

Who is God for Us? Images of God in a Group of Catholic Women in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract: Our understandings of God change and grow with us as we move through life. This study of a group of New Zealand Catholic women finds that childhood God images were shaped more by who our parents were to us than the catechism we memorised. By middle adulthood our images of God reflect not only some lasting childhood images but the experiences of friendship, role modelling, groups we belong to, study, parenting, solitude, nature and the pain of suffering. Our adulthood God images, especially in terms of gender and power, are also linked with 1980s suffering, and how we envision church.

OUR UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD are deeply entwined with who we are as individuals and communities. Who God is for us affects how we think, what we value, the faces we present to the world and the persons we strive to be. In Elizabeth Johnson's words: "The symbol of God functions as...the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world."¹

At least since 1968, when Mary Daly questioned prevailing "conceptualizations, images and attitudes concerning God",² feminist theologians, in particular, have challenged traditional God images including a God who is addressed as male, one who exercises controlling power and the impassible God. In short, they reasoned – from their own experience and reflection as well as often from pastoral experience – that such traditional images of God shaped psyches and behaviours of both men and women, causing women to be dependent and have lower

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 4.

2. Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 180.

self esteem, and causing all to accept patriarchy in society and be less capable of acting in the world on behalf of justice.³

Parallel (and at first, largely unconnected) to the theological critique, psychologists studied the formation and development of God images, and sociologists studied patterns of God image change over time, attempting to discover empirically and historically whether relationships could be found between human values and behaviour on one hand, and God images on the other. In 2000, psychologist of religion, Joseph Ciarrocchi, criticised theologians for not citing relevant empirical literature and for making "incautious statements about matters that are empirical questions".⁴ The present article is an effort to document God imagery over the lifespans of a number of women in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand Catholicism, addressing questions of God image formation and development with the help of social science methods.

STUDY METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Based on feminist theological methodology, the study employed social science methods in inviting and interviewing women; recording, transcribing and requesting confirmation of their stories; and analysis and presentation of data. These steps were carried out with aims to be emancipatory (identifying God images which were freeing and life-giving for women), rooted in women's experience, subjective and participative, confirmable (findings trackable to participant words to address possible researcher bias), interdisciplinary and concerned with seeking truth.

Eleven women were interviewed for a total of six to eight hours, usually in three interviews and mostly over a period of eighteen months. All women were practising Catholics at the time of their interviews: three of these were received into the church as adults. All had lived in New Zealand for at least thirty years, two having been born in Europe and one in Australia. All were ethnically European, all were or had been married, all had children, and all were born in the 1940s to early 1950s. All lived in major cities, although many had grown up in rural areas. All were economically middle class and had post-

3. Articulation of the traditional God image critique is widespread. Ground-breaking works, in addition to the works of Daly and Johnson previously mentioned, include Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

4. Joseph W. Ciarrocchi, "Psychology and Theology Need Each Other", *National Catholic Reporter* 36 (2000) 19.

secondary education, a slightly higher level than the average New Zealand women of their age group. The women were chosen in order of response to a request for volunteers given to a pool of women who had previously been trained to coordinate Christian Family Life Education (training in spirituality and sexuality), a programme administered by the National Centre for Religious Studies. The particular pool was chosen, in part, because it was perceived to be theologically mainline, that is, not identified as liberal or conservative, feminist or non-feminist.

The results of an in-depth study with a small number of participants allows an opportunity to understand the meaning of each woman's God images within her context. It does not allow the results to be generalised to all Catholic women in New Zealand. It does, however, offer an important opportunity to learn about God image formation and change throughout life, to identify common influences on God images and to name common and differing images, both within this group of women, and on a comparative basis with women in other studies from other contexts.

CHILDHOOD GOD IMAGES

Women's retrospectively identified God images included the stereotypical ancient man with a flowing white beard seated on a throne of cloud. "He" was reported to be kind and good, but in many cases, also stern and demanding, remote yet able to see all, threatening and punishing – all at the same time. This God was an awesome God who seemed to require constant adoration, rosaries, benedictions, masses and perpetual guilt in return for fixing everyday worries and, of course, redeeming us from our sins (which were many and grievous). God was a heavenly creator and judge, whose distance and inapproachability to young girls was usually bridged by belief in Jesus the gentle shepherd (for those who grew up Protestant) or Mary the kind mother and the saints (for those who grew up Catholic).

When asked how they came to have these understandings of God, the women related memories of murals depicting the Last Judgement (including a Trinity of two men and a bird); sermons on heaven and hell from Sundays and parish missions; primary school catechism; spiritual bouquets; songs; statues; pictures in children's bible storybooks; holy cards given as school prizes; and prohibitions against touching sacred objects – and, of course, against touching or chewing the communion host. There were dire warnings about the necessity of purity, which sometimes caused severe scruples: "You might think the word 'bosoms' and that might be terrible. This seems to be something the nuns thought a lot about – impurity – but they never defined what it was, so people

imagined it was all sorts of things." A night prayer was recited from memory: "I must die – I know not how nor when nor where – but if I die in mortal sin I am lost forever"; and there was even a clock whose pendulum read "always damned and never saved".

While these teachings and experiences (referred to later as "taught" images) undoubtedly shaped youthful understandings of God, by far the most profound and lasting formators of God images were the parents and caregivers of the women. Most women could not remember much about what or how their parents taught them about God, but one thing was very clear: childhood God images closely matched descriptions of parental traits and behaviours, especially negative ones. Parents who were demanding, judging, punishing or threatening unwittingly produced that kind of God image in their children, often even when parents were also described as loving and kind. Women who reported mostly positive traits in the caregivers they spent the most time with were most likely to remember understanding God as loving, caring and a friend.

Who our parents and caregivers are to us seems to be taken in and imprinted as our internal picture of God. This positive, negative or mixed God-picture (referred to later as "caught" images) can be reinforced by various means of teaching (oral, art, written) in school, church or home, but the initial parental imprint (and occasionally that of others such as grandparents, aunts, teachers) is one we usually adhere to into adolescence, early adulthood, and sometimes even middle adulthood as our God images evolve and grow with us.

ADOLESCENCE

As the women grew from childhood through adolescence, their worlds opened out to include an increasing number and variety of friends, teachers and other role models. New feelings and experiences caused most of them to begin to question the values passed on from parents and the institutions which shaped them as children. Nonetheless, the less conscious imprint of God images seems to have been left mostly intact during this stage of life.

Two significant occurrences were noted, particularly in adolescence, in most of this group of women. The first is that, consciously or unconsciously, the women declared a moratorium on God. As one woman put it: "Forget God here for a while!" There was not so much unbelief as a suspension of interest in thinking about God and a release from the religious concerns that, for many, had dominated their early years. God was not as evident or relevant in the world they were

exploring, so was put on hold to be returned to at an unknown future time.

The second item of note is that it was during this time that struggles with self esteem surfaced for most of the women (although the roots of the struggles were often in childhood). Only one of the eleven women showed no signs of anxiety over self esteem. For many of the women, self image issues extended into adulthood, and were linked with the God images women articulated in middle adulthood (discussed further in "God Image and Self Image" below).

EARLY ADULTHOOD

In their twenties and thirties, the study participants were finishing study, working, marrying and raising children. They also began new affiliations with groups and organisations (including negotiating new levels of affiliation with their families of origin and their churches). In their teenage years, most of the women had confined their relationships with God to Sunday church-going, but in early adulthood, more complex life situations caused them to actively seek out closer relationships with God. In the wake of Vatican II, they found openness and encouragement from the church which was, for many, a catalyst to their own reflection and growth.

The new life experiences that adulthood brought – including those in the above paragraph, as well as friendships, deaths of parents, serious illness, loss of babies, and volunteer work – led, for many, to altered perceptions of who and what God was. For those who had grown up with a God who was loving and caring, those perceptions deepened. A major shift in perception of God occurred, however, for the majority of women who had had negative or mixed images of God as children. In early adulthood, all but one woman began to understand that God was not necessarily the demanding and punishing God of their childhoods. Rather, God could be close, understanding, unconditionally loving, an all-encompassing presence, in people and relationships, and in suffering and grief. God began to be a much more positive presence. Psychological studies have demonstrated that increasingly benevolent God images – in a way similar to the ability to reflect on other relationships with new information – are associated with psychological maturity.⁵ Further, continual shaping and reshaping of God images is to be

5. Todd W. Hall and Beth Fletcher Brokow, "The Relationship of Spiritual Maturity to Level of Object Relations Development and God Image", *Pastoral Psychology* 43 (1995) 373-91.

expected in response to new interactions and experiences throughout life.⁶

MIDDLE ADULTHOOD

Who was God for women in mid-life? By their forties and fifties, nearly all traces of any demanding distant childhood God were gone. God was now close and deeply involved with their lives. God was a painter of sunsets, creator of opportunity, eternal giver, compassionate friend, well of love, nurturer, birthgiver, paradox, sacrament, mystery, feminine presence and an ever-presence. God was in the midst of suffering, in those working for justice, in the ever-changing light over the sea, in stillness, in the feeling of being in a desert place with no signposts, and in the storm which stirs up the depths. God was indwelling in each person, continually unfolding, empowering toward freedom, vulnerable yet strong, expressed by love in action, and continually calling persons to growth.

What influenced the formation and growth of these images? Many new understandings of God were gleaned, as in childhood, from the observed values and behaviours of others, especially those referred to as close friends or soulmates, role models and mentors. Other significant influences were the challenge of new study, volunteer or paid work, the struggles and delights of growing children and grandchildren, the support of groups and communities, enjoyment of nature, appreciation of solitude, and – for many – an integration of feminist theology into their understandings of God, self and world.

A final important influence on God images, and one which also proved to be the principal catalyst to occasional periods of rapid image change in the lives of many of this group of women, was suffering (which this article will explore further below). All but one of the women had experienced deep suffering from the mental or physical illness of self or others; deaths of parents, children and close friends; loss of jobs; overseas or domestic moves; and relationship difficulties.

FORMATION AND CHANGE IN GOD IMAGES

While each woman's God images and understandings of images were unique, the growth, development and integration of God imagery from childhood through adulthood followed a similar pattern from simplicity

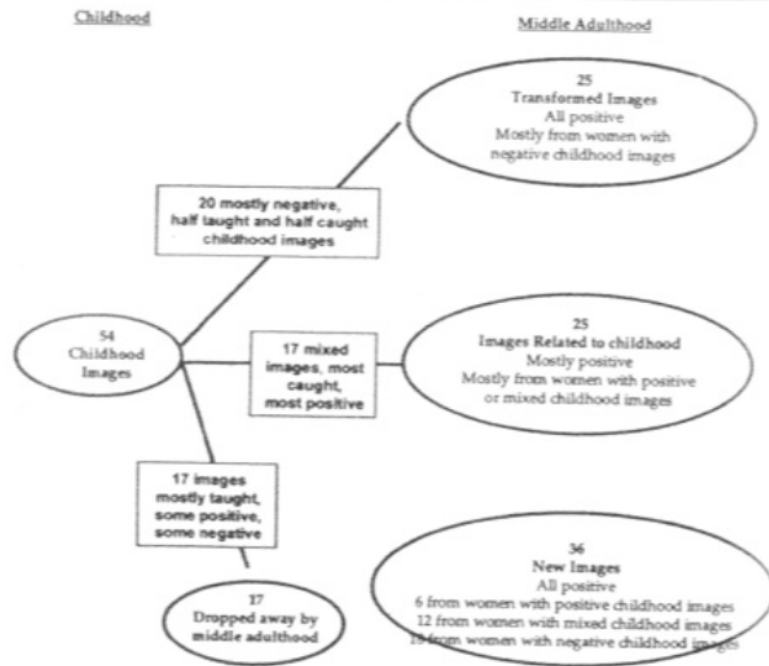
6. Martha A. Robbins, *Midlife Women and Death of Mother: A Study of Psychohistorical and Spiritual Transformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990) 74-75. See also Ana-Marie Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 46.

and discreteness to complexity, depth, breadth and integration. Figure 1 illustrates the overall pattern of God image development for the women in this study.

The eleven women collectively had fifty-four documented God images in their childhoods and eighty-six images by the time of their interviews in middle adulthood. Of the original fifty-four, twenty mostly negative images (fearful, demanding, distant, etc.) were transformed into twenty-five all positive images (justice, eternal giver, birthgiver, all encompassing presence, unfolding, etc.) by middle adulthood. Seventeen mostly positive images “caught” from parents and caregivers (loving, friend, help, etc) were carried far into adulthood, evolved and deepened in most cases, and these expanded to twenty-five images. The remaining seventeen childhood images (mostly “taught” ones like king, man with beard, etc.) completely dropped away. This development pattern demonstrated that the women’s understandings of God became increasingly more positive over time, that images “caught” from parents and other caregivers were long-lasting, and that images which were somehow “taught” but not part of the women’s reality did not last.

In addition to the fifty images either transformed from, or related to, childhood images, the women named thirty-six additional images which could not be traced to the images they articulated from their childhoods. Such images included paradox, painter of sunsets, mystery, rock, God within, Wisdom, peace, partner, enabling, and so on. These arose from study of the Scriptures, from reading in spirituality and theology, from the many experiences of life and – from a faith perspective – from the on-going self-revelation of God to each person.

Figure 1
 Summary of Image Change and Development: Childhood to Middle Adulthood



THE ROLE OF SUFFERING

Of the many influences on God image formation and change, suffering was one of the greatest. Confirming what Martha Robbins found in her research on women who had lost their mothers – “The underlying structures of meaning-making by which she knows, values and believes may undergo some profound shifting”⁷ – this study found that grief and suffering prompted women to reflect, and consequently they changed their understandings of God and themselves. Women with already positive images of God found that their images of God as comfort, friend, love, and God in relationship, were deepened and broadened. Women with negative and mixed images found their understandings of God changing in a positive way, usually gradually, as they persevered, as they read and reflected on their situations, as people supported them – and sometimes as people let them down.

7. Robbins, *Midlife Women and Death of Mother*, 36.

For one woman whose world fell apart after losing her first two babies, her expectations that the clergy of her parish and the religious in the hospital would help her were not met. In her disappointment and despair, she turned to God whom she found to be a presence alongside her and someone to talk to about her pain. The experience marked a turning point after which she continually “searched” God to make sense of what was happening in her life. From a childhood God who was remote and whose strings one could pull to get positive outcomes to life, her middle adulthood God images were of a God there beside her, one who created opportunity and was “giving birth all the time, to new and wondrous things, which [were] ideas...people [and] situations”.

THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING AND GOD’S POWER

Ascribing controlling power to God has been identified both by theological and psychological literature⁸ as potentially damaging to human initiative for challenging injustice, and so it was important to explore women’s understandings of God’s power. The way in which women described God’s role in their experiences of suffering unexpectedly helped to reveal their understandings of God’s power.

Some women understood God as present in the midst of suffering, in those who suffer and in those who worked to alleviate suffering. Many of them said in some way that God was capable of suffering, challenging the traditional understanding of the impassible, immutable and invulnerable God. As Maryanne Confoy notes: “Women, reacting to such remote images of God, are particularly concerned to reclaim the affective qualities of God’s relationship with creation and bonding with humankind.”⁹ Most of these women had been involved in social justice issues and were immersed in paid or unpaid work with people who were suffering. They had come to understand God’s power as an enabling empowerment alongside them rather than an almighty power over them. Their understandings of God’s power were those, which theologians reasoned, would encourage action toward justice.¹⁰

8. See, for example, Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 17; JoAnn Wolski Conn, *Spirituality and Personal Maturity* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989) 6-7; and Dorothy Sölle, “Mysticism, Liberation and the Names of God: A Feminist Reflection”, *Christianity in Crisis* 41 (1981) 179-85, see esp. 182.

9. Maryanne Confoy, “Women and the Meaning of Suffering”, *Pacifica* 13 (2000) 249-66, see esp. 259.

10. See Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990) 164; Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988) 148-49; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 243, 270.

Other women, while not saying that God *caused* suffering, nonetheless attributed responsibility in some way to God for having control over the suffering in life: suffering is something God expects of us, it is something given at God's discretion, God never gives us more than we can cope with, and suffering is a part of God's plan. Some of these understandings of suffering have echoes of atonement theology, which can support a culture of victimisation and abuse, and/or lead to a "mystique" of suffering.¹¹ The women who understood God and suffering in this way did not mention involvements in social justice, and had a tendency to refer to God as parent or judge. In terms of where power and responsibility lay for themselves and the world, their lives as well as their theologies pointed more toward God than themselves.

CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF POWER IN GOD IMAGES

Overall there were notable shifts over time in the gender and power terms which the women used in speaking about God. As children, all of the women were taught images like Lord, master, almighty God, judge and king. Although they were exposed to such images in school, church and home, the images became deeply ingrained only in those whose parents acted them out in their parenting practices. By middle adulthood, as noted above, most women had adopted empowering images rather than images connoting the exercise of power. Parental influences often took years to overcome, and a number of women who had one or two authoritarian parent(s) still found themselves referring to God as Lord and master. One felt that God was "calling her to order" as if God were the judging parent she grew up with. For most women, these were images they were consciously trying to leave behind.

The image of Lord, however, proved to be different. Four of the eleven women, while stating that God did not exercise controlling power, consciously used the image Lord even while acknowledging that the definition of the word implied power and control. Two of the women explained that Lord was important for them not because of its meaning, but because it *sounded* or *felt* right. There may genuinely be a personality factor at work, because language *is* understood and appreciated differently by different personality types. But because these are some of the same women who have residual controlling elements in

11. Marie Fortune, "The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective", in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (eds.), *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1989) 139-47; Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World?", in Brown and Bohn (eds.), *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, 1-30, see esp. 9; and Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985) 373.

their God images, it may also be that the very language the women are using because it is familiar is continuing unconsciously to shape their reality.¹²

CHANGING UNDERSTANDINGS OF GENDER IN GOD IMAGES

All of the women understood God to be like a man when they were children and adolescents. By middle adulthood most women thought of God as having no gender or as inclusive of both genders, and had consciously made changes in the ways they spoke about God to reflect their understandings. They preferred gender neutral language like rock, friend, and love – and gender balanced language like he and she, mother and father, and so on. Only one woman expressed a clear preference for male imagery, and six of the eleven women felt that female imagery was vitally important for themselves, women in general and/or the church as a whole. It appears that reading feminist theology, working or praying with women's groups and working in a largely female environment – all of which may sharpen awareness of gender language issues – may be conducive to, though not sole determinants of, the use of inclusive God language and imagery. Women who made changes did so because they felt that seeing God in a broader way with respect to gender enabled them to know God more fully and because thinking about God in gender balanced, gender neutral or feminine language enabled them to better see themselves as reflecting the divine image. Their experience in adopting new images of God confirms the reasoning of object relations psychologist John McDargh, that for changes in God imagery to be internalised, alternative imagery must engage both the conscious and unconscious, and be validated by experience.¹³

GOD IMAGE AND SELF IMAGE

When gender and power attributions to God were compared with women's self images and with a number of aspects of their life experience, a clear pattern emerged. Women with stronger self images were less likely to use male God language and more likely to use gender

12. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Models of God: Exploring the Foundations", *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 (1988) 19-23, see esp. 21; Neil Darragh, "Imagine God", *Compass Theology Review* 25 (1991) 12-24, see esp. 18; Elaine Wainwright, "What's in a Name? The Word which Binds/ the Word which Frees", in Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A. Lee and Joan Nowotny (eds.), *Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology* (North Blackburn: Harper Collins, 1995) 100-119, see esp. 102; and Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 126.

13. John McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religions: On Faith and the Imaging of God* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1963) 115.

balanced and female God language. They were less likely to have controlling attributes in their God images or use parental images, and were more likely to understand God's power as empowering rather than as power to plan or act. The same women were more likely to have experienced acceptance from significant persons as children, and empowerment from a friend, husband or mentor as an adult. Whether or not a woman had had controlling God images or parents as a child did not prove to be a factor in adult self image or the gender and power attributes of adult God images (although it would be advantageous for a larger study to retest this).

Courage and initiative to act for the better in one's own life and for justice in the world were associated with stronger self images in the women in this study. The relationships among good self images, acceptance and empowerment, and gender balanced, feminine and empowering God images have wide implications. It is evident, from the women who thrived in the company of friends and mentors, that the more empowerment and acceptance given to women, the more likely they are to explore and grow in their God images, and to use God images which reflect transformation and empowerment rather than control or power over others. It is also true that at different points in their lives, the women in the study were introduced to God in language and images which were gender balanced, gender neutral and feminine, and that this was a factor in the growth of their self images, which in turn was associated with their courage to work for change in society. In these aspects, the intuitions of feminist and other theologians are vindicated – changing traditional gender and power images of God has the potential to transform lives and, ultimately, society. For some persons, however, changes in God imagery may require self-growth first, while for others the changes may happen simultaneously.

McDargh's axiom is important to keep in mind – that people will adopt a new God image only if they experience that God as true in their lives. The women in this study found God to be listening, compassionate, a friend, a birthgiver, a nurturer, in creation and much more, because their experiences of persons, events and nature reflected those images of God back to them. To encourage more loving, compassionate and empowering images of God, it falls to us to become more loving, compassionate and empowering people.

NEW ZEALAND WOMEN'S IMAGES AND IMAGES IN OTHER STUDIES

When the most common God images of the women in this study were compared with the most common images of God in the (broadly)

theological literature¹⁴ and studies in Australia and North America, both remarkable similarities and distinctive differences were found (see Table 1). Five of the ten most common images used by the women in this study were among those in the three other studies cited: God as liberator/power, friend, presence, healer/helper and creator. But there the similarities end.

Nature images of God were the most common images of the women in the present New Zealand study, as they were in the literature, unlike in American and Australian studies, which did not identify nature images as important at all. The second most common image for the New Zealand group was God as love, which, while mentioned briefly in the literature, was not a major image there or in other studies. That these two are central images for the New Zealand women (ten of eleven women used them, and for some God as love was their central God image) indicates that women have had opportunities to experience God in creation and in the context of loving relationships. Is New Zealand geography, demography, culture or lifestyle more conducive to these opportunities¹⁵ or is there another reason why (apart from the literature) only the New Zealand study identifies these images?

The other salient explanation for the non-identification of nature and love images in other studies is that the other studies were not open-ended, that is, participants were given lists of pre-chosen images and asked which ones they most identified with. One then needs to ask: "Why did the authors of the other studies not include such images in the pre-chosen lists, and might the images have been common in the contexts they studied?" It is surprising that nature images were not included, particularly in the study of American Christian feminist women, given that any reading of the literature would have shown their frequency, and since Miriam Therese Winter (one of the authors of that study) is herself a contributor of nature images to the literature. It is also somewhat surprising that God as love was not included, given the prevalence of the image in the Scriptures, especially in the Johannine tradition.

14. This literature review for God imagery included a number of works from about fifty theologians, spiritual writers, composers and social scientists. The theologians are mostly feminist – pastoral, systematic or biblical in their major interest. Writers include, for example, Ann Carr, Carol Christ, Neil Darragh, Bernadette Farrell, Elizabeth Johnson, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elaine Wainwright, Gail Ramshaw, Judith Plaskow, Kathleen Fischer, Margaret Schrader, Miriam Therese Winter, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Colleen Fulmer, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Bridget Mary Meehan, Douglas Meeks, Dorothy Sölle, Martha Robbins, Daniel Louw and Sallie McFague.

15. This would have to be tested with a standardised study across cultures and places.

Table 1
Most Often Chosen/Articulated God Images in Recent Studies¹⁶
 (in order of importance)

American Christians ¹⁷	American Christian Feminist Women ¹⁷	Literature Christian - Jewish, Female - Male, US - NZ - European	This Study - NZ Catholic Women	Australian Christians ¹⁷
creator	creator	nature	nature	almighty
healer	spirit	mother	love/people	power/presence
friend	wisdom	wisdom	liberator/power	friend
redeemer	healer	healer/helper	friend	helper
father	presence	friend	presence	creator
master	mystery	love/compassion	healer/helper	
king	friend	spirit	creator	
judge	liberator	presence	suffering	
lover	help	creator	compassion	
liberator	emerging connection	liberator	indwelling	

Three other God images among the ten most common for the New Zealand women – suffering, compassion and indwelling – did not appear among the ten most common in the other studies, and of these, only compassion was mentioned with the same degree of magnitude in the literature. God who suffers, is compassionate, and who dwells within are images which seem to have been recognised by the women in the New Zealand study after a length of time in reflection and solitude, two opportunities which, again, may not be as available to persons (whether authors of studies or in the general populations) of the other contexts studied.

While the images of eleven women cannot be generalised to all, the fact that half of the most common images were also common in other studies, and that all were found to some degree in the literature, suggests some reliability. These images were markedly different from the traditional images of God as Lord, father and almighty God, which are common God nomenclature in Catholic liturgy, homiletics and written prayer.¹⁷ If the images in this study were shown by further

16. Key: Solid lines connect same images across sources (studies or literature); dashed lines connect same images where there are only two sources with same image; bold print indicates the images which this study has in common with other studies among the ten most common images; italics indicate images found in only one study (not including literature).

17. The predominant use of Lord and father is noted by Neil Darragh, "Imagine God", 18, and Margaret Schrader, "Women's Spirituality", in *Women and Church Shaping the Future: 4th National Feminist Theology Conference* (Auckland: Women in Ministry, 1994) 23-24, see esp. 23. In the Catholic *The Sunday Missal* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1987), approximately 105 of the approximately 230 references to God use male pronouns, nouns or adjectives. No female parts of speech are used. Of approximately 200 nouns and adjectives, sixty have obvious power connotations (for example, Lord, king, almighty,

study¹⁸ or observed acceptance and use to be generalisable to a larger group of New Zealanders, the implication would be that their use in common prayer, Eucharist, music and religious education within the church would be imperative. The God we pray to on Sundays and learn about in youth and adult education must be the God we know in the rest of our lives. Anything else renders our worship, and ultimately our church, hollow and irrelevant.

WOMEN, GOD AND CHURCH

As children, women did not discriminate between God and church: all were part of the divine realm with Mary, the angels and saints. At various times between adolescence and middle adulthood, women began to attribute very different characteristics to God than to church. God was increasingly understood as inclusive, a caring presence, co-creator and community, accepting, listening and wisdom, enabling and encouraging growth. Church, however, was increasingly seen as male-dominated and clergy-centred, uncaring, hierarchical, excluding, not open to questioning, wielding power, and blocking or confining human relationships with God.

In a significant and perhaps not surprising way, women's vision and hopes for church matched well with their understandings of God. They wanted the institution to be more like what they imaged God to be: they hoped for a church of equal involvement, caring community, participation, acceptance, possibilities, empowerment, freedom and growth.

Also significantly, women's perceptions of the church of the present bore striking similarities to the God images they rejected or transformed over their lifetimes – those images of solely male, distant, parent, judge, authority, power and restriction associated with traditional God attributes.

Sociologically, there are parallels between women's present understandings of God and their vision for church in western society's moves in past centuries toward participative democracy and human and civil rights (including freedom of speech and gender equality). Indeed, social scientists have traced the ways in which over centuries "concepts and images used of God have been closely associated with images and

judge). While "Lord" is used approximately forty-five times, "God" is only used approximately twenty-two times. Approximately twenty-five gender and power neutral ascriptions are used, but usually only once and never more than five times each.

18. Having identified the incongruity of God images of women in this study and images in official use, a next step could be to survey God images in a more representative and systematic way. Results from such a survey would be grounds for a revision of how God is spoken about in assembly in the New Zealand context.

concepts of political authority".¹⁹ Thus, while the New Zealand women in the study – and I as the researcher – have carefully documented the persons, places and events of the women's lives which have influenced the rejection, remoulding and transformations of their God images, the much wider context of the historic era in which we live is also a significant shaper of those images. As Neil Darragh notes: "Theology in a new place has to work out how to handle... conflict in the sense that it has to decide what it will retain, what it will discard, and what it will radically transform from out of the tradition."²⁰

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

In this case, the "new place" is partially a new (in the sense of the history of the church) geographic place – Aotearoa – but even more a "new people" in the sense that women's experiences of God have not been given voice in the shaping of liturgical and common prayer, Scripture, homiletics and doctrine. Differing images of God and visions of church are causing many women to join the ranks of those "defecting in place".²¹ Many women are trying to hang on by their toenails to a church which has been home for so long, but even more they need to pray and worship where God as they know God is acknowledged and celebrated.

This research has been intended as a window into the experience of women, particularly into the ways in which they understand God, and an instrument through which their voices can challenge the church to be a place and community which will encourage the growth of women's spirituality and faith expression. It reminds us that God is known by many names and that God's self-revelation occurs to all in their own way. Women's understandings of God are critical not only to their spiritual search for God, but to the wider church and society. Theologians have intuited – and psychologists and this study have documented – the increased well-being of women who understand God in positive and gender balanced or feminine images. Will they be allowed to share these images with the wider church in liturgy, homilies, common prayer and writings of the universal church? With Sallie McFague, I understand that "language and the 'world' are co-

19. David Nicholls, "Images of God and the State: Political Analogy and Religious Discourse", *Theological Studies* 42 (1981) 195-215, see esp. 196; Blombery, "Social Factors and Individual Preferences", 79; and Edward F. Edinger, *The New God-Image: A Study of Jung's Key Letters Concerning the Evolution of the Western God-Image* (Wilmette IL: Chiron Publications, 1996) xiii.

20. Neil Darragh, "Contextual Method in Theology: Learnings from the Case of Aotearoa New Zealand", *Pacifica* 16 (2003) 45-66, see esp. 51.

21. Miriam Therese Winter et al., *Defecting in Place*.

terminus...changes in the one will involve changes in the other, and such changes are often revolutionary".²² All who have ears, let them hear!

22. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 9.