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

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Chapter 3: The research plan

Introduction

It was the aim of this study to describe the role that the imagination plays in the religious conversion of adolescents who attend Catholic secondary schools. In particular, the study focused on evidence of religious conversion found in the transcripts of interviews and journals contributed by 15 Year 12 students attending Catholic secondary schools in the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (hereafter referred to by the acronym IPA) was used to analyse students' accounts of their religious lives. Conclusions were drawn about the role of the imagination in the experiences of conversion that were revealed by them and of the contribution of Religious Education to their religious conversion. As a research method, IPA provided the means whereby a detailed analysis could be made of each participant's account of his/her religious life. Smith & Eatough (2007) described IPA as a "double hermeneutic" process, that is, "the participant is trying to make sense of his/her world and the researcher is trying to make sense of how the participant is trying to make sense of his/her world" (p. 36). The interpretative dimension of the method, from both perspectives, was evident throughout the whole study, particularly during the data analysis phase, as will be shown in the chapters that follow. All forms of belief and faith involve interpretation just as does any form of research. What was critical to the success of the study, then, was the rigour of the research method.

Procedures

It was stated in chapter 1 that the present study had its origins in the experience of teaching religious education to senior students attending Catholic secondary schools. Concerns about the contribution made by religious education to the evangelisation of youth in Catholic secondary schools and a personal interest in the use of creative strategies in teaching religious education led to the formulation of the research questions stated in chapter 1. In the same chapter, in the examination of the ethical dimensions of the present study, the procedures employed in locating likely participants were outlined. To summarise: the principals of five schools were approached and their permission sought to speak to the Year 12 cohort of their schools, to encourage some students to participate in the study. Generally speaking, all but 15 students declined the request. Those who did respond were given an information package to read and to present to their parents. The information package included a letter to the student, a letter to parents/guardians an acceptance form and a stamped, addressed envelope.

The participants communicated their willingness to contribute to the study by posting the signed forms in the stamped, addressed envelope provided with the information package. In most instances, the participants were contacted by telephone to arrange a time for the interview. This information was communicated to the relevant authorities in the schools that the participants attended. In one school, the religious education coordinator spoke with the Year 12 cohort and provided the information about the names of the participants as well as the date, time and location of the interviews.

The participants were interviewed in the schools that they attended with the knowledge of relevant school authorities and in a room made available for the interviews. Most interviews took place in classrooms. The locations of subsequent interviews with those who had graduated from secondary school varied. Some took place in school surroundings. Two participants were interviewed in their homes. One interview took place across a table in a park. As far as possible, the interviews took place during school hours. All interviews were conducted at times that were chosen by the participants. The interviews were conducted across a desk with the recorder placed between the interviewer and the participant.

Data Collection

In the present study, two methods of data collection were used. First, all participants were interviewed. Second, they were asked to keep journals for a period of one month. Some of the participants wrote in the journals that were provided. Others chose to be interviewed a second time rather than keep a journal. Some participants were interviewed again after they had left school. Typically, phenomenologists gather data by means of in-depth interviews and personal journals that are maintained by researchers throughout their involvement in their projects. In this study, the researcher kept notes and typed memos that became a data source along with the transcripts of the interviews and the journals that some participants provided.

The purpose of interaction with the participants in the study was to learn as much as possible from them about the meaning of their experiences of God that formed part of their religious lives. While the questions used in the

interviews conducted in qualitative research need to be open-ended, so as to encourage participants to reveal as much as they can about their experiences, the researcher found that closed questions also provided rich data: participants often expanded on their responses to closed questions in order to clarify their position. Sometimes, the researcher had to seek clarification, but did so only if the initial response was unclear or it seemed that there might be something more to be said by the participant.

Qualitative data collection requires great sensitivity towards the participant. The required level of trust displayed by participants was high and it was the responsibility of the researcher to treat the sharing of personal details as sacred ground. How the data was handled was crucial to the project's success. Because phenomenology seeks to understand and appreciate the meaning of a person's lived experience, the researcher tried to "bracket" personal feelings, perceptions, misconceptions and judgments. Recall that in chapter 2, it was noted that bracketing is an area for debate within phenomenology and related methodologies. As stated above, the researcher used note-making and memos while working with data collection and data analysis as a way of maintaining the detachment needed to ensure that the participants' lived experiences were reported faithfully.

Each participant was interviewed at least once; some were interviewed two or three times. The reasons for this will be outlined below. The interviews were semi-structured in form (Appendix 4 and Appendix 5). There were five main areas raised for reflection:

- What do you believe about God?

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

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

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

- Who has played a significant part in your faith development?

As stated elsewhere, each question had subordinate questions that were intended to broaden and, hopefully, to deepen the reflection through helping the participants identify what was meaningful for them in their experiences of lived religious faith. Most interviews were between 30 and 40 minutes in length.

The interviews were taped using a cassette recorder. The researcher experimented with a digital voice recorder but found it to be too sensitive to ambient noise and, as a result, the task of transcribing the interviews became an ordeal. Analogue technology won out in this part of the research process.

Away from the interview, the sound was transferred to a computer using a software package known as *Express Scribe* (www.nch.com.au). With the aid of a game controller and its four function buttons, the researcher was able to use the computer like a tape player and control the movement of the sound (start, stop, fast forward, rewind, slow down, speed up) to assist with the task of transcribing each interview.

In the early part of the data collection phase of the research, after the first interview, the participants were given a journal document and a stamped,

addressed envelope for returning it to the researcher. They were asked to write in the journal over a period of one month. The reflection tasks in the journal directed them to think about aspects of their faith. They were asked to consider their life to be like an autobiography. An outline of the journal writing tasks can be found in Appendix 6.

The journal-writing phase of the data collection proved to be valuable but unpopular with the participants. Some completed their journals, but took more than the month stipulated in the instructions. It was evident with at least one participant that the journal writing was rushed. One journal was returned incomplete and others were not returned at all despite regular contact with the participants to encourage them to complete it and return it.

The decision was made to offer ask participants to choose between journal writing and another interview. Being interviewed again was much more popular than writing. The journal content became the content of the second interview. Participants were asked to prepare for the interview by reading the instructions printed in the journal. Those who chose this interview spoke for about thirty minutes.

The data collection also included an interview that was conducted about twelve months later. It took place to surface any changes in thought and attitude that the participants had experienced as a result of moving away from the familiar territory of their school.

In the early phase of the data collection, saturation was a reality and so the methodology was changed to reduce the likelihood of redundancy. The number of interviews for each participant was reduced from two (or three in

the case of those who did not want to write a journal) to one interview on the understanding that should further interviews be required, then the participant would be contacted and invited to another interview.

Table 2

The interviews and journals

Name	Interview 1	Journal	Interview 2
Alexandra	√	√	√
Alyssa	√	*	√
Cameron	√		
Cecil	√		
Elizabeth	√	√	√
Emily	√		
Frank	√	√	√
Glynna	√		
Gunter	√	*	√
Kevin	√		
Luke	√	√	√
Mikaela	√	√	√
Morgan	√		
Sophie	√		
Stephen	√	√	√

* The participants who chose to be interviewed rather than keep a journal.

The interview that took place after students had graduated from school was structured to reflect the categories explored in the first interview. Where there was evidence of change in what the students shared with the researcher, they were invited to reflect further on their experiences.

The journals were typed and misspellings and incorrect syntax and grammar retained to keep the transcriptions as faithful as possible to what the

participants chose to share. The data in the transcriptions of the interviews and journals were analysed using the method employed in IPA. In addition to these data sources, use was made of the notes and memos recorded during the data collection phase and during data analysis.

Sample selection

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia supports more than 30 Catholic schools with upper school classes. Most of these schools can be found in the metropolitan area surrounding Perth. This study involved a total of 15 Year 12 students from five Catholic secondary schools. Information gathered from the students provided data on the meanings they gave to aspects of their lived religious faith, on their awareness of changes in their religious beliefs, attitudes and values, on their experiences of religious education, and on those moments that they considered to have been significant in their religious development.

Phenomenological research typically uses small sample sizes (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Smith & Eatough (2007) stated that it was not uncommon to have one participant in research projects that make use of IPA. They reported that it depends on "the degree of commitment to the case study level of analysis and reporting, the richness of the individual cases and the constraints in operation" (p. 40). The critical factor is saturation, that is, reaching a point in the analysis when no new theme emerges from the data. Creswell (1998) suggested using 10 to 15 participants for a phenomenological study. Other authors suggested that it was inappropriate to indicate the number of participants. Instead when the data is saturated, data collection ceases

(Streubert-Speziale & Rinaldi-Carpenter, 2003). It has been stated that samples of two to 10 participants have been found to yield data redundancy or saturation. However, depending on the study and the researcher, there may be as few as one to eight participants (Caelli, 2001).

The concept of data saturation works on two levels. First, in phenomenological research, it is possible to interview too many people. Beyond a "critical mass", the elements of meaning emerging from the data start to repeat themselves. In qualitative research, this might provide some level of comfort for the researcher, but in reality the repeated elements are redundant. On another level, while it might be useful to interview participants more than once, saturation might occur in the first interview, thus rendering subsequent interviews redundant also.

Smith & Eatough (2007) argued for homogeneous or "purposive" sampling (p. 40). They counselled researchers contemplating the use of IPA to be pragmatic in their sampling procedures: "… you may have to adapt or redraw the criteria for inclusion as it transpires that you are unable to persuade enough members of the originally defined group to agree to take part in your study" (p. 41). This was certainly the case in this study. There was a serious attempt to gain a spread of students from across the suburbs of Perth, but this was met with only limited success. In two schools, only one student from each was willing to be interviewed. In another school, no students presented themselves. In the fourth school, of the four students who volunteered, only two presented themselves to be interviewed. The majority of students interviewed came from the school in which the researcher teaches.

Only those students whose parents or guardians approved of their involvement were interviewed.

The participants

Fifteen students participated in the present study. To protect their identity, the participants were placed in four fictional schools, one in the northern suburbs of Perth, one in Perth itself, the third in the southern suburbs and the fourth in the hills to the east of Perth. The following portraits were constructed to reflect this and the details were drawn from the transcripts of the interviews and journals.

Alexandra

At the time of the research, Alexandra lived with her mother and stepfather in one of Perth's northern suburbs. She attended a Catholic secondary school situated in a neighbouring suburb. Alexandra said that she believed that God existed and is "in everything alive." She described God as "friendly" and as the one who determined her destiny. She linked her attitude towards God with her attitude towards her family and friends. When they supported her, she knew that God was supporting her. Despite the certainty of this belief, she admitted that when her stepbrother died suddenly, she was convinced for a time that God had abandoned her family.

Alyssa

Alyssa attended a Catholic secondary school in one of Perth's southern suburbs and was in Year Twelve when she was first interviewed. She lived at

home with her parents, her younger sister and her grandmother. Alyssa acknowledged the help her parents have given her with her religious development: "it's always been the two of them, like my Mum an' my Dad an' my Gran even, um – that have – um – helped me grow with my faith an' what I believe." She believed that God was "something bigger in the world than us" and saw her relationship with God as "friendly," even though she admitted that she was not as close to God as she "probably should be." She believed that God listened to her and took "on board" everything she said.

Cameron

Cameron was born south of Perth and lived near the ocean with his parents and his younger brother. In his interview, he acknowledged that his parents were a major influence in his life. They were his "main support structure." He described how they encouraged him to listen, to question and to discuss what he was thinking. Often the context for this learning was Sunday Mass. His parents allowed him to choose whether or not he attended Sunday Mass with them. He appreciated the responsibility given to him and commented, "You have to do your own thing an' take your own path." Cameron spoke about God as "a greater force" who "can comfort us" and who always listened to those who called on him.

Cecil

Cecil and his younger sister live with their mother in one of Perth's hills suburbs. His parents separated when he was young. He reported that still sees his father "on various weekends," but did not think he was a strong

influence in his life. On the other hand, his mother influenced his religious development. She taught him to "light a candle at Mass" and pray for people in need, such as his Nan when she was ill. Cecil spoke about the influence of his girlfriend, Anita, who led him back to regular Mass attendance in his parish. He also attributed his renewed interest in his faith to the experience of listening to some of his peers give witness to their faith on his Year 12 Retreat earlier in the year of the interview. Cecil said he believed that God "sits up there and watches over us." God listened to him and answered his prayers, even if indirectly.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth was born in Perth and raised in one of Perth's hills suburbs. Her father was the pastor of the local Lutheran church and she was an active member of her parish. She spoke proudly of her participation in the children's liturgy programme and her leadership role in the Lutheran Church in Western Australia. Elizabeth reported that her parents chose to send her to the Catholic school she attended because it had a reputation for being a school with a strongly Christian and ecumenical focus. She spoke about the influence of her parents on her life and drew a clear distinction between the nurturing role of her mother and her father's contribution to her religious development. Elizabeth described God as being like a Father who held her in his hand. God guided her and challenged her to be a forgiving person, an understanding of God that she had begun to struggle with.

Emily

Unlike the other students who participated in this project, including those from her school in the hills outside of Perth, Emily said she believed that God "doesn't exist." She acknowledged that when she was little she probably believed that God existed, but she had reached the position of rejecting the value of God in her worldview. She stated, "I just haven't seen anything in my life that makes me believe in a God or anything, so I've given up." Emily explained that her rejection of belief in God was a sign of her stubborn nature, something she inherited from her father. She admitted that religious belief and practice was not part of her family life. Her final year at school was in contrast to her time in Italy at the end of Year Eleven. It symbolised for her the purpose of living, which was to have fun.

Frank

At the time of the interview, Frank lived with his parents and some of his siblings in one of Perth's eastern suburbs. He said he was the youngest of five children. Frank described his relationship with his parents as positive. He said that his mother had a strong faith and this encouraged him to seek a similar relationship with God. He described her as his "foundation, the centre part" of his faith. On the other hand, his father was less "churchy", but admired by him nonetheless. Frank described his faith in God in terms of being helped by God whose presence was "more of a feeling of him being there than actually seeing him." He had been given the responsibility to choose whether or not he attended Mass with his parents. Even when he did not go, he said he listened to what they had to say about the Mass and the priest's homily.

Glynna

Glynna was a Year Twelve student from a Catholic College in the southern suburbs of Perth. She was an only child and she lived at home with her parents. For as long as she could remember, religion had played a significant role in her life. When she was a child, Glynna believed that God "created the universe in seven days." By the time she entered Year Twelve, she was trying to reconcile her former beliefs with evolution. Glynna stated that her mother "had a big impact" on her faith. She enjoyed sitting in her mother's prayer room because it helped her to relax. Her father was not a Catholic. She called him an atheist but acknowledged that he challenged her intellectually, something that she enjoyed.

Gunter

Gunter lived with his parents and his younger brother on a farm on the outskirts of Perth. He travelled about thirty kilometres to school, a journey he had made since he was in Year 8. Gunter said that he had always believed in God and accepted what the Church taught about God, namely that God was "the creator of everything." He saw no reason why he should change his views. He credited his parents with the drive to have him educated in the Catholic faith. They made sure he was prepared for the sacraments and they took him to Church.

Kevin

Kevin, the eldest of four children, lived with his parents and siblings in one of the suburbs adjacent to Perth. His parents were members of a Catholic

covenant community and they encouraged their children to be involved in the community. The family attended youth nights. The children went on camps organised by members of the community and participated in their liturgies. Kevin enjoyed the support of his parents in all that he undertook. He described them as his teachers. Believing that God was a "supreme being" who was "powerful" and "amazing", Kevin was convinced that God had called him to be his servant and to please God by keeping the commandments, by joining the Disciples of Jesus Covenant community, by listening to God and by accepting suffering as part of God's plan for him.

Luke

Luke attended a Catholic co-educational college in the southern suburbs of Perth. His family was strongly Catholic and traditional in the expression of their faith. His parents had a "big influence" on his religious development. He described them as being supportive of his efforts to deepen his understanding of his Catholic faith. Luke went to Sunday Mass regularly with his family. A talented musician, he played in a number of music groups in different parishes. He claimed that this brought him closer to God. Luke was also a member of his parish youth group and expressed his appreciation for the efforts of the assistant parish priest whom he credited with teaching him how to pray.

Mikaela

At the time of her first interview, Mikaela was in Year Twelve at a Catholic College north of Perth and preparing to graduate from the school she

had attended for five years. She was living at home with her mother and younger sister. Her parents had separated and divorced when she was in lower secondary school and she found it difficult to cope with two places to call home. The interviews and her journal revealed that her parents' influence on her was strong but considered by her to be largely negative. Although she was not a Catholic, Mikaela revealed her desire to be received into the Church. She acknowledged the influence of her school and her best friend and she commenced instruction in the faith with the help of the local parish priest.

Morgan

Morgan lived at home with her parents and her younger sister. Her father was often away because of his work. Her parents portrayed contrasting attitudes towards religion. Her mother taught by word and example the importance of having a relationship with God. Morgan recognised that going to Mass was important to her mother who forced her husband to go and her children, too. She reported that her mother taught, "You have to go to Church or God won't love you." Morgan believed in God and described God as "the creator of the universe". "He's a sort of spirit who's always there." She described a growing realisation of the presence of a transcendent being: "He's always there to help. He's always – always there to listen."

Sophie

At the time she was interviewed, Sophie lived with her parents and her younger sister in a suburb close to the city. She was brought up in the

Catholic Church and her mother taught her about the value of strong faith. Sophie described her mother as her "best friend" and was inspired by her mother's strong faith to try to remain faithful to God. She explained in her interview that her father "doesn't really the into whole religion thing," however, she acknowledged her debt to him. He taught her to respect other people's opinions. Sophie spoke confidently about her faith in God. She claimed, "I sort of construct the idea that if you believe in God, you shouldn't question." Sophie believed that God was present in her life and she described her relationship with God with words like "strong" and "respect."

Stephen

Stephen's parents separated and divorced when he was very young. He moved from the country to a beach suburb north of Perth and he lived there with his mother and younger brother. Stephen admired his mother and he described her as a "really, really good person". She was his "best mate." His relationship with his father was built on common interests and respect. Whenever he stayed with his father, he was encouraged to go to Mass. He reported that his religious development underwent a dramatic change when he had to come to terms with a surfing accident suffered by one of his cousins. His "soul searching" led him to accept that God did not control such things but did give people the strength to face adversity.

Data Analysis

The method of analysis used in phenomenological research varies according to the focus of the research; however, no single method will suffice

for all enquiries. There are commonalities that lead to a general approach. Giorgi (1975) described a seven-step method of analysis, which Giorgi & Giorgi (2008) modified to form a four-step method that aimed to reveal the meaning of the lived experience of a phenomenon. Both methods identified essential themes embedded in the experience. Other researchers, including Schweitzer (1998) and Holroyd (2001) adapted Giorgi's method. Van Manen (1990) suggested a three-step analysis that moved from global statements to precise meaning derived from consideration given to individual words. Munhall (2000) and Polit & Beck (2008) summarised phenomenological analysis as "bracketing, intuiting, analyzing and describing". Interpretative studies, such as those conducted using IPA, do not make use of bracketing. Storey (2008) described a four-step process for IPA that involved the careful reading and re-reading of transcripts, the identification of themes, the grouping of themes into clusters and the tabling of meta-themes illustrated with quotations from the transcripts (p. 52f).

The method of data analysis used in this study was based on Storey's outline of the method recommended for the use of IPA. The method was modified to make use of qualitative data analysis software. In the outline of the method of analysis below, the following were considered: the use of qualitative data analysis software, how the transcripts were read, the coding of the transcripts, the use of memos, how the themes were derived, and how the findings were reported.

In the present study, the goal of the data analysis was to extract from students' accounts of their relationship with God, signs of the imagination at

work in their conversion to a more religious way of living. The first step, which is common to all forms of data analysis in phenomenological research, was an iterative process: the transcripts of interviews and journals were read and re-read in order to gain an understanding of and appreciation for the richness of the experience of each participant's relationship with God. Second, through a process of categorising statements in the transcripts, themes were derived which were grouped or clustered into major themes that reflected the presence of statements identifying experiences of relating with God and conclusions were drawn about religious conversion and about the role of the imagination in these experiences.

Using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)

To carry out a rigorous data analysis of thirty documents seemed a daunting task. The decision was taken to make use of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) to assist with the data analysis, a simple, but powerful, software programme was used. The observations of Coffey, Holbrook & Atkinson (1996) were borne in mind from the outset. In their review of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis in ethnographic studies, they raised four important issues. First, the use of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) made it possible for the researcher to assign code words to pieces of data, which could be retrieved easily when required. Second, it was foolish to think that QDAS was different from manual methods of coding data. In fact, QDAS was developed from manual techniques that were used prior to the advent of computer technology and continue to be used. Third, there was no conceptual difference between QDAS and manual techniques of marking

documents with code words, or using ways of highlighting pieces of data on a page of text. Fourth, the major benefit of QDAS lay in the ease of access to coded data. Most QDAS programmes provided sophisticated search facilities within the database holding the information about the coded documents.

Attention was paid to the observations made by Thompson (2002), who reviewed the use of QDAS in phenomenography, a qualitative research approach related to, but distinct from, phenomenology. He highlighted the failure of some qualitative researchers to be transparent about their use of QDAS. He quoted from Hasselgren (1993) who stated that in most cases researchers "quite simply establish that they transcribe their interviews, read and re-read these thoroughly and then state that in this process categories of description, and so also the conceptions, simply 'emerge'" (Thompson, 2002, para. 17).

In this study, a qualitative data analysis software programme known as Weft QDA was used. It was developed by English social researcher Alex Fenton and made available in 2006 on the Internet as public domain software. Weft QDA uses SQLite, an open-source file-based relational database system, to store data that can be sorted, extracted and exported through a user-friendly graphical interface. Text searches (words and phrases), queries about the occurrence of relationships between categories, and reviews of coding are features of Weft QDA that were used in the data analysis carried out in this study. There was a fusion of the old and new in the methods employed in the study. In the search for relationships between categories that might yield insights into themes running through the accounts given by the

participants, reports were generated and exported as text files that were opened in Microsoft Word. The reports were analysed for evidence of organising principles, called "themes" and these were grouped in such a way as to provide a faithful interpretation of each participant's religious life.

Weft QDA facilitated the process of identifying themes and how they were related. Briefly, it was used in the following way. The transcripts were converted to text files (.rtf format) and loaded into the programme. Fundamental to the use of the software in data analysis are the "categories" that can be created to analyse transcripts. Fenton (2006) defined categories as "themes, ideas, coincidences and variables that you use to describe and inter-relate passages of text within documents" (p. 17).

Reading the transcripts

The transcripts were read during the transcription activity that formed part of the data collection process and as outlined by Storey (2007), they were read again and again in the initial phase of data analysis to increase familiarity with the content of each text. Even at this early stage, it was possible to identify common threads running through their accounts.

Prior to focusing on each participant, as in a case study, the transcripts were read again during the coding phase of the analysis. These readings tended not to focus on a careful reading of the whole transcript because Weft QDA had a "find" facility that assisted in locating relevant passages expressing a common idea. At this stage of the analysis, the reading of the transcripts was more focused on the context and meaning of each passage

that had been found. For example, when the transcripts were read to locate passages identifying what the participants believed about God, references to "God as creator" were frequently made. The "find" facility was used to locate passages containing the word "creator," "created," or "creates. These passages were marked and their locations stored in the database under the heading "God as creator."

By far the most intense reading came with the interpretative phase of the analysis when major themes were derived and tested against the text for accuracy and relevance. The final reading of each transcript was done to ensure that the themes identified reflected faithfully the meanings ascribed by the participants to their experiences.

Coding the data

Essential to the analysis was the coding of the transcripts. Coding is a method of identifying significant statements, even if the significance is only a hunch and not yet able to be articulated. Fenton (2006) defined coding as "the process of reading text and selecting and marking passages as "about" a topic, and then later returning to review the marked text about that topic" (p. 33). The "marked" passages were given labels. The code labels came partly or completely from the text being read.

Fenton (2006) suggested that an initial source of codes could be found in the questions that formed the structure of each interview (p. 17). For example, in this study, the first question asked was "What do you believe about God?" and, therefore, the transcripts were coded to gather all the

passages directly related to "beliefs about God". Following his advice, and drawing on the interview schedule (Appendix 4), the following categories were created: beliefs about God, the Blessed Trinity, personal faith, prayer, significant people, significant events (Table 3). Each category was defined and the coding of each transcript was conducted according to the categories.

Table 3

The general categories and their definitions

Category	Definition
Beliefs about God	Statements which identify what the participants believe about God
The Blessed Trinity	Statements which identify the what the participants believe about the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity
Personal faith	Statements which identify the types of relationships that the participants have with God
Prayer	Statements made by the participants which identify the place of prayer in their lives
Significant people	Statements which identify who has influenced the participants to seek God or turn away from God
Significant events	Statements made by the participants which identify the events in their lives that have influenced them to seek God or turn away from God

IPA makes use of an "idiographic" approach to data analysis, that is, the focus is solely on one participant at a time (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Therefore, because the participants were grouped alphabetically according to their pseudonyms, the analysis began with the transcripts of interviews and the journal provided by Alexandra. Each transcript was read and coded according to the six categories tabled below. In phenomenology, categories are sometimes referred to as "natural meaning units" which Ratner (2001) described as "coherent and distinct meanings" (para. 4) that are found in the text of the transcript being analysed. Sometimes short statements were coded; mostly, however, there were chunks of data included. For example, coding the category "Beliefs about God" in Alexandra's second interview yielded the following: "I see God as "support." (line 50) In contrast to this, the following passage from her journal revealed the significance of her encounter with a guest speaker during a religious education class:

> A religion lesson, which changed my view of my faith, was when we had a guest speaker who was blind. My faith changed because he made me realize that life will always bring hard times and problems but you need to learn from those problems and see how you can get through the problem stronger. 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 57-63).

It became obvious in the course of coding the transcripts that the chunks of data contained related categories. Locating the categories required interpretation about what constituted a coherent and distinct meaning. These

categories were identified and called "sub-categories." For instance, passages coded for the category called "Blessed Trinity" included participants' responses to the question "Is Jesus different from God?" The responses from participants were coded both for "Blessed Trinity" and for a sub-category called "Jesus".

One of the powerful graphical features of Weft QDA is the construction of tree-like structures to show the relationship between categories. As the data analysis progressed, new categories were added and some were moved around the "tree" to reflect the growth in understanding of the participants' experiences of their religious lives (Figure 2). The tree that was developed for the data analysis of Alexandra's transcripts was used to carry out the coding and analysis of all the transcripts. Other sub-categories were added as needed.
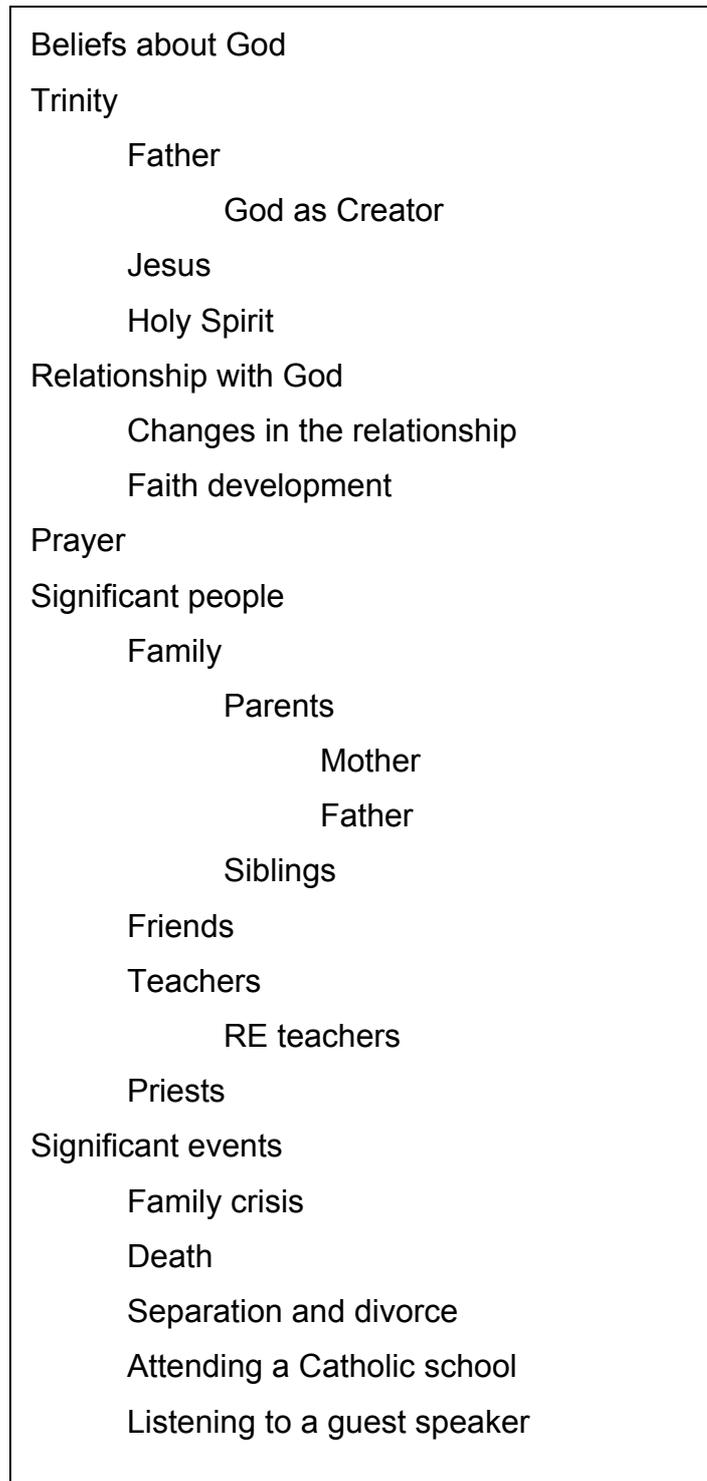
Using memos

In their accounts of data analysis methods employed in IPA, Smith and Eatough (2007) and also Storey (2007) made reference to the practice of "memoing" or note making. They explained that in their research projects, they used the left hand margin of their copies of the transcript to make notes about personal feelings and reactions evoked by the account they were reading as well as about significant elements of the transcript. The right hand margin was used for noting themes.

In this study, as each transcript was read and re-read, notes were recorded using the "memo" facility that is part of Weft QDA. Early in the data

analysis, the notes were very general. For instance, the following memos were recorded when coding documents for the category "Beliefs about God":

Figure 2

Category coding tree

Beliefs about God
Trinity
      Father
          God as Creator
      Jesus
      Holy Spirit
Relationship with God
      Changes in the relationship
      Faith development
Prayer
Significant people
      Family
          Parents
              Mother
              Father
          Siblings
      Friends
      Teachers
          RE teachers
      Priests
Significant events
      Family crisis
      Death
      Separation and divorce
      Attending a Catholic school
      Listening to a guest speaker

This category seems to be present in a number of places throughout the interviews. So far, the notion of God being transcendent is very strong. However, it is not a vengeful God, or an abusive God who is described, but one who is forgiving, gentle, caring and, as Frank says, "affectionate".

I have just been through Mikaela's journal again and marked more passages. Some relate to the category of "relationship with God" but they also carry ideas about what she believes about God as well.

These memos acknowledged the presence of categories other than the one being coded at the time the memo was entered. This was an important feature of the early note-making activity. The newly discovered categories were added to the list as sub-categories attached to the category that was being coded and the transcripts were later coded again using the new categories. Fenton (2006) referred to this aspect of data analysis as "coding on" (p. 20).

Detailed memos were reserved for comments made about individual passages. Whenever a category name was selected in Weft QDA, a window opened displaying all the passages coded for that category. For instance, at one point in the data analysis carried out in this study, when the category "Beliefs about God" was selected, a window opened and it was possible to scroll through 181 passages taken from 30 transcripts. The passages were listed alphabetically according to the names of the participants and progressively through each transcript. Each passage was given a numerical tag to indicate its location in the transcript. By double clicking on a passage in

this window, another window opened to display the transcript at the location of the quote being analysed.

To make the best use of the memo facility in the programme, the passages from the transcript that was being analysed were selected and copied into the memo window. Then each passage was analysed and a memo typed directly below the passage. The memos became increasingly important in the iterative process employed in the data analysis. They exhibited a mix of operational, intuitive and speculative comments. The comments became wide-ranging. They brought together aspects of the study, including references to conversion, the role of the imagination and strategies used by religious education teachers. There were theological comments and references to the ideas of Kant, Fowler and others whose works were reviewed in the previous chapter. It was recognised that the memos would be a valuable resource in the construction of the remainder of the thesis document. This process was repeated until no further categories could be created. In other words, it was clear that data saturation had been reached. This is why Smith & Eatough (2007) call IPA a "double hermeneutic." In this way, a highly detailed picture of each participant's account of their religious life was derived from the transcripts analysed.

Identifying major themes

In this study, insights into QDAS provided by Thompson (2002) who reviewed literature about phenomenography, a research approach related to but distinct from phenomenology, proved to be useful. His distinction between mechanical and conceptual parts of data analysis was used to guide the

process used in this study. The task of marking text was largely mechanical, however, the identification of themes, which is a conceptual activity, was much more difficult and required interpretation at a deeper level than that used in coding the transcripts. Concerning the conceptual part of data analysis, Smith & Osborn (2008) stated:

Once each transcript has been analysed by the interpretative process, a final table of superordinate themes is constructed. Deciding which themes to focus upon requires the analyst to prioritise the data and begin to reduce them, which is challenging. The themes are not selected purely on the basis of their prevalence within the data. Other factors, including the richness of the particular passages that highlight the themes and how the theme helps illuminate other aspects of the account, are also taken into account (p. 75).

With the focus solely on one participant, the analysis proceeded by viewing the Memo window of each element of the category tree and noting below each passage the themes evident in the passage. For instance, in the Memo window for the category "Significant events: Listening to a guest speaker" the following passage from Alexandra's journal was recorded and below it the themes were typed:

Alexandra's Journal [3464-3960]

A religion lesson which changed my view of my faith was when we had a guest speaker who was blind. My faith changed because he made me realize that life will always bring hard times and problems but you need to learn from those problems and see how you can get through the problem stronger. 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.

- Learn from problems.

- Always look on the brighter side of problems.

- Problems are lessons that make and shape you as a person.

These steps were followed with every passage coded for each category. Some passages had more than one theme associated with them. The data accessed through the Memo window was selected and then copied and pasted to a Microsoft Word file. This was done to simplify the process of moving around the thematic statements to form major themes. The document was printed and then read and re-read, one category at a time, to discover the connecting threads within the set of passages that would reveal the major theme(s) embedded in the accounts given by the participant of her religious life. The lists of themes attached to the passages assisted in this step because they presented a summary of the contents of the passages. Once the themes were recognised and named, they were used to analyse the sets of coded passages taken from the transcripts of the other participants.

Smith & Eatough (2007) stated that in IPA the findings of research are reported initially in a tabular format. Because IPA is idiographic, even though the focus initially is on one participant, the detailed analysis and reporting on that one case must be extended to every participant equally. The researcher "should … endeavour to convey some of the details of the individual experience of those participants" (p. 48). This characteristic of IPA has impacted on reporting on the findings of the research.

The passages representing the six categories in Alexandra's transcripts were analysed and themes were identified and listed below each passage. These themes were then sorted and grouped like with like to reveal three major themes, each with subordinate or minor themes. The major themes were named as follows:

1. A changing relationship with God. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to changes in participants' perceptions of their relationship with God and how the relationship changed.

2. Significant influences. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to the support provided by parents, family, friends, youth groups, church, schools and teachers.

3. Owning faith in God. This theme incorporated the minor themes that related to participants' efforts to develop their relationship with God in the light of changes in their lives.

Limitations of the study

Every inquiry is limited by the human condition, that is, by such factors as intelligence, awareness, knowledge, gender, culture, communication skills and motivation. The present study was undertaken with the knowledge that the research process, including the outcomes, would be limited by the researcher's level of awareness and understanding of the subject matter and of the research process. Recall that in chapter 1 it was stated that the desire to understand the role played by the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents motivated the researcher. The decision was taken to use a qualitative research approach to allow the data to emerge because the

researcher believes that knowledge is the outcome of reflection. Recall that it was stated in chapter 2 that the researcher was attracted to the "discovery" orientation of the qualitative research paradigm which allowed time for the reflection to happen and for adjustments to be made. For instance, the discovery of IPA came only after an unsuccessful attempt to use phenomenography in the data analysis phase of the study. Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that focuses on the qualitative differences in people's understanding of concepts or constructs (Marton, 1988). The researcher had used the approach in a study of religious education teachers' personal constructs of revelation (Branson, 1998). The iterative character of both approaches led to recognition of the importance of each participant's story. IPA, with its idiographic orientation, was better suited to discovering the role played by the imagination in the faith development and conversion of the participants in the present study. The differences between the participants' understanding of God and their religious experiences were no longer relevant to the purpose of the study.

The account of the shift from phenomenography to IPA was given to illustrate the importance of the dialectic nature of research: the limitations of the research approach are held in tension by the strengths that co-exist with the limitations. For instance, qualitative approaches such as IPA are time poor, that is, data collection and analysis take a long time to carry out; however, they are also time rich, that is, they allow for the development of lines of thought, the gaining of insights, and the development of understanding and knowledge. The interpretative nature of IPA called for the use of knowledge from various fields of study that impact on the classroom,

such as philosophy, theology and cognitive psychology. The interpretation of the accounts given by the participants made use of the Catholic Church's teaching about evangelisation, Kant's (2007/1781) understanding of the imagination, Rambo's (1993) description of the process of conversion, the structural-developmental theories of Piaget (1950) and Fowler (1981), and Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory. The discovery orientation of qualitative research and its emphasis on process rather than outcome allowed for the development of the researcher's understanding of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents.

Is such a generalisation as that just made warranted given that qualitative research approaches are limited in what they can claim by their small sample size? Is it possible to make generalisations about the role of the imagination based on a study of the accounts of their faith given by 15 participants? The issue of the size of the sample was dealt with elsewhere in this chapter and its justification stated in terms of the purpose of the study. Smith & Eatough (2007) presented a case for making generalisations based on small samples in studies using IPA. They stated "delving deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal" (p. 39). This was found to be true of the present study. The outcomes of the present study were modest, in keeping with qualitative research, even if, at times, they were stated confidently. The confidence came from the recognition of the richness of the data and from knowledge gained from reviewing the literature related to aspects of the present study. For example, despite the small size of the sample, the significant role of Christian youth groups in the religious conversion of adolescents was highlighted. This conclusion was supported by

statements made by Pope John Paul II (1991) and the research into the importance of sponsorship in faith development and conversion by Fowler (1981), Leavey et al. (1992) and Rambo (1993).

The sampling procedure provided its own set of limitations. The researcher had very little control over which Year 12 students were addressed in the schools that were visited. Recall that it was stated above that in one school, the religious education coordinator was given the task of finding participants. In other schools, the principal found teachers of Year 12 religious education who were prepared to allow the researcher to speak with their classes. Despite these limitations, there were 15 students who agreed to participate. Although the study drew its respondents from Catholic secondary schools, there was no attempt to make sure that all respondents were Catholic. Given the relatively small size of the sample, religious traditions other than the Catholic tradition were not represented intentionally. It was not the purpose of the study to draw conclusions about the religious affiliation of students. Rather, it was intended that within the boundaries of religious development, it could be shown that the imagination plays a significant role in the religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools. The study made no claims about students attending non-Catholic schools. The researcher addressed groups of Year 12 students in a number of schools and accepted as participants those who volunteered to be interviewed. While such an approach places some strictures on the research, the richness of the data gathered from the 15 participants more than compensated for the lack of response from most of the students who were addressed.

Adolescents are no different from any other group in society when it comes to commitment to seeing tasks through to their completion. While some of the participants completed the three parts asked of them (being interviewed twice and writing a journal), others baulked at the journal writing and yet others were not prepared to be involved beyond the first interview. Recall that it was reported earlier in the chapter that two participants chose to be interviewed a third time rather than write a journal. One participant lost interest in the journal and never submitted it to the researcher. Another wrote part of the journal and eventually submitted it incomplete. A third participant completed the journal and then lost it. Frantic phone calls to Australia Post produced no results. Eventually, some months later, it turned up on the back ledge of a car the participant had been travelling in while visiting a friend in the north of Western Australia. Yet, despite the limitations of the data collection method, the sincerity of the participants was obvious in their commitment to telling their stories when they were interviewed. Those who engaged in the journal writing activity also provided data that was invaluable in constructing the images of adolescent faith that revealed how the imagination assisted faith development and religious conversion.

Summary

In this chapter, details concerning the sample sought for the study as well as vignettes of the participants were provided. The methodology used in the study was laid out and the elements used in the analysis of the data were explained. Consideration was given to the matters relating to the limitations of the study. In chapter 4, the findings of the research will be provided in a form

consistent with IPA: a narrative account of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents will be delivered. It will draw on the transcripts for examples to illustrate the major themes that emerged from the data analysis. Subsequent chapters will provide a detailed analysis of the theoretical and practical considerations flowing from the findings of the study.