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

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University of Notre Dame Australia

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Appendix 1: Letter to student

Richard Patrick Branson
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Armadale, WA, 6112
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Dear student,

Thank you for agreeing to consider being a participant in my research project. I am writing to you to give you more details so that you will be able to decide whether or not to continue with your involvement.

As you are aware, I am a student of the University of Notre Dame Australia. I am enrolled as a candidate in the university's doctoral programme. The subject of my research is the role the imagination plays in the religious conversion of adolescents. Sometimes, conversion experiences are quite dramatic, however, I am sure that for most of us, religious conversion happens slowly and quietly. I am interested in the signs of the inner activity that happens in people's lives as they experience their conversion to God.

I have restricted the field of my study to Year 12 students attending Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Perth. This is quite deliberate. I teach religious education to Year 12 students and I am impressed with their thoughtfulness and the insights they have into their faith and into life.

I have written to your parents. If you want to participate in this project, I will need their permission for your involvement. I have included a reply form which acknowledges your willingness to be a part of the project with your parents' approval. All you have to do is for you and your parents to sign it and send it back to me in the stamped addressed envelope that I have included. Then I will arrange to interview you.

The interview, which is the first part of your participation in the project, will last no more than 45 minutes and will be about the experience of change in your life and the place God has in the changes that have been taking place.

In the course of the interview, I might ask questions that you do not want to answer. You should feel free to decline to answer questions that make you feel uncertain, or vulnerable, or perhaps may anger you. I realize that I am entering a very private world and that I am a guest. The people I will interview will tell me only as much as they feel comfortable revealing to me.

I would like to tape the interview. This will help me produce a faithful record of our conversation. If at the conclusion of the interview, you decide not to proceed with your involvement then I will delete the file from my recorder.

If you choose to continue, then I will transcribe the interview and send you a copy for you to read. You will have the opportunity to let me know if I have misunderstood you or for you to make changes to what you said. I will check with you a few days after you have received the transcript and arrange to interview you again if you want to make any changes to the transcript.

I would like you to keep a journal. The subject matter of your journal writing is set out in the document that I will give to you at the conclusion of the first interview. Some students have taken up to six months to complete the journal, even though I suggest in its introduction that you take only a month. For some students, writing is a difficult task. For others, their lives are so full that they find it hard to make time to think deeply about the matters raised in the journal. Should you choose not to write the journal, then I would like to interview you a third time as outlined below.

When I have completed the analysis of the first interview, I will contact you again to arrange for a time to interview you a second time. I will do this to clarify anything you might have said that perhaps I haven't understood or explored with you sufficiently in the first interview. Again I will tape the interview, transcribe it and provide you with a copy of the transcription.

At some point about half-way through your first year away from school, I will contact you again to interview. This could be the second or third interview, depending on whether or not you choose to do the journal. I would like to interview you at this time because the experience of leaving school can bring about changes in your relationship with God and those changes provide insights into your school experience. As with the other interviews, I will tape this one, transcribe it and then send you a copy.

At some point about twelve months after the final interview, I will provide you with a written statement of the findings of my research. You will have the opportunity to reflect on my findings and provide any insights or corrections that you feel comfortable in giving me. Whatever changes I make will be shown to you before I go any further with my research.

In my writing, I will give you a fictitious name and invent details, such as the name of the school you attend. You will be invited to give yourself an alias. I will maintain contact with you during the writing phase of my study and provide you with copies of what I write not only for your own interest, but especially to make sure that your anonymity is preserved in my writing and that I have represented you fairly wherever you can identify yourself in the text of my writing.

During my research, all documents, disks and CDs will be locked away except when I am working on the documents. I will be the only person with access to the information that will be stored on my computer. I will keep two copies of all disks and CDs to guard against loss of data.

If you want to participate in this project and you have your parents' permission, please complete the acceptance form that I have included with this letter. On receipt of your form I will contact you to arrange a time to interview you at school one afternoon when we are both free.

Yours sincerely,

Pat Branson B.A., M.Ed.

1st July, 2004

Appendix 2: Letter to parent/caregiver

Richard Patrick Branson
49 Amethyst Crescent
Armadale WA 6112
Phone: 9399 7359
Email: p.branson@kolbe.wa.edu.au

Dear Parents,

My name is Pat Branson. I am a deputy principal at Kolbe Catholic College in Rockingham. At present, I am working part-time on a PhD at Notre Dame. My thesis is about the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents in Catholic secondary schools. Recently I spoke to the Year 12 students at school about my research and invited them to participate in it. Your daughter indicated that she would be willing to consider being part of the programme which will involve up to twenty students. Your permission is needed before I will accept her involvement in the research, hence my letter to you. I have included an acceptance form with my letter to your daughter.

In my role as a deputy principal at Kolbe Catholic College, my main area of responsibility is religious education. Over many years of teaching the subject I have come to recognize the importance of the role of the imagination in the religious development of adolescents. My studies are directed towards making clear what appears to be happening in the faith lives of senior secondary school students when they make choices that reflect changes in their relationship with God.

If your daughter participates in the programme, she will be asked to contribute in the following ways: **First**, she will create a fictitious identity for herself. This helps to preserve her anonymity. When results of the research are published no one will know who participated in the research.

Second, there is an interview which lasts about forty-five minutes. It will be recorded. A copy of the transcription will be given to your daughter to make sure that it is accurate and to allow for further comment by her. I would conduct the interview one afternoon after school and at school or at a time that best suits her.

At the conclusion of the interview, I will offer her the opportunity of keeping a journal for about a month. The subject matter of the journal is her faith journey and the part religious education and her religious education teachers have played in her journey. If she chooses to write the journal, then I will not conduct the second interview.

Third, I will interview her a second time. This interview is conducted to clarify statements made in the first interview. This interview is also recorded and transcribed. A copy of the interview will be given to her and there will be opportunities for her to respond.

Fourth, at some point in the middle of the following year, I will make contact with your daughter again to interview her a third time. I do this because leaving school often creates changes in a person's relationship with God. The changes provide further insights into the influence of school experiences on the faith development of adolescents. As with the other interviews, this one will be recorded and transcribed and a copy given to your daughter.

As the letter to your daughter indicates, she may withdraw at any time from the research project and for any reason. If that does happen, all materials, including original documents, computer disks and CDs will be given to her and there will be no reference made to her contribution in the report I write as part of my research programme.

Perhaps you are concerned about what happens to the information that is provided. It is divided up into statements (Each student typically would contribute about 300 statements.). These are sorted into a set number of categories and the statements from each particular category brought together and sorted again into a second set of categories. By this time, the only person who would know who made each statement would be me. The work I have done up to this point has revealed some significant features of how some Year 12 students image their faith and the part that parents, siblings, friends and religious education teachers play in this.

During my research, all documents, tapes, disks and CDs will be locked away except when I am working on the documents, or transcribing tapes. No information will be stored on computer. I will keep two copies of all disks and CDs to guard against data loss. The only other person who see the data in its raw form is my supervisor, Dr Anthony Imbrosciano who is a member of the College of Theology at NDA. He knows the students only by their fictitious names.

The direct involvement of your daughter in the project is relatively short and will involve about two hours hopefully over twelve months. My research programme, including the writing phase, will continue to the end of 2006. If you would like to be kept informed as to the outcomes of the research, I am only too happy to produce a summary and post it to you. The final document will be at least two hundred pages in length.

If you are prepared to allow your daughter to be part of the project, please sign the acceptance form. When I receive it, I will make contact with your daughter and arrange a time with her to interview her. If you have some concerns that have not been addressed in my letter to you, please feel free to ring me.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Pat Branson, B.A., M.Ed.

1st July, 2004

Appendix 3: Acceptance form

Student Participant Acceptance Form

Dear Mr Branson,

I, agree to participate in your research project on the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. I understand that you will interview me and ask me to keep a journal for about a month; and you will show me transcripts of what I give you to make sure that they reflect what I know to be true about myself. I accept that what I say and write will be subject to analysis and the findings of the research will be published. I also understand that I shall be able to withdraw from the project at any point and if I do that you will not include anything I have said or written in your research.

Signed:

Date: ___/___/___

Parental Permission Form

Dear Mr Branson,

I give my child permission to participate in your research into the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. I would like/would not like* to be kept informed about the progress of your research.

Signed:

Date: ___/___/___

* Please put a line through the response that does not apply.

Student's Details

Please complete the following:

First Name: Family Name:

Address:
.....

Phone: Email:

Fictitious First Name: Fictitious Family Name Initial:

Richard Patrick Branson B.A., M.Ed.,
49 Amethyst Crescent
Armadale WA 6112
Phone: 9399 7359
Email: p.branson@kolbe.wa.edu.au

Appendix 4: Interview schedule #1

What do you believe about God?

- Have you always thought about God in this way?
- What words would you use to describe your relationship with God?
- In what ways is your faith in God today different from what it was some years ago?
- Is Jesus different from God? If he is, tell me about the differences? Are these differences important to you? Was there ever a time when you didn't see any difference between God and Jesus?
- And what about the Holy Spirit? How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a friend who doesn't believe in God?
- Do you pray? To whom do you pray? How often do you pray? How do you pray?
- To whom do you pray most often: God? Jesus? or the Holy Spirit? Why?

How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?

- What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards suffering?
- What impact has your faith had on your attitude towards death?
- In what ways does your faith help to give your life a sense of purpose and fulfillment?

What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?

- What have people said or done that has contributed or not contributed to your relationship with God?
- Why were these words or actions so important to you? How did they relate to your life?

Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months? Why?

- What has been the impact of your school on your faith?
- Have there been any significant people or moments in your school life that have led to changes in the way you think about and relate to God?
- Has anything happened or been said in RE that has influenced you in your faith?
- What impact have your RE teachers had on your relationship with God?
- Comment on the place of prayer and liturgy on the development of a relationship with God.

What people have played a significant part in your faith development?

- What have your parents said or done that has prompted you to grow closer to God or to move away from God?
- How does the influence of your mother differ from that of your father?
- What stories from your life describe how each of your parents has influenced you in your relationship with God?

Appendix 5: Interview schedule #2

You have been interviewed once and you have completed a journal. Thankyou for maintaining your involvement in this research project.

In this interview, we will re-visit the broad themes reflected on previously so that you may add anything further to what you have stated already.

Your anonymity will be maintained and whatever you say will be handled respectfully. Should you decide to withdraw from the project, I will remove any reference to what you have stated and delete all quotes from what you have given or will give in this interview.

Do you have any questions about what I have just said?

The Themes

- You have been reflecting on how your faith has changed as you have been growing up. Is there anything further you would like to add to what you have stated in the past about the changes you have experienced?

If nothing is said about images of God, then the following will be asked:

- What would you like to add about how your image of God has changed over the years?
- Do you have anything further to say about the people, such as parents, siblings, friends, others and events that have influenced your relationship with God? with Jesus? with the Holy Spirit?
- What else would you like to add about prayer and your relationship with God?
- Is there anything that occurs to you about your experience of school, of religious education classes, teachers and peers that you would like to say at this point?

After each theme has been dealt with, the following question is asked:

- Would you like to expand on anything you have just said?

After the themes have been covered ...

- Is there anything you would like to add to what you have stated that we have not covered to this point?

After the subject has finished a statement similar to the following is made:

- Thankyou for your help with this project. I will transcribe this interview and send you a copy. If you would like to make any changes or additions to what you have said you may contact me. In a few weeks, I will send you a draft of what I have written so that you may comment further if you wish. I welcome any comments you would like to make because your contribution to this point has been invaluable. Thankyou again for your help.

Appendix 6: Journal writing tasks

Week 1

If you wrote the story of your life now, what title would you give the story? Reflect on why you would name it in that way. How many chapters would you give your story? Name the chapters and explain the significance of the chapter headings. Where do God and religion fit into your story? Choose the chapter of your story in which God and religion seem to play a large part and write about why they were major characters in that part of your life.

Week 2

Recall a moment in your life when you were convinced that God exists or doesn't exist and that God cares or doesn't care for you. Describe the situation. Try to recall who or what acted as the catalyst, that is, which prompted you to recognize God's presence or absence in the situation in which you found yourself. Describe how your thinking about God changed because of your encounter with this person or event.

Week 3

Recall a religious education lesson that challenged you to change your ideas about your faith. Reflect on how your faith changed because of that lesson. Try to recall how the change came about. What did you reflect on? Who helped you to re-think your belief? How did the change in what you believed affect your attitude towards God and your religion?

Week 4

Consider your future life as you would like it to become. What would be the main theme of the next chapter of your book? Give the chapter a title and explain its significance. How would you like your relationship with God to be in the future? What is there in your life at present or your present relationship with God that tells you that such a future is possible?

After looking back over what you have written in your journal, are there any final reflections about your life and your faith that you would like to offer to draw this part of your life to a close?

Appendix 7: Use of closed questions and rich data

The following extract was taken from Mikaela's first interview (lines 410-437).

Interviewer: Was there anything they would have said or done prior to that that would have drawn you closer to God?

Mikaela: Never! Its – the ritual was youth group Friday, Sunday Church. And that's the way all it was. And in between all that my parents separated and divorced.

Interviewer: And yet they still went to Church?

Mikaela: Yeah, just sort of Christians – um – pretend.

Interviewer: Do you see your Mum as a “pretend” Christian now?

Mikaela: Um – no, not so much. Like she wants to go back to Church but there's ALWAYS something that she has to do or has to be done that will make her not go to Church and I remember hearing ages and ages ago that the Devil tries to put things there that aren't that urgent but you think they are so – I sort of started not thinking like that. Before I go to bed I make sure I pray even if I have – even if I'm - I know I'm about to fall asleep, even if I know I'm about to pass out, I make sure I pray and then I'll go to sleep. Um – I remember Michael said to me he can't EVER go to sleep unless he prays. He'll sit there in the dark go “Yep! This is pretty boring.”

My Dad – my Dad – um – he goes – he goes “What are y'doing on Sunday?” I say, “I'm going to Church.” An' he goes, “Aw yeah, that's good.” I go, “Why don't you come?” “I can't. Mirna won't let me.” But Mirna goes to Church with me sometimes. So I can't understand that. But – um – Mum – one of the main reasons – Mum an' me – oh, I said I don't wanna go to the Church she wants to go to an' I think she's too scared to go by herself. But I think my sister will end up going with her.