes into account new information. It was concluded in the present study that the participants whose stories indicated the likelihood of religious conversion — Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen — were not able cognitively, nor emotionally, to experience conversion when they were children. The accounts of the other participants

included above, suggested that such a conclusion was reasonable and consistent with the findings of Inhelder and Piaget (1972), who stated that the adolescent at about 14 or 15 years of age is capable of holding in equilibrium that which appeared contradictory when a child (p. 335).

Religious conversion can happen only when people are able to process cognitively information about themselves, their world and about God and the changes in understanding and behaviour are significantly different from past understanding and behaviour. For example, Mikaela testified to changes in her faith. She moved from having a poor relationship with God—"I didn't get along with him very well" (first interview, line 37)—to wanting to be close to God. She wrote in her journal: "I want to be able to love God for the rest of my life and my life after death be with him in heaven if I am just that little bit worthy of it" (lines 145-146). She noticed the change in herself when she was in Year 11. In the previous chapter, it was shown that Kevin changed from being unaware of the meaning and value of his Catholic upbringing to accepting God into his life. He spoke about his involvement in a Catholic youth group and stated that "in Year 10 I started paying more attention an' yeah, the stuff that they were saying was pretty interesting, so I kept coming back" (lines 25-27).

Elizabeth acknowledged that as a child she did not give much thought to the religious practices that were part of her life. In her first interview, she said: "When you're younger you kind of just – y'know – you listen to the stories and you say, you say your prayers at night with your parents, but it's not that much of a big thing" (lines 22-25). As she grew older, this changed.

Concerning prayer, she stated: “I think it – that got more meaning, or I felt that it actually worked more as I got a bit older” (lines 27-28). Stephen acknowledged the changes in attitude and understanding that were part of his life. He admitted: “I was pretty arrogant in primary school, like if something bad had happened I’d like blame God” (lines 35-36). Events in his life contributed to changes in his understanding of God and his attitude towards God. In his first interview, he stated: “I realised that he doesn’t – like he’s given earth and people like the will to do their own sort of – do what they want” (lines 36-38).

Egan (2009) linked memory and the imagination with learning by means of the medium of story-telling. The key to the success of the relationship between memory and the imagination lies in the engagement of the emotions. In his discussion of the use of stories in teaching and learning, Egan emphasised the power of narrative to engage people affectively, that is, through the emotions. Memories both stir and are stirred by emotions and together they feed the imagination. In his journal, the participant named Luke called his imaginary autobiography “The Steady Rollercoaster.” Luke described himself, God and his relationship with God (the “steady”-ing influence in his life) in a positive way. It is suggested that the image of God as the seatbelt on the roller coaster of life, an image he introduced in the opening part of his journal, was constructed as a synthesis of memories of the positive experiences of life at home, at school, in the youth group to which he belonged, and as a member of a Catholic parish. In his journal, he wrote: “There are so many influences in my life at the moment but most of them are good which to me is a good sign” (lines 87-89). He stated in his first interview:

I was baptised really early, couple a weeks, I think. Um – ever since then I've been to Church, um – we've always said grace before meals, um – we've always – both my parents were in youth groups when they were young and both went to Church an' stuff, so they've continued to go to Church with us kids as well. We've been taught the way – being at a Catholic school all my life has taught me a lot. Um – I did altar serving which also I think brought me closer. And then just yeah as growing older going through all the sacraments and then getting to these youth groups. My parents have had a lot of influence (lines 124-134).

Luke's expansive language, seen in phrases such as “ever since then,” “we've always,” “all my life,” and “all the sacraments,” contribute to the positive image that Luke created of his relationship with God.

Religious conversion involves the interplay of memory and emotion with the imagination working to produce a synthesis of experiences related to faith in God. The data collection method used in the present study involved the recording of autobiographical memories. Bernstein and Rubin (2006) commenced their reflection on autobiographical memory by observing that memories of the past do not always correspond to what actually happened, but may be consciously directed or re-membered to achieve a particular outcome. They referred to this form of remembering as the “observer perspective;” however, it is possible for the past to be recalled automatically without any conscious direction from the person doing the remembering. They called this the “field perspective” (p. 1193). Their interest focused on the emotions associated with reliving biographical memories and their study provided some valuable insights into the relationship between memory and

emotion that were relevant to the present study. In the discussion of their findings, they remarked that "... remembering a past event in such a way that sensory details and emotional states are relived and re-experienced requires the activation and processing of more information than remembering the personal memories in a pale and detached way" (p. 1211).

Cognitive development and the imagination

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) developed a theory of cognition based on his belief that cognition, like digestion, is a biological system (Lerner, 2002). Central to Piaget's theory of cognition (1950) was his understanding of cognitive development as "an evolution governed by an inherent need for equilibrium" (p. 49). The balance achieved by an organism and its environment was called "equilibration" which he defined as "a system of balancing interchanges, alterations which are being continually compensated by others" (p. 40). What was most significant to the task of describing how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion was Piaget's (1950) concept of disequilibrium which he defined as "the state of tension or disturbance in which elements of a person's world no longer seem to fit the "reality" which he has created" (p. 168). According to Fortosis & Garland (1990), disequilibrium comes about when new information or data is perceived to be contradictory to a person's "created reality," that is the reality that the adolescent created "against which he or she will later test every incoming piece of information or data" (p. 633). It must be either assimilated, that is, changed to fit a person's created reality, or accommodated, meaning the created reality is changed to fit that which contradicts it in some way. The

experience of disequilibrium and of accommodation is where the work of the imagination can be found, particularly with respect to faith development and religious conversion.

Piaget described assimilation and accommodation as two complementary, yet opposite, cognitive processes that remain in a dynamic balance as long as there is cognitive activity. By assimilation, Piaget meant the integration of perceptions of objects or concepts into pre-existing cognitive structures, or schemas. The cognitive structures remain unchanged; the perceptions are “changed” to fit the pre-existing mental structures. Assimilation is best noticed in the religious sphere of life when a person takes on a religious practice but does not make any conceptual adjustment to accommodate the new activity. The logical structure of the person’s perception of the world is so strong, new information is assimilated into it. For instance, the participant named Glynna revealed in her interview that when she was a child she believed that heaven was in the sky and God “was like big and in heaven and had really big shoes ’cause we could only undersee his feet” (lines 41-43). Information associated with the sky was assimilated to this belief. Thus thunder became the sound of God walking around in heaven.

Accommodation is also about change, however, it is the opposite of assimilation. Accommodation is the adaptation to schemas that occur when the perceptions or concepts “act” on the pre-existing cognitive structures to change them under the influence of elements external to those structures. Put another way, assimilation occurs when information that is received is changed to fit the person’s prior perception of reality; accommodation occurs when the

person's perception of reality changes to "accommodate" newly discovered environmental factors. Piaget (1950) maintained that the human person, like every other biological system, operates to achieve an equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation.

The case of the participant named Glynna can be used to illustrate the meaning of Piaget's concept of equilibration. During her interview, Glynna described her childhood beliefs about God as creator of the universe. She explained: "Like when I was little I believed like God created the universe in seven days and he knew everything and all that type of stuff..." (lines 12-14). Through her studies at school, she became interested in science and set her sights on studying nanotechnology at university. The information she gathered contradicted her beliefs. She found herself in a state of disequilibrium. To accommodate what she learned through studying science, Glynna changed her beliefs about God. She explained: "I sorta started to get more into like science. And I kind of realised that it was a bit like ignorant of me to just ignore that" (lines 15-16). She stated:

I believe that like God created the universe an' stuff. But like I don't really believe like the whole creation story an' that 'cause I'm really like sciencey based type thing. So like evolution and God's role have sorta like combined, like God guided evolution type thing (lines 6-10).

The only way for the new information to be accommodated was for her to change her religious beliefs. It made more sense to her to think in that way than to bring a new interpretation to bear on the information she gathered through her studies. At the time of the interview—she was in her final year of

secondary school—what she had chosen to believe about God and about creation restored the equilibrium.

The imagination does not work independently of the human mind. Rather, it is a power or function of the mind and it makes use of the mind's cognitive structures. As a way of coming to an understanding of this, consider for a moment that while explaining the role of play in child development, Vygotsky (1978) made the point that the activity of the imagination is "a specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action" (p. 93). In the context of the present study, something happens to the individual (disequilibrium) that causes the imagination to propose an image of God that is more relevant and more satisfying in the changed circumstances of the individual's life.

Disequilibrium is not necessarily, or even commonly, a short-lived experience. It can last for years, particularly in some of the situations that were examined through the present study. For instance, the story told by the participant named Alexandra provided an insight into how she lived with the knowledge of the abusive behaviour of her step-brother towards her mother throughout her childhood. In her journal, she wrote about the third chapter of her imaginary autobiography. She titled the chapter "New Demons":

... because that year my step-brother became violent and an alcoholic. After uncountable years of sleepless nights I lost my childhood spirit and view. My childhood was cut short and adult more mature problems then became mine. Since viewing my mother in trouble and scenes no child should see I've developed more faster mentally in the area of behaviour

and thinking “beyond the box” when friends, even family, ask for help and support (lines 25-31).

Alexandra’s first interview took place towards the end of her final year of secondary school. She was interviewed about 12 months later again. Her step-brother had passed away prior to her first interview. The experience had been traumatic. She did not refer to it directly in the interview but what she did say gave an insight into the impact of his death on her: “... death - um - had a big influence on me and that’s influenced me to go - get closer to get to God, to get closer to God” (lines 159-161). Alexandra lived with the trauma and her confusion about the place of God in her life until the experience of listening to a guest speaker at her school speak about making the most of the opportunities in life. She stated in her first interview that he helped her to realise “not to worry about the bad things, but focus on the good things in life” (lines 226-227). His message provided her with a way to resolve the faith issue she had: she was convinced that God had deserted her family.

The case of Alexandra as outlined above highlighted the difficulty of separating the two movements for the purpose of discussing the activity of the imagination in faith development and religious conversion. The conduct of the discussion is somewhat like walking a tightrope: it is a matter of balance and compensation. As stated at the outset of this part of the discussion, because the matter of the role of the imagination in religious conversion involves reflection on a dialectic, it is necessary to keep in mind both parts of the dialectic and to move backwards and forwards between them. Concerning this balancing act, two points need to be borne in mind. First, Kant (2007/1781)

stated that the work of the imagination is something “of which we are scarcely ever conscious” (p. 104). Thomas (1999) also described the functioning of the imagination as being “a rapid sequence of microperceptions and microreactions, almost simultaneous as far as consciousness is concerned” (p. 21). The point behind these references is this: the imagination is engaged in a balancing act. Second, religious conversion is rarely a sudden event, but something that tends to happen over a long time. Individuals become aware of changes in their perceptions and their own choices often only reflexively. For instance, it was shown above, that changes in faith and awareness of those changes come with maturity. These points need to be borne in mind during the following discussion of how the religious conversion of Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen came about and the role of the imagination in their efforts to “reach back” into their memories and emotions.

Leaning forward: the imagination, understanding and will

When a person becomes aware of new information that contradicts present knowledge and understanding, a state of disequilibrium is created in that person’s mind. It was shown in the previous section of this discussion that the imagination “reaches back” into a person’s memories and the emotions associated with those memories to construct or create a reality that restores the balance. Piaget (1950) called this process equilibration. The role of the imagination in equilibration was characterised as “leaning forward,” that is, the act of composing, constructing or creating a new reality is future-focused: it follows the experience of disequilibrium. Put in another way, understanding, which is the product of the work of the imagination, informs behaviour. These

ideas will be addressed in the next section of the discussion which will be laid out in two parts. In the first part, the relationship between the imagination and understanding will be considered. The discussion will draw on ideas taken from Thomas' (1999) theory of perceptual activity and Perlovsky's (2002, 2007) philosophy of mind. The second part of the discussion will focus on the relationship between the imagination and religious behaviour. It will make use of Harris' (1987) model of religious imagination to explain the relationship. In each part of the discussion, examples will be used to illustrate how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion.

The imagination and understanding

There is a relationship between the imagination and understanding which Kant (2007/1781) described in the following way: "To bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that belongs to the understanding, and it is through this function that the understanding first supplies us with knowledge so-called" (p. 104). The imagination, whose work is largely unconscious, serves understanding in the task of forming knowledge that people have of themselves and their worlds. Its activity is perceptual. Nigel Thomas (1999) proposed a theory of perceptual activity that was based on the understanding of perception as "a continual process of active interrogation of the environment" (p. 11). The environment to which he referred consists of what is remembered. According to the theory he proposed, the products of perception are used by the imagination "to see *things as whatever they are or might be taken to be*" (p. 15).

To illustrate his understanding of the work of the imagination, Thomas referred to the example of Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler recounted by N. R. Hanson (1958) in his book *Patterns of Discovery*. Brahe saw the sun rise over the horizon, whereas Kepler saw the earth turning towards the sun. It was Kepler's willingness to look at what he knew with fresh eyes that led to his discoveries in astronomy. The understanding of the imagination implied in Thomas' description of Kepler's creative insight was found also to be relevant to the accounts of faith development and religious conversion given by the participants in the present study, as will be explained below.

In an outline of his neural modeling field theory, Perlovsky (2002) stated that the purpose of imagining was to satisfy the instinct for knowledge and understanding, a satisfaction that was experienced emotionally. Perlovsky contended that humans and higher animals have a knowledge instinct which is responsible for cognition. He (2007) defined the knowledge instinct as "an inborn mechanism in our minds, an instinctual drive for cognition, which compels us to constantly improve our knowledge of the world" (p. 27). There appears to be no real difference between Perlovsky's idea of the knowledge instinct and Fortosis & Garland's (1990) understanding of disequilibrium as being "life-based — that is, the accumulation of better and better modes of representing reality is accomplished to help persons survive and get along in their environment" (p. 639). The ideas that have been drawn out of the work of Thomas and Perlovsky will be used to guide the following discussion about how two participants in the present study used their imaginations to construct or create their understanding of how to relate with God.

In his interview, Cameron constructed an image of his faith development from memories of his beliefs and religious behaviour as a child and also at the time of his interview. Cameron described belief in God as “sort of an idea that’s there that he’s there an’ he can comfort us an’ if we do need help that’s there’s always someone there listening” (lines 8-11). God was “a support structure for me – um – that’s someone who can sort of listen an’ just be there, so, maybe a comforting – comforting spirit” (lines 20-22). But his faith was not always that sure or comforting. Cameron constructed an image of himself changing from not understanding much about God to being able to create his own image of God. In the passage below, he was responding to a question about the differences between God and Jesus:

Um – maybe when I was very young, around five an’ six, an’ just starting to learn all these sort of things. It was just an easier concept to see them all as one person, but as you grow up, you mature an’ you sort of – logic takes hold an’ it’s – you can’t just have questions that are unanswered an’ that you just believe and you have to ask those sort of questions an’ work it out for yourself (lines 51-57).

When he was a child, he believed that Jesus was God. It was easier to think of Jesus and God as the same because he was not capable of thinking “the unthinkable,” that is, that perhaps Jesus was not God in the way that God is God. Such possibilities were part of the formal operational thinking of the adolescent, and as an adolescent, Cameron’s understanding of God changed. The focus came on the humanity of Jesus and his faith; the divine power was returned to God:

Jesus was a man an' he – he lived an' he died an' he did all these other things that I might not be able to do, but it was through his intense faith in God an' being the son of God that did that... (lines 65-68).

Working things out for himself was a theme that ran through Cameron's interview. It surfaced in his statements about his beliefs and about his upbringing. According to Cameron, his parents encouraged him to be an independent thinker. The shift in his beliefs about Jesus reflected this theme. Looking at his life from that perspective, he remembered that when he was a child his parents forced him to go to Church. In his interview, he referred to his parents "dragging" him to Church (line 159). But he also remembered that they helped him to understand and appreciate the place of religion in his life by:

... taking me to Church an' talking to me afterwards about it an' if I understood it all an' commenting an' listening to my comments an' making sure I understood it all when I was little helped me to have that sense that – um – it's – it's part of your life and you should have it as part of your life because it can help you. I think the whole idea that religion's out to help you ... (lines 171-177).

Thomas (1999) quoted Hamlyn (1994) to clarify the work of the imagination which involved "perspectives, new ways of seeing things, in a sense of "seeing" that need not be literal" (p. 27). This understanding of the imagination was reflected in Cameron's story: as his ability to think developed, and he sought to understand what was going on in his life, his understanding of God changed. He said as much himself when he spoke about what prayer

meant to him: prayer was his time to think – “just tryin’ to work out what’s going on in *my* head” (lines 89-90) – while God remained in the background, a silent, comforting presence.

Cameron’s lack of understanding about theological concepts that were part of the faith he received from his parents was a form of disequilibrium. His story was constructed to show this. It would appear that he lived with it for a few years until he realised that he could make up his own mind about what he believed about God. This seemed to coincide with being given the freedom to choose whether to go to Mass or stay home.

With the development of his cognitive abilities and the freedom his parents gave him to choose how he practised his faith in God, Cameron was able to assimilate the beliefs that he had been given, meaning he changed what he had been taught to make it fit with the reality that his imagination created. He concluded his comment about the difference between God and Jesus with a comment that described how he perceived the relationship between imagination and understanding: “So I think with more knowledge you can build a better an’ more – more like strong image of what is really going on an’ what you see” (lines 68-71). His statement is reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s (2004/1849) statement that the depth of understanding a person has depends on the imagination. Cameron’s ability to imagine God, that is, his “strong image,” produced what he can “see,” — used in the way Thomas (1999) used the word “see”—that is, what he understands.

Applying Maria Harris' model of religious imagination to faith development

The imagination is credited with producing a world of the not-yet future. For instance, the latest mobile phone product is a wrist watch video phone. It was first described in 1932 as a tool to be used in the fight against crime by the comic book hero Dick Tracy. Often the flights of fancy attributed to the imagination represent the first steps in the search for knowledge that will transform the world for future inhabitants. The concerns of the present study, are those images produced by the imagination that are religious in content as well as intent. Such images can be part of what is often referred to as the sacred. Early in the present chapter, this form of the imagination was defined as having a transcendental, or 'other worldly' dimension. Like Dick Tracy's wrist watch video phone, religious imagination produces a world of the not-yet future for people to choose to make their reality.

In her desire to understand the 'other-worldly' or sacred character of religious imagination, Harris (1987), whose intention to give the imagination a religious meaning and to describe its functions using religious language, described the imagination as a person-centred power that could transform creation. According to Harris, religious imagination worked in contemplative, ascetic, creative and sacramental ways. The following discussion of religious imagination drew on her model and the four ways of imagining faith were applied first to the development of faith and then to religious conversion.

Contemplative imagination and faith development

Like other forms of productive imagination, contemplative imagination creates new realities, however, what is different about contemplative imagination, is its focus. Harris (1987) stated that the imagination functions in a “contemplative” manner by drawing on “the active intensity of contemplative life, which calls for a totally engaged bodily presence: attending, listening, being-with, and existing fully in the presence of Being” (p. 21). Contemplative imagination is characterised by the awareness of the “adequacy, fit or truthfulness in representation” of the created reality of a new, or renewed, relationship with God (Fowler, 1981, p. 30).

Experiences of this form of the imagination are confirmed by what Perlovsky (2001) called “instinctual satisfaction,” that is, the satisfaction that comes from recognising the truth of what has been experienced. Religious imagination has a contemplative quality that is recognised in the tendency to reflect on or ponder a situation until the presence of the divine is confirmed and celebrated in action. The recognition of the presence of God is an act of the imagination reflecting on the manifold of experience. Faith changes and develops as people reflect on their experiences of God being present in their world.

The participant named Luke reflected on the impact of listening to a guest speaker at a youth camp on his faith. In his journal, he wrote:

There were about 150 kids all in this room from ages 12-18 and we were listening to a talk that a guy was giving and he had been in a crash (car). His story just hit me and made me think. From the things he was telling us

that were happening, they couldn't have happened without God (lines 40-44).

What was being said was distinctive enough to hold his attention (“His story just hit me....”) and caused him to reflect on the message that the speaker delivered. Luke interpreted his story as being about the intervention of God in a person's life. Neville's (1981) explanation of Kant's description of the synthetic function of the imagination was helpful in coming to understand how the imagination assisted the type of reflection that Luke experienced on the camp and subsequent to it: “(Kant) supposed that knowledge grows from two roots—the influence of outside objects and the spontaneous activity of the mind developing these influences in the form of knowledge” (p. 149).

The “spontaneous activity of the mind” to which Neville referred does not mean the effect was instantaneous. While Luke might have recognised the truth of the speaker's message when it was delivered, in other circumstances, recognition might have taken much longer and as a result of periods of reflection or contemplation. When the participant named Frank found himself in a situation which challenged his understanding of how to relate with God — a religious education class debate on the death penalty — he reported that the change in his thinking happened slowly. He stated in his journal:

The change was gradual and could probably be partly attributed to my own maturing. My RE teacher is the one who helped me come to my more practical understanding of faith in God.... I believe I am a more placid and open person now and have a stronger connection with God. It was hard to

be close to God when you would be willing to kill another man (lines 85-89).

Frank's experience of inner conflict confirmed the existence of the action-reflection dialectic referred to earlier in the present chapter as part of the work of the imagination. Frank came to a "more practical understanding of faith in God" through reflecting on what he believed about God and the part that God played in his life. The adequacy of his new knowledge of God—the instinctual satisfaction identified by Perlovsky (2002)—was acknowledged through his reference to changes in his beliefs about himself: "I believe I am a more placid and open person now and have a stronger connection with God." At the time when Frank wrote his journal the changes in his faith were not radical; they were rather an intensification of qualities that he saw in himself. Prior to the debate and the subsequent reflection, he had a strong connection with God. The experience and his reflection on it confirmed and strengthened his faith. With religious conversion, the contemplative work of the imagination produced radically different outcomes.

Ascetic imagination and faith development

Harris (1987) described ascetic imagination as the synthesis of all that a person experiences that is related to religious discipline and discipleship. The word "ascetic" comes from the Greek word *askesis* which means "exercise." It was used traditionally in Christian spirituality to refer to the exercise of the regulation of the conflict between the spirit and the flesh. McBrien (1980) identified three aspects of Christian asceticism: self-acceptance, commitment to service of the needy, and freedom to love and to

be creative. The terms “religious discipline” and “discipleship” which were used by Harris (1987) to describe the context of ascetic imagination were taken to refer to the practice of observing the laws and customs of Christianity as a follower of Jesus Christ.

From its inception, the Christian religion was characterised as being “other-centred,” that is, its focus was on reflecting the love of God, which was made visible in the person of Jesus, in acts of service to the needy. The “ascetic” character of this focus was captured in sayings, like “This is my commandment: Love each other as I have loved you. The greatest love a person can show is to die for his friends” (John 15:12-13 New Century Version), as well as in images like the actions of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and pre-eminently in the suffering and death of Jesus.

In chapter 3, it was stated that the participants were not asked to comment on their use of imagination. Rather, it was intended that the questions put to the participants would assist them to identify what was meaningful for them in their experiences of lived religious faith. One set of questions was directed towards determining whether or not their faith helped them to identify the purpose and meaning of their life. In keeping with the understanding of Christian asceticism outlined above, it was concluded that the signs of McBrien’s structure of the ascetical life would arguably be signs of ascetic imagination at work.

The analysis of the data showed that for most of the participants, there were no significant signs of ascetic imagination. For instance, when Glynnna was asked if her faith had helped her gain a sense of purpose and direction,

she responded by stating that although it helped her make decisions, ultimately her choices were based on what she wanted. She stated: "I'm more selfish" (line 232). The vision she had of herself was evident also in her comment that her religion had taught her "that family and friends are really important" (lines 240-241). She could not conceive of herself being so ambitious that she would put her future before her family and friends. Glynnna was not able to say that her life had meaning and purpose. She stated: "Like I want to do well but I don't know why I want to do well" (lines 254-255).

Morgan responded to the same question with a statement about experiencing pressure to hide her beliefs when she was with some of her friends. "Sometimes you hide that sort of belief when you're in front of your friends, or something, because maybe they're not Catholic. Maybe they don't believe in that and you think, "Oh, I'll get teased now." Or like you'd rather just not say something, y'know" (lines 119-123). When Morgan was asked about her prayer life, she stated: "If everything's all right in my life, I'll probably pray for people who don't have what I have. Like, y'know, poor people who don't have anything" (lines 100-102). With Morgan, the focus was on her own needs and her fears with little consideration of others outside her own circle of family and friends.

Creative imagination and faith development

The third form of religious imagination described by Harris (1987) in her model of religious imagination is creative imagination. Drawn from Wheelwright's (1982/1968) "compositive imagination" which she defined as "the blending of disparate elements" (p. 18), Harris related creative

imagination to the role of being a co-creator with God. Thus creative imagination shows itself in people's efforts to use "their potential in the service of one another and of the world" (p. 22) in ways that seem new. Wheelwright's model needs to be used to make clearer what this means. According to Harris, Wheelwright described two principles which combine to form compositive imagination. The first, which he labelled "radical interpenetration," is the belief that everything is interconnected. The second principle, which he identified as "radical novelty," refers to the freshness of new ideas that seemingly appear out of thin air. Hart (2003) provided a shape to these principles in action: he referred to people responding to the world in appropriate and responsible ways (p. 8).

When creative imagination is considered as the meeting of these two principles, then it should be possible to find creative imagination at work wherever new ideas emerge about the relationship between the divine and the human that give expression to the possibilities that flow from such a relationship. For example, in the present study, the participant named Alexandra had resolved an impasse between her beliefs about God and the experience of trauma in her life by deciding that her family's relationship with God had changed. She wrote in her journal: "I believed God had abandoned my family. I thought that God wouldn't have all these events in less than three months to my family" (lines 50-51). Her conclusion was not satisfying. Her journal traced her search for more satisfying understanding of God's participation in her life. As stated in chapter 4 above, Alexandra found inspiration in the message of a guest speaker. In her journal, she wrote:

The speaker taught me to always try to see the brighter side of the problem, because you could be worse off and all problems can be seen as a lesson that makes and shapes the person you are at the end (lines 61-63).

This was only part of the solution to her impasse. She came to realise that God worked indirectly through people to help those in need. In her first interview, she revealed: “I think that - um - God can act as another human being trying to help stop the suffering” (lines 122-123). Alexandra cast herself in that role and explained in her journal that she regarded her life as an opportunity to “help others to become strong when faced with difficult problems” (line 66). Everything was connected and in this interconnectedness lay the resolution to the dissatisfaction she experienced in her relationship with God. Creative imagination provided her with a way forward in her life and in her faith.

Sacramental imagination and faith development

Through her descriptions of the significant relationships in her life, the participant named Sophie communicated what she believed to be true about her relationship with God. At the outset of her interview, she explained that her beliefs were constructed:

... as I grow up, or grew up, um — I pulled bits from my background — my fam— 'cause my family being Italian — um — the Catholic sort of f— um — faith and belief: from that — um — an' I just constructed — Also my surroundings, like my school, I just constructed different pieces of what I form in my religion my faith (lines 14-19).

One of the aspects of the imagination observed in her construction of her faith was what Harris (1987) called “sacramental imagination.” To understand what Harris meant by “sacramental imagination” it is necessary to go to the sources of her idea, one of which was Wheelwright’s (1982/1968) fourth way of imagination, the “archetypal imagination.” Tarnas (2009) defined *archetype* as “a universal principle or force that affects—impels, structures, permeates—the human psyche and the world of human experience on many levels” (p. 27). Harris interpreted Wheelwright’s understanding of archetypal imagination as follows: it is that way of imagining which “reveals in an almost effortless way the universe or universal embedded within it” (p. 19). The work of revealing is “almost effortless” because truth resides in the image. Harris, wanted to develop a theology of teaching, so she described this way of imagining being oriented towards the numinous, or as Tarnas (2009) described it, an orientation of the imagination that is “in one sense timeless and above the changing flux of phenomena, as in the Platonic understanding, yet in another sense deeply malleable, evolving, and open to the widest diversity of creative human enaction” (p. 28).

In the context of religious imagination, archetypal images can be sacramental, that is, they become a vehicle for divine-human communication. As a Catholic Christian, Harris drew on her experiences of the sacraments and the “sacramental” in life to draw attention to the experience of mystery in life. The word “sacrament,” from the Latin *sacramentum*, meaning “solemn oath,” that is, conviction about the truth of the experience of the presence of the divine in daily events, was used to translate the Greek word *musterion* that has come into English as the word “mystery.” The seven sacraments of

Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Holy Order, Marriage and Anointing of the Sick which were part of Harris' faith and her life as a Catholic and her experiences of the sacramental in life were moments of participation in the divine, or the inherent numinous dimension of life and of truth. Harris summarized her understanding of this way of religious imagination with "nothing here on earth is profane" (p. 22).

Sacraments are signs that point to the presence and power of the Divine in life. It is the role of sacramental imagination to construct those signs from the data of experience. A few examples, taken from the transcript of the interview conducted with Sophie, will show how this way of religious imagination assists faith development. The truth for Sophie was the existence of God who was present and who guided her through life. She stated that faith ruled out the need to debate the existence of God. Instead, relationships confirmed her faith. They were the signs of God's presence in the world.

The most important relationship was the one she had with her mother. Sophie described her as "like my best friend an' I – I can tell her everything" (lines 358-359). From her mother's story, Sophie learned the truth about God's faithfulness, that is, she constructed her beliefs about God on what her mother told her about God and what she accepted as the truth about God in relation to her mother's experience of God: "how he's helped her through hard times as well and she's always stayed faithful to God as well, so she's sort of an inspiration to do the same" (lines 364-366). Her relationship with her mother became a sign of her relationship with God. In her interview, she stated: "... not that my Mum is my God, but like she – the way I talk to God is

also the way I talk to Mum” (lines 361-362).

Sophie also described the impact of her relationship with her Aunt Sue on her faith. In her interview, she reflected on a photo of her aunt that she kept in her room:

... it's really beautiful 'cause she's just sitting in a field an' – um – I jus' – I jus' love that photo. I've got it in my room. An' – um – I jus' picture her as this – this beautiful, wonderful person that would always look after me an' that's sort of my gift – like having her in spirit with me (lines 150-154).

Sophie believed that her aunt, who died before Sophie was born, was her guardian angel. Based on what her mother told her, Sophie chose to think of her aunt as someone who looked after her. She described her as a model, “as like a very great person,” (line 145) and gave her aunt a role similar to that which she attributed to the Holy Spirit: “... the Holy Spirit is sort of – I would describe it as the feeling you get with faith an' – um – the – sort of the – guidance, the – um – the encouragement” (lines 70-72).

Sacramental imagination constructs signs of the presence and power of God that a person uses to define their faith. In the case of Sophie discussed above, her relationships with her mother and her aunt provided her with an image of a supportive God who was faithful to her. Sophie's image of faith in God was constructed from stories about struggling to overcome adversity. Her father taught her to respect people: “He's very much about respect” (line 350). She acknowledged the importance of respect in the face of conflict about religious belief. As stated above, her mother's “hard times” (line 365) and her grandparents' “struggles through life” (line 375) taught her

“to stay strong” (line 388), meaning to be faithful to God. Her own struggle with a delicate conscience — “I have the – like the worst conscience I feel guilty if I don’t help Mum with the dishes ...” (lines 161-162) — that caused her stress, was portrayed as an aspect of her faith in God.

Harris (1987) described the work of sacramental imagination as picking up a thread of reality and following it to the heart of the universe (p. 75). As she told her story, Sophie twisted together the strands of her life to form a thread that led her to a faithful God who supported and guided her family. In her story, family was the archetype on which her existence and meaning was founded. The bonds of family were stronger than the adversity her family endured, stronger than death. Sophie spoke about death as adversity, including the death of her Aunty Sue, however, death was never cast in the role of the victor. With God’s help, the human spirit triumphed. This was the context of her story which showed the work of sacramental imagination.

While Harris’ (1987) model of religious imagination proved to be a useful means for describing how the imagination assists faith development, it must be stated that it is just a construct. The four ways of religious imagination described by her provided four different views of the one reality, namely, the participant’s perceived relationship with God. They served to amplify the presence of the transcendent in the accounts of their lives that the participants provided.

Concluding remarks

To facilitate the discussion about the role of the imagination in faith development, a model was generated from Kierkegaard's (2004/1849) insight into the interplay of the imagination with feelings, understanding and will. Various theories related to cognition, particularly Piaget's theory of cognitive development, provided concepts and language to assist the discussion. Finally, to clarify aspects of the relationship between faith and the imagination, Harris' model of religious imagination was used to show how the imagination helped people express their faith in God. In the next part of the discussion, the focus will be on the role of the imagination in religious conversion.

Evidence of the imagination in religious conversion

Many people experience moments of grace that affect them profoundly, that is, they testify to being moved by God's Spirit to choose to commit themselves to God in ways that are radically different to their past behaviour. Their changed religious practices accompany changes in their religious beliefs and attitudes towards themselves, others, the world and God. In the following part of the discussion about the role of the imagination in faith development, the focus will be on the part that the imagination plays in religious conversion. In the previous chapter of the present study, four participants were identified as likely to have experienced conversion: Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen. Their stories will be examined again to determine how their imaginations assisted the radical changes in their relationship with God.

Mikaela's conversion

During her interviews and in the journal that she kept, Mikaela recalled how her relationship with God changed over the time she was in secondary school. She remembered events and recalled some of the emotions she experienced because of what happened to her. In her journal, Mikaela presented a view of her childhood that contrasted with her life at the time she wrote the journal. She was in her final year of secondary school.

The first journal-writing exercise invited the participants to imagine that they had written their autobiographies. The activity made use of their biographical memories. It required them to name their biography and then to name and outline each chapter. Mikaela chose to call her biography "Elevator" because "we all have ups and downs. In my life I have had ups and downs and sometimes felt like I wasn't moving at all" (lines 10-11). In itself, this appeared to be an innocuous image, however, the title of her second chapter revealed the intensity of the emotions she experienced as a child. She named the chapter "Plunge" which described the impact of her parents' divorce on her emotions: "It was like being on a bungee jump that didn't rebound. Travelling down without (stopping) slowly. This was when my parents broke up. I didn't care (about) life or anything it stood for" (lines 18-20).

Mikaela made use of this image to express the intensity of her feelings of powerlessness. In response to the experiences surrounding her parents' divorce, her imagination "reached back" into her memories of her anger towards her parents, her lack of trust and her self-pity and composed an

image of her being isolated from them, and also from her friends, from Church and God. To accommodate her feelings of betrayal and insecurity, she chose to believe that God either no longer existed or did not care; she wrote in her journal: "... if there was a higher being he/she was just putting obstacles in front of me to make me feel bad about myself and others in my life" (lines 69-70). She blamed God for how she felt about herself and others, including her parents.

Fowler (1981) stated that the imagination composed in the direction of what fitted best with what was perceived. Even images of hate provide the sort of instinctual satisfaction that Perlovsky (2001) identified as part of the acquisition of knowledge. Fromm (1965) analysed the use of the Hebrew word *yetser* which means "imaginings" and which is used to refer to good and evil. Thus the imagination is responsible for both good and evil. The negativity that Mikaela recalled as being part of her childhood and early adolescence was constructed by her imagination from the data of her experiences. Fortunately, by the time she was in Year 11, it had lost its dominance. The human mind responds continually to the information it receives through the senses. Fortosis & Garland (1990) stated that "one's view of reality is not passively registered but is actively constructed by continually relating new information to existing knowledge" (p. 639).

Mikaela's conversion occurred when she was in Year 11. In her journal, she recalled it as a powerful emotional experience: "I remember feeling worthy and a sudden burst of energy and happiness when the idea or

epiphany came to me” (lines 84-85). Upon the advice of her best friend Joan, she took her feelings as a sign that God approved:

I then told Joan and she said it was a sign that God was making contact with me because I made contact or finally read the signs he was sending me through my whole life. God does exist and I know it almost hands on (lines 85-88)!!

Her elation was obvious and contrasted markedly with her description of her childhood as a “huge puzzle.” In her journal, she wrote:

I was a good child throughout my life but I never seemed to know much about life picking up on small pieces of a huge puzzle that I would probably never figure out. Slowly but surely by the work of a lot of older people I began to tell me things even when I didn’t want to believe it (lines 13-17).

The action of “picking up on small pieces of a huge puzzle” is the work of the imagination as Kant (2007/1781) understood it: “... the act of putting different representations together, and of comprehending their manifoldness in one item of knowledge” (p. 103). Mikaela highlighted the confusion that she experienced in her childhood and her lack of confidence in coming to understand life. The description of the reality of her childhood and her poor relationship with God — “I didn’t get along with him very well.” (first interview, line 37) — contrasted with the description of her present relationship with God: “What has he given me? What am I gonna give him?” (first interview, lines 12-13).

The moment Mikaela decided to become a Catholic was like being transported to a new world. Everything she remembered was interpreted by

her imagination through the template of this experience as she sought to construct a meaningful account of her life. A similar cognitive pattern was noticed with the other participants who experienced religious conversion. For example, Kevin viewed his life from the security of his position in the charismatic covenant community of the Disciples of Jesus. Elizabeth found her security in her participation in the life of the Lutheran Church through her membership in her parish youth group. Stephen was comfortable with seeking answers from what he referred to as a Buddhist perspective. In general, it was noticed that the imagination constructed a new world from memories that could be synthesised into a more satisfying understanding of God than what was experienced in the past to guide the journey into the future.

The act of re-imagining the world provides a way of dealing with disequilibrium that has the possibility of being instinctually satisfying. The images are like mental maps that guide the search for information that is used to create new realities in the mind. As Fortosis & Garland (1990) noted, the search for information is natural; the motivation for learning is intrinsic. It was found in the present study that the act of seeking information about God had a self-reflection component that assisted the work of the imagination in religious conversion. Harris' model of the four ways of religious imagination provided a way of analysing the shift in Mikaela's view of the world that she constructed with the aid of her imagination.

What was said about contemplative imagination and faith development in the previous section of the discussion was true also of religious conversion, but in a radical way as befits the nature of conversion. Recall that Frank's

experience of the class debate about capital punishment demonstrated in a small but significant way the power of disequilibrium in bringing about change in his faith without producing any radical changes in religious behaviour, such as taking up the cause of the anti-death penalty lobby through joining Amnesty International. The experiences of disequilibrium reported by Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen demanded real and definitive changes in their relationships with God which were created with the assistance of contemplative imagination. The analysis of their stories revealed five factors that affected the work of their imaginations: the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the support of groups of friends.

Concerning the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection, Mikaela reported in her first interview that: "I reflect a lot. When I've done something wrong I sit there for ages thinking: "Yep! Why did I do that? Yep, that's pretty stupid. Maybe next time I'll think a little bit quicker" (lines 214-216). Mikaela recalled associating wrongdoing with the image of God as a "parent." Potvin (1977) concluded from his research of adolescent God images that adolescents tend to see God as punishing if they perceive their parents to be exercising undue control over their lives. One of the signs of her conversion was the replacement of the negative image of a punishing God with the image of a forgiving God: "I know that if I ask for forgiveness then he'll probably – he'll give it to me if I am truly repentful for what I've done" (First interview, lines 26-27). Away from her parents, and in her reflective moments, her imagination was able to draw on memories of other influences in her life, like

that of her friend Joan, to find the best way of representing reality, in this case, her relationship with God.

Towards the end of her second interview, which took place in the year following her graduation from secondary school, Mikaela again raised the issue of self-reflection. She said:

Okay, today I was going to show you where my favourite place was to sit and think, but, y'know, it's a long track. It takes me an hour to get there and about two hours to get back for no particular reason. Um – I just sit there and think. It's the most quiet place you could ever find. And um – I don't know – it's just very – something just draws me there every time (lines 150-155).

She went on to speak about her motivation for seeking a “quiet place” to be alone and to reflect. She said: “I like being by myself” (line 157). Her reflection, which commenced in her childhood, led her to realise the truth about her faith and to recognise how she could change her life. In her journal, she wrote: “My faith was based on what others wanted for me, but slowly I have begun to realise that it is my choice and my choice alone” (lines 163-164). Just as Frank observed that changes in his understanding of how to relate with God came slowly, the same was found in relation to the experiences reported by Mikaela. Recall that in chapter 2, it was stated that religious conversion is a gradual process (*FC*, para. 9), a “continuing” process (*GDC*, para. 56).

The second way of religious imagination described by Harris (1987) is ascetic imagination. In the discussion of how the ascetic imagination assists

faith development, it was defined as “the synthesis of all that a person experiences that is related to religious discipline and discipleship”. The most compelling examples of ascetic imagination were found in the transcripts of the interviews and journals of the four participants whose accounts exhibited signs of religious conversion. With the experience of conversion, equilibration is restored; the new created reality of a person’s life has come as a result of accommodation of new ideas. Fortosis & Garland (1990) reported that once equilibration has been achieved, it is not easy to disturb it again. Thus it would be expected that in the case of conversion in a Christian sense there will be signs of self-acceptance, commitment to service of the needy, and freedom to love and to be creative because these are recognised as aspects of Christian asceticism.

It was stated above that Mikaela moved from being dismissive of God to accepting God as the focus of her life. The change in her understanding and attitude towards God was captured by her in the following passage from her journal:

If I just follow him, I will be alright because he knows a lot more about me than I think I even will. He knows more than I would ever realise. So if I follow his lead, my life will not only be a fairy tale but something better (lines 151-153).

Mikaela had come to realise that her relationship with God was her choice. She had moved from having low self-esteem to accepting that God loved her and was ready to forgive her whenever she did anything wrong. Having chosen to be committed to developing her relationship with God, Mikaela

resisted the efforts of her friends to draw her away from the practice of her faith.

Ascetic imagination synthesises elements of a person's experience that relate to concern for others and it prepares people to do acts of kindness towards others. It was the Samaritan's ascetic imagination that created for him the possibility that he could help the Jewish man who had been robbed and beaten (cf. Luke 10:30-35). It was Mikaela's ascetic imagination at work when she realised that it was possible to forgive the people who had burgled her home on the day before she was interviewed the first time for the present study:

Yesterday, when we got robbed, instead of feeling angry, I actually felt "Yep, I'm gonna go out and help those people because I feel sorry for them." That's the first thing that came into my head. I wasn't angry. I wasn't disappointed as much as I thought I would probably would have been, but I actually thought, "Yep, I'm gonna go out and help them because they've obviously got a problem that can be fixed" (lines 118-124).

The concern for others that she expressed in this account was evident, too, in her comments about prayer. She said in her first interview:

... for the last couple of months, I've been praying about, for everyone else and not for myself as such. And I remember hearing ages and ages ago somebody says 'If you pray for somebody else, God will give you something in return.' So I – every night I'd say, 'Please bless people, please, the people I love and the people that don't like me, that I don't get

along with.' It's just – I dunno – even though I would – I'd never want to wish anything bad on anybody any more anyway (lines 171-179).

Even though there is the suggestion of self-interest in the statement quoted above, her admission that she did not want to think ill of anyone showed that her focus had become the good of others and not just her own situation.

In her search for understanding, Mikaela had come to recognise that it was possible to want only good for others, including those who tried to lead her away from the path she had chosen to follow. In her second interview, she was asked about how her relationship with God had been influenced by her family and friends since leaving school. Concerning her friends, she said: "With my friends, I really have no idea what to do. I think they push me a lot closer than they obviously think they have" (lines 85-87). It was reported in the previous chapter that she considered God to be a better father than her natural father and her communication with God was better than her communication with her natural father. Her situation with her friends had become similar. In both situations, Mikaela experienced conflicting values. She assimilated what she experienced with her friends and, as she admitted in the second interview, her faith in God was being strengthened through their efforts to draw her away from God.

What was sacramental about Mikaela's use of her imagination? Put simply, a sacrament is a ritual signifying and effecting the presence of the promise and power of God. Mikaela's sacramental imagination synthesised her memories of times when she recognised and accepted that God was working in and through her to achieve good. The most obvious example was

her belief that she was a forgiving person. Her ability to forgive others was modelled on God's willingness to forgive her. Reference has already been made to the power of her realisation that God wanted her to become a Catholic; the experience was sacramental.

Mikaela's imagination worked within the mental and social structures of her childhood until the parental relationships that supported her world collapsed (her parents' divorce). This was a traumatic experience for her. As she re-lived those years during the interviews and as she wrote her journal, she constructed images of herself as someone who moved from blaming God for her unhappiness to accepting Jesus as her saviour, the image that was dominant in her life at the time of her involvement in the present study.

The construction of a new world, one in which God loved and forgave her — and she tried to live her life as a faithful response to God's love — was a work of imagination. She created her new world over about four years. It culminated in her "epiphany" when she realised that God wanted her to become a Catholic. From a cognitive perspective, her imagination worked with her memories and emotions to compose a reality that she understood and which she found instinctually satisfying. It was clear from the account that she gave of her life that her imagination worked within the boundaries of her cognitive abilities in a state of tension (disequilibrium) that led her to God. That she wasn't led away from God was a mystery that she continued to ponder.

Kevin's conversion

The story told by Kevin was about his search for a relationship with God. The questions put to him in his interview directed him to recall his childhood and how he imaged God. His memories of his childhood were linked to negative emotions. Kevin spoke about times when he felt “really down, like I’ve been suffering emotionally” (lines 114-115). He described the source of his negative emotions and the impact they had on his self-esteem: “... in primary school I was sorta the outcast sort of thing. Then when I got to high school I was ss-s-so emotionally broken down that (*pause*) I didn’t really care about myself personally” (lines 140-143). He perceived his life to be worthless—until he found God.

Like Alexandra, Mikaela and Kevin had experiences that disequibrated them, that is, they had to change their beliefs about God in order to accommodate what the experiences “taught” them about themselves, others and God. Their imaginations created their new worlds from events that challenged the accommodation they had made previously in order to make sense out of their lives. Thus Mikaela had come to accept that if God existed then God was responsible for her low self esteem. She was thrown off balance again by the experience of being with her best friend Joan whom she described in her journal as her “spirituality mentor.”

According to Kevin, his discovery that God cared for him happened as a consequence of growing up. In his interview, he recalled the impact on him of the youth group that he attended regularly. He stated: “... in Year 10 I started paying attention an’ yeah, the stuff that they were saying was pretty

interesting so I kept coming back” (lines 25-27). What he was being told made some sense to him. He was able to see how it applied to his life. As a consequence, he constructed an image of himself as a positive person who accepted suffering because it made him a stronger person and prepared him for what God would ask of him in the future.

Just as Mikaela found herself trying to forge her identity out of experiences of rejection and acceptance, so, too, did Kevin. The rejection by his peers at school and his lack of self-control—he spoke about praying “in the mornings, so I’m prepared – I can take school on s-sort of get the Holy Spirit to clear my head a bit so I can have more self-control” (lines 68-70)—were countered by the feelings of self-worth generated through his involvement in the youth group. For instance, he spoke about the power of the share group to which he belonged: “... we talk about our problems an’ stuff, so – and they really hold you accountable for your faith. And so you’d get stronger ‘cause of that” (lines 174-176).

The image that Kevin constructed of himself from his memories was of a person who had chosen to live his faith despite the rejection he experienced at school. He recalled that his values differed from those of his peers. He gave his story an apostolic flavour which was in keeping with his religious experiences: at the time of his interview, he had joined the Disciples of Jesus covenant community and was a leader in their youth group. He had constructed for himself an identity of a servant of God: “He’s like the – like all-powerful, like the – like master sort of thing. So like I’m his servant ...” (lines 5-6). He imaged himself as a role model for his peers and demonstrated to

them how to behave in the school chapel. Kevin volunteered to sing in the chapel choir and he helped to distribute Holy Communion at Mass.

From the security of his position in the present, Kevin was able to explore his memories of his past and describe the antagonist in the drama that was his life. The experience of rejection by his peers at school disequibrated him. He spent some years in that wilderness and admitted in his interview that during those years he “was st- – starting to doubt because – doubt that I was any good in myself so I was – yeah, looking for other ways” (lines 20-21). His experiences of rejection caused him to seek acceptance elsewhere and he found it in the youth group he attended each week. However, Kevin admitted that it took him a few years to understand what that acceptance meant. When he was in Year 10, he realised that through the sense of belonging he experienced in the youth group, he found God. The religious experiences that he associated with his involvement in the group were similar to those experienced by Mikaela: they were linked to the reliance on friends who also served as mentors. Both participants recognised the significance of the impact of their friendships on their self-esteem and on their new-found relationships with God. Kevin explained:

I felt God calling me to join this community and he did this in like in a way that one of my friends, my be- – closest friend came to me said he had a strong feeling that God wanted me to join this community and so I felt this was the right thing (lines 36-40).

Like Mikaela, Kevin’s emotions played a significant part in the construction of a way through his experiences of rejection and isolation from God to feeling accepted by others and experiencing conversion to God.

In the discussion about how the imagination assisted in Mikaela's conversion, it was stated that there were five factors associated with contemplative imagination that affected the work of the imagination. Those factors were: the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the environment of supportive groups. All five factors featured in the work of Kevin's imagination as it constructed the possibility of his relationship with God. The same five aspects of his religious behaviour helped him to maintain the image of his faithfulness to God.

Viewed from the present, that is, at the time of the interview, Kevin's positive image of himself as a faithful person was partly dependent on the support of his youth group and, in particular, those in the group who mentored him. These aspects of his life were the focus of his reflection and formed part of the image of his relationship with God that was formed by his contemplative imagination. But there was more to consider. Like Mikaela, Kevin acknowledged the importance of reflection in his journey of faith. When asked about the place of prayer in his life, he explained his daily prayer regime:

I do the Sign of the Cross an' then I would call on God to – an' ask him what he would want me to do for the day. An' then I would – then I'd probly get into some Bible – reading the Bible and then I'd s-say a decade of the Rosary an' then to conclude. An' as well as writing in my prayer journal all the stuff I've been reading in the Bible that really speaks to me (lines 74-79).

This was the structure of his prayer, often in the morning before going to school. Typically, he would spend about an hour alone in prayer. His commitment was to doing God's will. He was convinced that God spoke to him through the Bible. When he was asked to explain what he meant by his prayer journal, he responded:

... when I'm praying I get sort of like a word, some like words that just come out, an' I believe that's God telling me stuff that's called "prophetic word," what I call the prophetic word an' so – and so I'm open to that. Sometimes I don't write anything because I haven't – he doesn't do it all the time but just I write – sometimes I just get this feeling that I have to write this word (lines 82-87).

The statement revealed a shift in Kevin's way of thinking from being focused on acceptance by his peers to being committed to God. Regular private prayerful reflection which involved the reading of the Bible enabled him to maintain this image. His behaviour was a reflection of the image of a faithful servant of God that his imagination composed from elements gathered principally from the time he spent at youth group meetings and other activities and events conducted by the community to which his parents belonged and which he joined during his final year at school. These positive aspects of his life were used by his imagination to create his way of viewing life that guided his behaviour, particularly in his final year at school.

Kevin's new world could be summed up in his words: "God is —he's like the supreme being sort of. He's like the — like all-powerful, like the — like master sort of thing. So like I'm his servant ..." (lines 5-7). His image of God and the relationship he had with God was created by his contemplative

imagination through those aspects of his religious behaviour that were contemplative in substance or orientation, as illustrated above. Within the confines of his new understanding of life, his ascetic imagination was able to work with other elements of his religious behaviour to further strengthen his relationship with God.

As shown above in the general discussion of the work of the ascetic imagination, and also in the discussion of Mikaela's conversion, there were three aspects of ascetic imagination that were found to be present in the account Kevin provided of his relationship with God. Those aspects were: self-acceptance, concern for the welfare of others, and the freedom to love and to be creative. The first was dealt with in the discussion about the use of memory and emotion by the imagination to create Kevin's image of his relationship with God. The movement from having a poor self-image to recognising that God loved him and others cared for him contributed to the creation of his new world and signalled his experience of conversion.

The second aspect of Christian asceticism was evident in his concern for the salvation of his peers at school. In his interview, Kevin reflected on his mission to evangelise his fellow students. He described his mission in the following way: "There are a lot of people – kids that don't believe in Christ an' so I feel compelled to like take a l-i- – like leadership role, so I'll – ah - be a role model sort of thing for them" (lines 178-181). The particular context that he used was singing in the choir at a school Mass. He explained how he witnessed to them: "I'm at Mass – go to – at the liturgy choir. Some people would like sit and then I'd encourage them to kneel and if they don't – don't

like if they need some explaining about the Mass, I'd gladly do that" (lines 183-185).

At one point in his interview, he explained that the faith that he found in God gave his life a purpose that saved him: "... if I ha- didn't have that sense of purpose I probably wouldn't have been here today 'cause I would've cracked under the pressure, probly done something really bad" (lines 133-135). The compulsion that he felt to model his faith in God came from the conviction that he was God's servant. His missionary role was an essential part of the world his imagination had created for him. From his belief that he was doing God's work came the strength that he prayed for each day and that he needed to face the conflict that he experienced at school. Through witnessing to his faith, he found the acceptance he was looking for in his life. He explained this in the context of going to Mass at school:

I've been actually able to do what I would do out of school an' so I would – it gives me real courage an' s- – I would – gives me since I don't have to be different so I'd be – be normal, so I can practise what I preach (lines 214-217).

The image of himself as God's servant that his imagination created for him brought him that instinctual satisfaction that Perlovsky (2001) identified as an outcome of responding to the knowledge instinct that is part of each person. Kevin's imagination created for him a way of thinking and feeling that gave him the freedom he needed to make his way through life with dignity.

The work of sacramental imagination, which was evident in Mikaela's description of her "epiphany" moment – her imagination composed her belief

that she was being called into communion with a loving, forgiving God — was evident also in Kevin’s life as he described it. It has already been shown that the reality of his life of faith was constructed from his need for acceptance, coming to understand the message of Christian salvation given through the youth group he attended, and the invitation to become a member of the community. One of the elements of the reality his imagination constructed, was his initiation into the community which involved education-in-faith experiences. Concerning his difficulties at school, he described the help he received from his leader:

... the leader that’s there, he – um – actually approached me an’ said – because he knew I had – because he’s been praying before, an’ then said, “You were down you s-“ – an’ that “you should really like take courage” an’ he’s literally taught me what some of the basic s- – ah – like, yeah, he made me realize that I – I’d been wrong, made me admit to my – my – admit my pain and suffering an’ t- – to let it all go so I can deal with it (lines 148-154).

Kevin’s description highlighted the nature of his experience of salvation. It was somewhat like that described in the song *Amazing Grace*: “Once I was lost, but now I’m found / Was blind, but now I see.” The description of his salvation was the work of sacramental imagination revealing the presence and power of God in his world.

Kevin’s conversion ushered in a new world for him which was imaginatively constructed from elements of his life that meant little to him as a child but which, as a seventeen-year-old, he understood and appreciated.

When he was interviewed in the final month of his time as a secondary school student, he described himself as a servant of God. When he was a child, he engaged in the religious practices of his family with little understanding of their significance. Conflict at school sent him searching for ways of feeling good about himself and how to deal with the conflict. His search led him back to where he had been going for more than four years: the youth group that was part of the charismatic covenant community to which his parents belonged. The moment of his conversion came when he understood that the answers to his questions about himself and about relating well with others would be answered through faith in Christ. His understanding was the work of his imagination constructing for him a way of viewing his life that gave him a sense of instinctual satisfaction.

Cognitively speaking, when Kevin was a child, his imagination constructed realities that did not include God because he was not able to relate what he was experiencing with what he was taught about God. He reported in his interview that these images of his world failed him and his self-esteem plummeted. It was only when he started to understand the messages delivered in the youth group that he recognised the way out of his misery. The progress from concrete operational thinking to formal operational thinking that Piaget identified through his research into cognitive development provided an adequate interpretation that Kevin gave of the dawning of his understanding of the religious world in which he was placed by his parents.

Elizabeth's conversion

Elizabeth's story differed significantly from the previous stories because her life was not marked by emotional stress in the way Mikaela's and Kevin's lives were. Like Kevin but unlike Mikaela, she lived at home with her parents whom she loved and admired. Unlike Kevin, she did not experience rejection by her peers at school. Her image of God differed from Kevin's image of God which he described as a master-servant relationship. In her first interview, Elizabeth imagined God to be like a father: "... the image of God is for me like a father, a father-type figure which has always been like that" (lines 29-30). Her memories of her relationship with God were positive. She stated that even as a child she imagined God to be like "a mother or father holding a little baby, or on the shoulder – um, y'know, carrying, warm and safe. Um – well, y'know, the thing of guiding, with holding the hand, guiding and helping" (lines 40-43).

Elizabeth's memories of her relationship with God and the emotions associated with that relationship differed significantly from those recounted by Mikaela who associated the word "parent" with the image of God who punishes people for wrongdoing. In her first interview, Mikaela admitted that the dominant childhood memory she had of God was of a being who punished people: "... if I didn't do something right he'd punish me for it" (line 20). Whereas Mikaela associated fear with the God of her childhood, Elizabeth associated love with God from as far back as she could remember.

Like Mikaela, Elizabeth kept a journal as part of her involvement in the present study. She named her imaginary autobiography "Oxymoron" which

she defined as “where two opposites or contradictory ideas meet” (line 3). Whereas Mikaela described her life as “ups and downs and sometimes felt like I wasn’t moving at all” (Mikaela’s journal, line 11), Elizabeth described hers as “opposite or contradictory thoughts, feelings and actions being experienced in the same moments” (lines 4-5). What was a “huge jigsaw puzzle” for Mikaela, was a tension between opposites for Elizabeth, almost like the dialectic described by the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, whose doctrine of opposites represented his attempt to describe the dynamic and changing character of being.

One part of the dialectic was her positive outlook on life. Elizabeth recognised that her life up to the present was happy and her basic attitude was one of gratitude. “I am so thankful to God for giving me my parents and brothers and sister,” she wrote in her journal (lines 21-22). This was reflected in the chapter headings of her imaginary biography. For instance, her first chapter was about the gift of her family and the second chapter, which she called “Moulded Under Blue Skies and Sunshine” (line 27), recounted the influence of her parents and siblings who “guided and moulded me to be the best person I can be, and taught me without even knowing it with their great example” (lines 31-32). The early part of her biography presented a marked contrast to the early chapters of Mikaela’s biography.

Elizabeth looked upon her life as being like a fairy tale come true. The narrative that she constructed reflected this in the title of the third chapter of her imaginary biography. She titled it “The White Fairy Visits Me” (line 34) and referred to the fairy who turned the wooden puppet Pinocchio into a human

person. It was her way of referring to the experience of growing up and becoming able to think and decide for herself.

This part of the dialectical framework that was Elizabeth's imaginative construction of her life — recall that the title of her imaginary autobiography revealed the dialectic — was kept in tension by those events in her life which caused her to reflect on her relationship with God. Those events amounted to her experience of disequilibrium. The first experience that she mentioned concerned coming to an awareness of the challenge of the Old Testament image of God as a supreme being who sought revenge against evil doers. In her first interview, she explained the changes that had been taking place in her faith in God:

it's – it's gone from, um, from a thing of always, y'know, just having God there as a father to rely on, to – like I'm realizing now that you have to – um - that there's other aspects that you've gotta work towards, or – like you've gotta try to be the best you can, not just keep saying "Sorry, sorry, sorry." So, like, and trying to understand, whereas before I'd just dismiss the passages in the Bible that showed God as a – y'know – revengeful thing, trying to understand it more ... (lines 69-76).

Elizabeth's imagination contributed to her search for a greater understanding of God by keeping before her the apparent contradiction between images of God that she had accepted without thought and the images of God that she found in the Bible.

Another event in her life that caused her to re-evaluate her image of God came from the experience of leadership in the Lutheran youth group that

was attached to her parish Church. She was invited to be a leader in the group, a position she found herself ill equipped to fill. For instance, she felt inadequate when called upon to pray spontaneously. In her second interview, she reported: “I could always like pray with myself to God by myself. I’ve been doing that forever, but like I’d have trouble praying with other people, you know, but I’d do it, like I’d do it at camps” (lines 82-84). The expectations of her as a leader in the youth group “disturbed” her. The image that she created of herself included references to her decision to have nothing more to do with God — “I don’t want to have any thing to do with this God stuff anymore” (lines 103-104) — and about holding back from participating in religious ceremonies, such as the Maundy Thursday ceremonies at her church. These “negative” experiences contrasted with references to seeking the advice of her best friends and choosing to resist the temptation to remain uninvolved in her church liturgies.

Finally, in her journal, she wrote about making bad choices: “I have also been put into some bad situations where I made wrong choices. The healing process and growth I experienced from this has really brought God closer to me” (lines 83-85). What she had done was not evident from the text of her journal, however, it was clear from her use of the words “bad” and “wrong” that she had engaged in activities that stirred her conscience. The resolution of her situation was described in positive terms: she used the words “healing” and “growth” which denoted the experience of Christian salvation. The implication was that she had sinned against God. To be reconciled with God and to rid herself of the guilt that she felt, she sought God’s forgiveness. Studies in attachment theory highlight the influence of parental attitudes on

adolescents' images of God. For instance, Potvin (1977) and Birgegard & Granqvist (2004) concluded that adolescents with supportive parents tended to believe in a forgiving God. Elizabeth was supported by her parents in her faith development and their love for her was part of the imaginative construction of her conversion. Central to her conversion experience was the "healing process" to which she referred.

It was reported in the discussion of Harris' (1987) model of religious imagination that there were five factors that affected the work of contemplative imagination: the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the support of groups, such as Christian youth groups. It was established in the discussion above that Elizabeth used her reflective skills to imaginatively compose and develop the image of God as a loving Father who was always ready to forgive those who strayed.

To this function of her contemplative imagination must be added her reading of the Bible. It was in that context that Elizabeth mentioned the struggle she had with the Old Testament images of "God as a, y'know, revengeful thing" (First interview, lines 75-76). She also struggled with reading the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. She admitted: "It's hard. It's harder. My Bible's got like footnotes type things that explain things. It takes ages to read a bit and then read all the footnotes" (lines 395-397). The concepts did not fit easily in the framework that she had constructed. In her first interview, Elizabeth reported that she tried to assimilate the images by "trying to

understand” (line 74) them. However, that was unsuccessful, so she tried other ways of dealing with the “disturbance” in her mind:

“Ah, sometimes I just dismiss them. But, but, um, I don’t know, but maybe go discuss it with someone, or just – I know it’s hard, like, the Old Testament’s hard” (lines 79-81).

That she would discuss her difficulties with others was taken to be a sign that she could not dismiss the idea of a punishing God.

Elizabeth supplemented her reading of the Bible with other forms of spiritual reading. For instance, in her second interview, she remembered reading a book called *The Five Love Languages* and related it to her dominant image of God:

I know that my love language is touch and I think – I think that that might – well, it occurred to me that that might have a – be a part of, or influence the whole, you know – that’s every, every image – every image that I like the most, is – is – involved touch (lines 11-15).

However, by this time in her story, her dominant image of God had shifted to include her experience of the independence that came with graduating from secondary school.

Elizabeth was mentored in her faith journey. The support of close friends was a significant feature in the accounts given by Mikaela and Kevin of the changes in their faith. In both cases, the support amounted to an invitation to join a community of faith. While Elizabeth was already a member of a community, that is, the youth group that she attended regularly, the invitation she received from her friends was to a deeper commitment to God. Mikaela

and Kevin expressed appreciation for the support they gained from their friends as they developed their relationship with God. Elizabeth also acknowledged her indebtedness to her friends. In her journal, she wrote: "My Christian friends have taught me by example how to make God a huge part of my life and have helped me through some difficult issues in relation to God" (lines 87-89). She attributed her conversion to their influence.

In the discussion about Mikaela and Kevin, reference was made to the role of ascetic imagination in their experiences of conversion. One of the signs of the ascetic imagination at work, and the one that was most evident in Elizabeth's account of her faith journey, was defined as "self-acceptance." Through her interviews and the journal that she kept, Elizabeth acknowledged that one of significant changes in herself that she had come to appreciate was the development of her ability to think for herself. Mikaela also had made the same observation. In Elizabeth's case, the recognition of her increased capacity for independent thought was accompanied by awareness and acceptance of being responsible for the choices she made. As noted earlier in the present discussion, one of the factors in her conversion was her growth in maturity during her final year of secondary school. It enabled her to imaginatively re-compose her image of God to include the possibility of forgiveness and healing. In the concluding paragraphs of her journal, Elizabeth captured the spirit of this shift in her world with the following statement:

I would like to try and express the huge debt I owe to God for all of the wonderful gifts he has given me so far in my life and for sticking with me

when I stuffed up or didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore (lines 222-225).

Like Mikaela and Kevin, Elizabeth showed concern for others. In her first interview, she explained her motivation in the following way: "... the thing of not – not helping is – or standing around and letting something bad happen is as bad as doing it" (lines 195-196). She conveyed the image of herself being prepared to stand up for the weak. One of her earliest memories was of her efforts to befriend a boy in Year 6 who was socially isolated, an action that was supported by her parents. Elizabeth's concern for others seemed to be restricted to the community in which she lived: her family, her local Church, her school and her circle of friends in the youth group that she attended. Unlike Stephen, whose conversion will be discussed next, she did not show any awareness of social or ecological issues. But that did not mean that she was not idealistic. In her journal, she stated: "I would like to make a difference to people's lives in small ways" (line 192). Elizabeth constructed an image of herself as someone who cared about others and who wanted to do what she could so that they could experience being loved as she was loved.

The fourth way of religious imagination described by Harris (1987) is sacramental imagination. As noted in the discussion of Kevin's conversion, sacramental imagination draws attention to the signs of God's presence and power in the lives of people. In the course of describing how her friends assisted in her conversion, Elizabeth revealed the work of sacramental imagination in the construction of her image of being saved by God. Her imagination brought together perceptions of her rejection of God and of God's

salvation through the agency of her friends. The clearest description of her experience was found in her journal:

Recently I experienced the first time in my life I was ready to give the whole Christian thing away because it seemed so unfair. I was very angry at God. But I didn't leave it at that. After my own research didn't help or get any answers, I went to talk to some of my Christian friends who are my age and understand the struggle. They helped me through this difficult time and my relationship with God was strengthened because I doubted but came back to him. My friend Serica said that that shows real faith. If I can stick with God and he sticks with me after a "fight" like that, I know that we can do anything together (lines 211-219).

Like Mikaela and Kevin, Elizabeth relied on her friends to help her validate her experience of God in the midst of her struggle with what she perceived to be the demands of God on her.

John H. Westerhoff III (2000) described faith as a journey that is made in stages. He called the stage that children typically show as "affiliative" faith. Many adolescents pass through a "searching" stage during which they have doubts about God's relevance or even existence. Eventually, people show signs of having an "owned" faith similar to the understanding that Elizabeth expressed in her journal about her hopes for her relationship with God:

I want to strengthen the feelings and beliefs I have in God. I know that with him I can do anything. I want to find some way to ease the doubts I feel about my faith, to find a way to answer the questions that seem unanswerable. I think that with a lot of hard work this kind of relationship

with God is possible. I know that I have the persistence and will to learn more about him (lines 206-210).

Elizabeth's imagination constructed what has been referred to above as a new world order, that is, the way she saw her life at the time of her second interview differed significantly from how she viewed it when she was younger.

Elizabeth's account of her faith journey bears out the truth of the observation made by Fortosis & Garland (1990) that the experience of disequilibrium will always occur because in the human mind there is a tension between the desire to accommodate new information and the contrary desire to maintain what is understood already. Her conversion came about because her personal circumstances no longer supported her image of God. Encouraged by her friends, she chose to believe that God was also merciful as well as loving. The belief that she was forgiven was her way into her new world, her conversion. That belief was based on the possibility that her imagination constructed from the array of memories she drew on in her attempt to make meaning of her life.

Stephen's conversion

When Stephen was young, his parents divorced. In his journal, he recalled that it did affect him, but the story he told showed that he coped with the divorce well. In his first interview, he described his father as "a pretty big influence on my thoughts" (line 53) and his mother as "a really good role model" (line 402). The emotional stability that he experienced was reflected in the way he wrote about his life in the journal that he kept as part of his involvement in the present study. Stephen presented an outline of his

imaginary biography which he titled “Snakes and Ladders” (line 10). The title was a dialectic made of the “many obstacles” (the snakes) in his life and the “many helping hands along the way” (lines 12-13) (the ladders) which he identified as his family and friends.

Whereas the radical changes in faith reported by Mikaela and Kevin were born from personal suffering, the changes reported by Elizabeth and Stephen were much less dramatic. Elizabeth’s created reality revealed that her gratefulness for the gift of her family and her Christian friends was the dominant emotion. Against this backdrop she recounted the change in her relationship with God that came about because she chose to take responsibility for developing the relationship. In some ways, Stephen’s account was similar. Like Elizabeth, he was grateful for the support he received from his parents. His relationship with them provided him with the stability that he needed for him to develop his relationship with God just as the relationships Elizabeth enjoyed supported her efforts to draw closer to God. However, whereas Elizabeth made her journey in the company of her friends in the youth group to which she belonged, Stephen’s autobiographical memories were of a faith journey that became increasingly a private journey: he constructed an image of himself being self-sufficient and making a contribution to society. In his first interview, he shared his dream for the future: “I want to be like a mechanical engineer, but I want to design like cleaner cars so that they don’t pollute the world as much” (lines 260-261).

In chapter 5, it was shown that there were two events in Stephen’s life that he considered important in his search for God. The first occurred when he

was in Year 10. One of his teachers confronted him about his mistreatment of a fly. The second event occurred when he was in Year 11. It was the surfing accident suffered by his cousin. Both events challenged his attitude towards life and his relationship with God.

Both events produced in him experiences of disequilibrium. He accommodated the new attitudes and beliefs by modifying his beliefs and values to align them with the changes in his attitudes. His account of the fly incident in his second interview gave an insight into how his imagination worked to accommodate Miss Scott's belief about the rights of the fly:

This is pretty bad, like in Year 10, I caught a fly and tied a bit of hair around it and Miss Scott said, "It's got as much right to live as you do." And I've never done it since. So that's one small thing. But Mr Jones' class last year would a been one of the biggest RE things. But, yeah, just that one thing Miss Scott said, like it has as much right as you just – But that's what the Buddhists also believe. Like they don't, they don't kill flies, or anything. I've spoken to a – like someone that follows Buddhism only last month and they don't own fly spray. Like they treat their animals with respect 'cause they believe that it could be like your grandmother or your grandfather that's done something bad that have to learn a lesson, so you treat them with respect 'cause you never know who they are (lines 92-104).

Autobiographical memory is an interesting phenomenon. Stephen switches back and forth from being the observer to being the participant in the event. His emotions were stirred by the memory of what he had done two

years before he was interviewed. He felt guilty. He was also willing to speak about the incident: it was clear from the construction of the account that he had learned an important lesson about life from it. His description of his action implied his thoughtlessness. Being self-absorbed, he gave no thought to the rights of other beings.

Stephen's "fly" story was composed of memories that were brought together to build an argument in support of his teacher's belief about the sacredness of life. The assimilation of her beliefs required changes in his own beliefs and values. The story covered two years of his life, from when he was in Year 10 to the time of the interview which took place just before he graduated from secondary school. By this time, he had come to the belief that God allowed people to make their own choices. It was God's role to guide and strengthen them so that they dealt with life in dignified and hopeful ways.

It was shown earlier in the present chapter that the search for understanding or finding reasons is influenced by the processes of equilibrium. Recall that disequilibrium is a cognitive process that is oriented towards equilibration through the interaction of the complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation. The movement towards equilibrium is not a single act, but continual movement. Fortosis & Garland (1990) stated that "one's view of reality is not passively registered but is actively constructed by continually relating new information to existing knowledge" (p. 639).

The analysis of the stories told by the participants revealed five factors that affected the work of their imaginations: the need for quiet to facilitate self-reflection; taking time to pray regularly; reading to promote self-reflection; the

support of friends and mentors who challenge assumptions about God and about faith in God; and the support of groups of friends. These factors influenced the development of and use of the contemplative imagination. Stephen's account of his life and his changing relationship with God reflected the presence of some of these factors. For instance, the changes that he observed in his way of praying pointed to the work of his contemplative imagination and reflected the radical nature of the changes in his faith. In his first interview, he described prayer as being "like a one-on-one with God, so you hear him and he hears you" (lines 112-113). He revealed that he always started his prayer by thanking God, although he did not know what started him doing that. In his second interview, he added:

as a child I just prayed like the same prayer every night. But now I actually thank God for certain things, ask him favours and so I suppose I look at God as a mate more so than someone you're just repetitive towards. So although it's decreased, it has also become – um – more personal (lines 64-69).

He contrasted his style of praying with the use of common prayers, like the Our Father: "I make my own prayers up which I believe is more in depth because I'm thanking him. It's like thanking a friend for doing certain deeds" (lines 74-76).

This change in his religious behaviour reflected the change in his understanding of God and how he could relate with God. It is worth noting that the way he perceived God to be was also the way he described his parent to be in their treatment of him. It is suggested that Stephen constructed his beliefs about God based on his experiences of the love his parents showed

towards him and the freedom they gave him to make his own choices. For instance, at the time of his first interview, Stephen had his driver's license and he would drive to his father's place "on Wednesdays" for dinner and then "drive back to my Mum's 'cause all my stuff's there" (lines 359-360).

Stephen noted the change in his attitude to life from being arrogant as a child to being embarrassed about his selfishness and lack of sensitivity. While he saw this and other changes as signs of his maturity, the change also reflected his imagination drawing together memories of his past attitudes and behaviours to create the image of someone with respect for life, as noted in his reflection on the "fly" incident. His present attitude, which was the work of his imagination synthesising his experiences to compose a reality that brought "instinctual satisfaction," was disclosed during the first interview. In response to a question about how his belief in God shaped his life, he responded:

"treat others as they would wanna – like as you would want them to treat you. Y'know, just live the Christian life, just have respect for one another and help out people when they need it, ask for help when you need it (lines 150-153).

This attitude and its underlying belief was an expression of his life as he conceived it and it was created by his ascetic imagination. As outlined above, the ascetic imagination can be found working through revelations of self-acceptance, concern for others and the world, and also in the freedom to love and be creative.

Stephen's humility was evident in his account of the "fly" incident. It was also recognised in his attitude towards his cousin's accident. In his

journal, he wrote: "After much soul searching I realised that God did not control this, but he did give Andrea the strength to get through this" (lines 60-62). The account he gave of his life contained numerous references to the need for God's guidance and help. The second most frequent form of prayer after his prayers of thanksgiving were prayers for help. He relied on divine intervention in his life. For instance, during his first interview, he spoke about the relationship between his belief in the "Golden Rule" ("Do unto others") and his prayer:

the way I picture God is the way I ask him for help. Yeah, like I said before, just the way he works, just gives you signs or sometimes, I don't know, like I'll ask for help and then all of a sudden a song on the radio will have the lyrics that I need to hear, just stuff like that (lines 156-160).

Stephen's use of ascetic imagination was evident also in his construction of himself as someone concerned for others and for the world. His family and friends were the first to be remembered when he prayed. In his interviews, he recalled situations related to his concern for the environment and people's responsibility for maintaining it. For instance, in his first interview, he stated: "... sometimes I believe that God is disappointed in the way we've been treating the earth ... we're not living the life we should be" (lines 168-174). This theme did not appear in his journal, however, during his second interview, he related it to another theme from his first interview, namely, his interest in Buddhism. He was not critical of his Christian heritage.

The change from mistreating a fly to being concerned about the way people mistreated the earth amounted to a form of ecological conversion, a

term used by Pope John Paul II (2001) to describe contemporary concern for and commitment to, protecting the environment. Stephen's interest in the environment and his reflection on the issue as an aspect of his faith, were aspects of the world he created from the information he gathered as a student of Geography and through watching the news on television. His statements illustrated clearly how disequilibrium can occur with just a question, a statement, an image, or an event. The new information contradicted part of his created reality. The conflict was resolved at a higher cognitive level with the formulation of principles that governed his beliefs and values, such as: "If everyone had faith and believed in sharing then everyone in this world could have a house over their head" (First interview, lines 188-189) and "... if you've got something you don't need to give it to people who do" (lines 199-200).

The way that Stephen perceived his cousin's surfing accident and her subsequent rehabilitation also showed aspects of how the imagination assisted his conversion. In his first interview, when he was questioned about her accident, he recalled her courage and described her as "a really strong-willed person" (line 23). The image he created of his cousin was composed from memories of the advice his father gave him "so much good advice" (line 382).

As stated in the discussions about the conversion experiences of Mikaela, Kevin and Elizabeth, the imagination composes images that are sacramental, that is, they convey, as signs, the presence and power of God in the world. Stephen's sacramental imagination composed the reality of God's involvement in his life in three ways. First, he believed that his cousin's

determination to overcome the injuries she sustained in a surfing accident was a sign of God's presence in her life. As he explained in his first interview, his experiences of her strength of spirit validated his belief that God "gives us strength and helps us when things are really hard" (lines 8-9). Second, he had come to believe that God spoke to him through everyday events which became signs of God working in his life to help him. He explained his belief in the following way:

... just the way he works, just gives you signs or sometimes, I don't know, like I'll ask for help and then all of a sudden a song on the radio will have the lyrics that I need to hear, just stuff like that (lines 157-160).

His imagination constructed his image of God present in the world and intent on communicating with him through his senses, in this example, through his sense of hearing.

Stephen's openness to God's presence in his life had changed radically from his childhood belief that God was responsible for everything that happened. In his interviews and his journal, he communicated his belief that people were responsible for creation. It was noted above that he expressed concern about their lack of concern, their irresponsibility. The possibility of salvation for the human race was constructed on his experience of his parents' love for him as a sign of God's goodness to him. Their love and support for him created the image of how God wanted to work in people's lives. He said in his first interview that: "... he puts us with who we need to be with to evolve into who we need to become (lines 232-233). He tried to respond positively to God's presence, a point already made through reference to his hopes for his future and the future of humankind.

Stephen constructed or created the reality of his faith by describing the changes that it went through as he grew and developed from childhood into adolescence. At the time of his first interview, Stephen understood God to be the One who “gives us strength and helps us when things are really hard” (lines 8-9). This was the anchor point of his constructed faith.

Concluding remarks

The emotions reported on by Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen were associated with religious experiences. Azari & Birnbacher (2004) discussed the relationship between emotions and religious experiences. They concluded that “religious experience emerges as ‘thinking that feels like something’” (p. 902). Their reading of the literature on the role of cognition and emotions in religious experience led them to state that “most theorists accept that many emotions, especially in humans, rely to some extent on cognitive processes and are largely culturally and socially determined” (p. 904). This was shown to be so with Mikaela, Kevin, Elizabeth and Stephen. Their imaginations drew on the experiences of their lives to create images of God that helped them negotiate their lives with a sense of hope for themselves.

When their imaginations engaged in the act of creating what Fischer (1983) called “the not-yet of the future” (p. 7), new worlds were created. Their conversion happened when the ways they related with the world shifted to accommodate new ways of imaging their relationship with God.

Summary

In this chapter, the second research question was addressed: *What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?* This research question focused on the much broader issue of faith development, of which religious conversion was the aspect under consideration in the present study. A model of how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion was designed and applied to the data gathered from the participants in the present study. Insights from information-processing theories, Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Thomas' theory of perceptual activity, Perlovsky's neural modelling field theory and Harris' model of religious imagination were used to provide the detail needed to describe the work of the imagination in the faith development and religious conversion of the adolescents who participated in the present study. In the next chapter, the third research question — *What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?* — will be examined. Recommendations will be made about how to address the goals of Catholic education outlined in the *Mandate* of the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia through engaging the imagination in assisting the faith development and religious conversion of adolescents.