

Taylor University

## Pillars at Taylor University

---

Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE)  
Theses

Graduate Theses

---

2017

### Your God is Too Small: The Impact of the College Experience on God Image

Jessica Woodring  
*Taylor University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Woodring, Jessica, "Your God is Too Small: The Impact of the College Experience on God Image" (2017).  
*Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses*. 83.  
<https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe/83>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses by an authorized administrator of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).



YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL: THE IMPACT OF THE  
COLLEGE EXPERIENCE ON GOD IMAGE

---

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

---

by

Jessica Woodring

May 2017

© Jessica Woodring 2017

**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

---

MASTER'S THESIS

---

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jessica Price Woodring

entitled

Your God is Too Small: The Impact of the College Experience on God Image

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2017

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tim Herrmann, Ph.D.      Date  
Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Skip Trudeau, Ed.D.      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Todd Ream, Ph.D.      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tim Herrmann, Ph.D.      Date  
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

### Abstract

Today's American college student enters higher education with the expectation college will play a role in spiritual development. Spiritual development is an ambiguous term to many student affairs professionals. To qualify students' experiences of spiritual development in college, this study examined the aspects of the college experience affecting a student's God image. The *God image*, a construct encompassing myriad ways of viewing and understanding God, serves as a working model or metaphor of the person of God. The researcher chose God image as a construct for this study because it changes as a result of experiences. Using a qualitative approach and phenomenological design, this study explored the essence of the aspects of college having the greatest effect on a student's God image. Major themes from the data included relationships, settings, and specific conditions within which students noted their understanding of God changed. The implications of this research provide direction to student affairs professionals as they seek pathways for faith development among college students.

## Acknowledgements

I feel so grateful when I think about all of the people who poured into me during this process. I'm thankful for the ways they encouraged me to press on and reminded me of my passion for this subject in moments when I was most insecure. Thank you to everyone who graciously listened as I relentlessly processed my thoughts, feelings emotions, and overall deep excitement for this topic and this project. I have truly discovered a deep well of passion for spiritual formation. Studying God image engaged my whole heart and mind and this process has had implications for myself as a Christ-follower and scholar-practitioner.

Thank you to my *family*. You stood by me and believed in me as I pursued a degree in higher education after graduating from college with a chemistry teaching license. You encourage me with your curiosity in what I'm studying, what I'm learning, and who I'm becoming. It's been hard to be this far away from home for these two years, but there has never been a moment when it felt like your love and care for me didn't reach across the miles. Thank you for believing that I have something to offer and for providing me with so many opportunities to learn about the Lord.

Thank you to my *friends*. I'm in awe of your faithfulness to me in this season when there are more miles between us than we would like. Thank you for being the hands, feet, heart, and voice of the Lord in my life for so many years and in so many circumstances. You mean more to me than you know.

Thank you, *Cohort IX*. I truly don't know what I would have done without you by my side during this MAHE season. You have been generous with your hearts, your time, your grace, and truly taught me how to be willing to fail—that the risk is worth it. I am so thankful to count you as friends and colleagues as we press on.

Thank you, *Sara Hightower*. Even though I didn't know it on Interview Day, Discipleship has truly been the best spot for me in this season. Your gracious, patient, intuitive leadership has been instrumental in my heart and monumental for my work as an educator. It has been such a blessing that you share a love for this topic and have been able to engage it with me so eagerly.

Thank you, *Tim Herrmann* and *the MAHE faculty*. Tim, I'm thankful that you read poetry at the beginning of your classes and that we share a love of the richness that is contained in metaphors. Thank you for encouraging me to be proud of my topic even when I felt like it was less important than others. MAHE faculty, thank you for the ways that you demand excellence of us and have given so much time to us.

Thank you to my *participants*. Without you, this study would not have been possible and I am so thankful for your stories with me in our interviews. I feel privileged to be let into the ways that you saw the Lord work, where you have doubted, and where you have been set free. I am encouraged by your stories and willingness to share them.

Most of all, thank you, *Jesus* for your companionship and constant provision throughout this journey. I feel so thankful that this process allowed me to see new markers of the ways that you are truly writing a story in me and through me. Thank you that you have always been and always will be bigger than anything I could ask or imagine. Thank you that the best is yet to come.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
God Image .....	2
College Student Development .....	3
Purpose of the Study .....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	5
Spiritual Development .....	6
Understanding God Image.....	8
The Intersection of College Student Faith Development and God Image .....	10
Summary .....	15
Chapter 3 Methodology .....	16
Participants .....	16
Procedure.....	17
Data Analysis.....	19
Benefits.....	19
Chapter 4 Results.....	21
Criteria for Dividing the Seasons.....	22
Choosing the Content of the Boxes .....	22



Relationships that Invite Question-Asking.....	23
Engagement with New Settings.....	26
Seeing God at Work.....	30
Aspects of College that Shape God Image .....	32
Essence: Expanding Understanding of God .....	32
Summary .....	33
Chapter 5 Discussion .....	35
The College Experience Positive and Negatively Shapes God Image.....	35
Students Understand God Differently in Relationships that Invite Question- Asking .....	36
Students Understand God Differently Through Engagement in New Settings .....	37
Students Understand God Differently When They See God at Work .....	39
Limitations .....	39
Implications for Further Research .....	40
Conclusion .....	41
References .....	42
Appendix A: Written Prompt.....	47
Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....	48
Appendix C: Sample Email Correspondence.....	49
Appendix D: Informed Consent .....	50

List of Tables

Table 1. Experiences During College that Affected God Image.....32

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

More than ever before, students expect the college experience to accommodate their spiritual interests and commitments (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). This expectation of spiritual growth is not limited to students who attend faith-based institutions, nor can it be dismissed as tangential to development at any institution type. The 2003 nation-wide Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) study, which drew significantly from all institution types, found that 48% of college freshmen believed it was “essential” or “very important” that college encourage their personal spiritual growth and expression (Astin et al., 2011). Though the demand is growing, the means and process of “spiritual growth” can feel ambiguous and undefined for student affairs practitioners. A need exists to identify pathways and experiences through which students grow spiritually during college in order to harness those avenues in spiritual and faith development. One such avenue is *god image*.

God image is a construct that describes the unique way one personally understands god “(e.g., God, Allah, Jesus, Buddah, Great Spirit, Krishna, Brahman, Vishnu, Shiva, ancestor spirits, and many others)” with human qualities (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch, 2013, p. 52; Lawrence, 1997; Rizzuto, 1979). Though “god image” can refer to different gods in different contexts, for the purposes of this research, “God image” refers to the God of the Bible and is denoted as such for clarity. Davis et al. (2013)

defined god image as “context-sensitive, affect-laden mental/neural representations” (p. 52). Through familiar images, metaphors, and character traits, people describe a previously incomprehensible entity, namely God.

People have long understood God’s character through metaphor; the Bible employs metaphors such as shepherd, clothing, and vine, among others, in order to make God more accessible and understandable to the reader (Psalm 23; Galatians 3:27; John 15:15). Winner (2015) explored metaphors for God and invited readers to see that “you can discover things about God by looking around your ordinary, everyday life” (p. 15). It is within “everyday life” that one develops and deepens one’s God image. It follows that the college experience, comprised nearly exclusively of the mundane tasks of everyday life, inevitably affects students’ God images.

### **God Image**

God image first takes shape during childhood as children synthesize their positive and negative experiences of love, acceptance, and belonging through their parents. Freud (1918, 1928) championed this construction with the idea that psychoanalytic roots trace God image back to the experiences and feelings one has towards one’s father. Building on Freud’s work, Rizzuto (1979) extended God image to be a combination of feelings about father *and* mother. Rizzuto further implied that, though initially formed at a young age, God image is dynamic and continually shaped by relationships and experiences. In the midst of this, God image can have positive or negative feelings attached to it and can positively or negatively affect one’s interaction with and understanding of the world (Beier, 2004). Beier went posited violent God images as the root of violence and terrorism but with the potential to become loving God images with effort over time.

God image constantly changes throughout life as one encounters new situations, experiences, and relationships. The introduction of new metaphors, models, and images as descriptors help allow people to view God differently in different seasons of life. Glucksberg (1998) explained that, “[w]ith continued and repeated use, once-novel metaphors become conventionalized; their metaphorical sense become dictionary entries” (p. 42). The dynamic God image draws from this pattern of assimilation of metaphor. The current study examined the change in college students’ God images over time to find the aspects of the college experience that contribute to spiritual growth.

### **College Student Development**

The development of one’s God image is of particular importance on college campuses. Today, when college students express increasing interest in spirituality (Astin et al., 2011), institutions of higher education have numerous opportunities to leverage the areas of the college experience that shape a student’s understanding of God. Tisdell (2003) noted that, through spirituality, individuals construct knowledge and meaning not only of God but also of their lives overall. A focus on the spiritual development of college students is, consequently, imperative to meaning-making and moral development, which Garber (2007) claimed as exactly the point of higher education: “[weaving] together belief and behavior” (p. 18).

The national HERI study sought to understand the spiritual life of college students in order to respond to the call to include spiritual development as a component of the liberal arts education on college campuses today (Astin et al., 2011). The study found that freshmen hold high expectations for the ways their institution will play a role in both their emotional and spiritual development. They enter college optimistic about the

institution's ability to further their personal growth, acquisition of personal values, and spiritual development. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) added to this call for spiritual development by identifying that religious attitudes and values play a role in the net effect college has on students. Though recent efforts such as the HERI study have initiated the examination of college student spirituality, the role of higher education in the spiritual development of their students has been understated and under-researched overall.

### **Purpose of the Study**

At this time, only a handful of studies relate development of the God image to the experience of college students (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Golke, 1994; Hoffman et al., 2008; Knabb & Pelletier, 2013). The existing studies have narrow focuses, each connecting a unique event, experience, or relationship to a change in God image. This study widened the lens to ask students to self-identify experiences—such as events, moments, or relationships—that affected their God image during college. Utilizing a two-part, qualitative method, the participants in this study first outlined the evolution of their God images since entering college and then identified where and when the major shifts in that God image occurred. This method provided data to answer the guiding question for this study: which elements of the college experience have the greatest effect on a student's God image?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Images, symbols, and other models daily help individuals comprehend the world around them. These models prove particularly helpful in understanding God, who is neither tangible nor describable with a singular comparison. Rather, people understand God through a variety of images, symbols, and models that employ metaphorical language. However, any single metaphor or image for an indescribable being is inherently incomplete:

The use of metaphor is . . . dependent upon recognizing the limits of any model or metaphor to interpret the richness of any life phenomenon. Models are deliberate simplifications, abstracted from the concrete. When models are appropriated as metaphors, they may at once disclose and obfuscate the richness of a phenomenon. Metaphors are useful only as they enable us to see aspects of reality that we would otherwise misunderstand. (Parks, 1986, p. 187)

Using metaphor to compare God to known phenomena, individuals can expand their understanding of God and develop their God image.

The primary constructions used to measure an individual's understanding of God in the realm of spiritual development are the God concept and the God image. The God concept is an intellectual definition of God, whereas the God image is a working model or metaphor of the person of God (Davis et al., 2013; Lawrence, 1997; Rizzuto, 1979).

The current study explored the God image of college students as an expression of their spiritual development during college. Examining the theories of faith development in college with an eye toward the role of images, models, and symbols provides the background necessary to understand the college experience's impact on God image.

### **Spiritual Development**

Both Fowler and Parks offered insight into the faith development of young adults and the patterns by which they construct meaning. Fowler (1981) showed, in the young adult years, individuals question previously accepted symbols, and Parks (1986) iterated the necessity of building up images that resonate with students' previous experiences.

**The purpose of symbols.** Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith contain six stages marked and mediated by age and maturity. Though each stage is subject to personal experience, many college students in their mid-twenties begin the "individuated-reflective stage." During this stage, the individual becomes aware of a personal ideology and begins to see social relationships in terms of the greater systems that govern them. Most relevant to the current study, students in this stage make new meaning for religious symbols.

Fowler (1981) explained that, before the individuated-reflective stage, religious symbols and rituals are seen as mediators between the individual and the sacred. However, the onset of the mid-twenties initiates new questioning of those previously accepted symbols. The individual begins to question the meaning of the symbols despite previous use and acceptance. Instead of the symbol exerting power over the individual, the individual begins to realize he or she has power over the symbol and therefore the ability to control it in his or her life. Fowler noted this redefinition of meaning can bring



guilt, grief, and a sense of loss in this stage. This is a personal process of understanding and reflecting on previously held beliefs about what it means to engage in religious activities that use or are centered on symbols.

Though the language used in the description of the individuative-reflective stage focuses solely on religious *symbols* rather than metaphors or images, Fowler (1981) connected “metaphors, symbols, concepts—and many, many other kinds of representations” to a person’s ability to understand and explain what they believe (p. 29). The experience of the individuative-reflective stage connects to these other abstract understandings of faith such as God image. In Fowler’s model, symbols of religion, as well as metaphors and images for understanding that religion, are challenged and reassessed as a part of a meaning-making process.

**The necessity of meaning-making.** Parks (1986) asserted and affirmed the need for young adults to be exposed to and have access to images “(1) that give fitting form to truth, (2) that resonate with their lived experience, (3) that capture the ‘ideal,’ and (4) that recognize and name the dynamic character of ongoing transformation” (p. 147). Parks drew specific attention to the need for multiple images in order to have a full understanding of truth because each image both sheds light on and invokes dissonance between previous understandings of truth. Overall, these images need to be congruent and valuable in the light of the student’s previous experiences of understanding.

Just as Fowler’s (1981) individuative-reflective stage broke down the symbols the students have previously understood, Parks’ (1986) claim built up the idea that students need images in order to continue to comprehend the world well. These images encourage young adults to look beyond the present moment to see the longer view of life and begin

to construct truth for themselves for the future. As young adults emerge into developing their concept and understanding of truth, it is important to remember that students respond to dynamic images that can change and form with new experiences and understandings of truth.

### **Understanding God Image**

The aforementioned God image is the expression of one's synthesis of any experiences that inform one's understanding of the person of God (Davis et al., 2013; Lawrence, 1997; Rizzuto, 1979). The culmination of these experiences is the God image, which forms in childhood but undergoes countless iterations during one's life (Rizzuto, 1979). Since Rizzuto's work, the understanding of the God image has expanded through the work of Lawrence (1997) on the God Image Scale and God Image Inventory, which were developed for use in counseling practices.

The work of Lawrence (1997), built on the foundation of Rizzuto's (1979) study, gave the God image validity and value in the lives of adults, describing it as a dynamic construct rather than a static construct. God image development begins during childhood but does not end there. More recently, Davis et al. (2013) consolidated literature about God image, which explicitly states God image can refer to any god figure, not solely the Christian God. Regardless of religious preference, God image is shaped by input into one's life from a variety of sources.

**Metaphors.** Metaphors are relevant to this conversation as a form of comparison. Ask someone to describe the indescribable, in this case a higher power named God, and he or she will likely compare God to a known feeling, phenomenon, or image. In English literature, metaphor is characterized by comparison without using the words "like" or

“as.” Metaphors appear widely in idiomatic language and often are used to help people understand new things by relating them to things already known. Metaphor is more than just a form of communication—it is also a way of knowing and understanding (TeSelle, 1974). Metaphor allows the individual to find places to insert new ideas and understandings into previous structures of meaning and knowledge (McFague, 1982; Parks, 1989). Through metaphor, people make meaning from thoughts or ideas previously deemed incomprehensible (McFague, 1982).

**The value of metaphors.** Metaphors, like any other form of figurative language, are apparent in everyday speech. Just as quickly as one makes meaning from a literal statement, one makes a comparison via a metaphor, and the mind evaluates the parts of the metaphor as true or untrue based on understanding of the two items in question (Glucksberg, 1998). Helpful metaphors insert a word, phrase, or idea in an unusual context and make new meaning from ordinary situations (Harms, 1944; TeSelle, 1974). Every metaphor speaks some truth into the object in comparison, but there always exist insufficient parts of the comparison (Bohler, 2008; Glucksberg, 1998; Parks, 1986, 1989). There are always similarities and differences. Each metaphor initiates a feeling that says, “yes, it is like that,” and “no, it is not like that” (Bohler, 2008, p. 4). Still, there must be enough truth in the comparison to render it worthy of contribution to reality. When used often, these comparisons assimilate as new definitions of the object they describe.

**Imagery and metaphor.** Harms’ (1944) study looked at the development of religious understanding in children using pictures. Harms’ methodology showed that a significant part of religious experience is hard to verbalize. In particular, he asked his participants to draw pictures for his research because the religious life sometimes is more

easily expressed through symbols and pictures. Metaphor allows meaning to “thick[en]” understanding (TeSelle, 1974, p. 632). It permits deeper cognition of what was once flat or transparent due to a lack of understanding or experience to frame the meaning.

Images are like metaphors in that they allow an individual both to express and comprehend something that may be otherwise inexpressible (Peloso, 2008). A feeling invoked by a work of art cannot necessarily be expressed except by comparing that feeling to something another individual may have experienced or understood previously. Similarly, pictures and images can express what words cannot (Harms, 1944). Because metaphor and symbol are often helpful, even necessary, conduits for meaning-making, a component of faith development, then, necessarily includes metaphor (Parks, 1989). Metaphors become models for what people cannot tangibly see or understand (McFague, 1982) and therefore become an avenue for comprehending something of the divine.

### **The Intersection of College Student Faith Development and God Image**

As supported by both Parks and Fowler, it is necessary and developmentally timely for young adults—including traditional college-age students (18-22 years of age)—to utilize images, symbols, and metaphors as a way of comprehending ideas that are challenging to explain or understand without a comparative aid. An individual’s God image develops over time. It is possible to track this change by a variety of factors.

Harms’ (1944) study examined the pictorial representation of God in pre-school to post-adolescent individuals. Post-adolescents enter the *individualistic stage*. Harms noted three specific categories of representations that surfaced in this stage: (1) pre-constructed images such as the crucifix or the Madonna; (2) symbolic representations of emotions; or (3) religious themes outside of the individual’s original religious

environment. This final stage proved to have the most obvious categories, whereas the earlier stages each contained one main form of representation.

The variety of representations during the *individualistic stage* implies the presence of a variety of factors shaping the God image during adolescence (10-19 years of age) and post-adolescence both to support and challenge the God image during that time. Many researched factors correlate to a change in the student's image of God and measurable correlations of the effects of God image on college student development and view of the world. Finally, the context of the study in Christian higher education provides an additional framework to understand the intersection of faith development in college and God image development.

**Factors affecting God image.** A myriad of situational and experiential factors impact the way individuals perceive and interact with God. The research on the factors affecting God image in emerging adults falls into one of two categories: external factors and internal factors.

**External factors.** For the purpose of this literature review, external factors are defined as environmental circumstances affecting the individual. For example, a study compared the images of God of abused and non-abused college students. In this study, Golke (1994) found a higher degree of sexual abuse yields a view of God that is increasingly "deistic and worthless" (p. 51). The students who were victims of sexual abuse viewed God differently after the incident. Though the student did not choose to have this experience, it still affects the student's now increasingly negative image of God's character.

Knabb and Pelletier (2013) studied the effect of parental divorce on God image within a population of students at a Christian university. Though Knabb and Pelletier hypothesized parental divorce, via parent-child relationships, would negatively impact God image, they found this to be only somewhat true since the father-child attachment does not impact the God image in this case. The study found that the caliber of relationship between the mother and child, which is not affected by divorce, “best predicts the development of a healthy God image” (p. 244). The results of the study agree with Rizzuto’s (1979) early work that suggested interactions between parent and child mirror the avenues with which individuals perceive and understand God, implying parents are a significant external factor in the process of building an image of God.

Multiple quantitative studies about God image use the factor-analytic method to relate attachment style to characteristics comprising God image. Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory rested on the idea that an infant attaches to a figure who is a safe and secure base in times of distress. Because attachment theory is grounded in emotions and feelings, it is common for God image studies to contain a component about attachment style. For example, Knabb and Pelletier (2013), Hoffman et al. (2008), Moriarty, Hoffman, and Grimes (2007), Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak, and Nixon (2006), and Golke (1994) all incorporated attachment style. Research about God image pairs often with attachment theory because God image initially forms from a child’s attachment to and perception of parents. The way people form attachment to God relates to the experiences they have with attachment to their parents (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990).

***Internal factors.*** Though external factors have a large impact on the God image college students develop, there are also internal factors. Internal factors are personal

elements of identity affecting God image. A study with Catholic high school students suggested self-esteem is positively related to loving God images and negatively related to “rejecting-impersonal-controlling” attributes of God (Benson & Spilka, 1973, p. 306). A similar study was replicated using a group of Catholic college students, and the results proved almost identical (Buri, 1990). When conducted using college students, the study results posited self-esteem as more predictive of God image than even “conceptions of their parents” (p. 11), with self-esteem as a highly personal factor affecting God image.

Hoffman et al. (2008) examined another angle of internal factors that affect God image by considering the effect of ethnic differences on college students’ God images. Overall, the study showed good reason for looking at the effect of these ethnic and cultural differences to understand God image. One main difference between white and non-white groups involved in the study pertained to identification as “religious and spiritual” (p. 38). Students of color viewed these two concepts as more closely related than white students did. However, the students identifying as “spiritual” corresponded with a God image as “loving, present, and involved in an individual’s life” (p. 38). These results, as well as those of many other studies, suggest God image changes based on individual experiences.

**Effect of God image.** Several studies point to the effects God image has on the lives of college students. These effects demonstrate the impact of God image on worldview and lifestyle.

***Effects on worldview.*** Knight and Sedlacek (1981) studied college student beliefs about the nature of God and why such beliefs were held. Students of a variety of religions were surveyed regarding their views of God. The correlation between view of

God and religious orientation shows a relationship between college students' concept of God and the function of religion in their daily lives. Students who scored higher on the extrinsic scale "used religion to provide security, status, and social opportunities . . . their concept of God reflected a need for sources of support outside themselves" (p. 6). The students who scored higher on the intrinsic scale tended to have a more traditional, "pietistic" (p. 6) view of God.

***Faith development.*** Within the many theories of development that explain the various changes and processes of human life, there emerges a trend toward an understanding of development as a "pilgrimage/journey" and that an appreciation for "homesteading" has been lost in the shuffle (Parks, 1989, p. 288). Modern culture sees those who remain in the same place as not developing as significantly as those more fluid with their life who embark on a pilgrimage of some sort. Parks noted the necessity of attending to these symbols within faith development because they provide an avenue through which meaning-making occurs. If culture teaches people to value one metaphor over the other, that metaphor narrows each individual's understanding of the world. Though the journey metaphor is powerful in religious development, there is life in understanding religious development outside of just one model.

**Christian higher education.** This study was conducted in the context of Christian higher education. Faith-based institutions have an explicit bent in their mission statements that orients them towards the integration of faith and learning (Woodrow, 2006). The missions of these institutions integrate faith and learning in many ways throughout the college experience, including in the classroom and through campus climate and events. Faith-based institutions prompt their students to think about faith in



their everyday lives to promote an awareness of God and facilitate a continued understanding of God. In another context, this study would have had a different purpose simply because other schools do not have the same institutional mission that focuses on an awareness of faith development. However, students from all institution types wrestle with defining faith and spirituality during college (Astin et al., 2011).

### **Summary**

A survey of Parks' and Fowler's faith development theories reveals the need for relevant images and symbols with which to make sense of the world. Part of this meaning-making process begs for understanding of a higher power. Through symbols, images, and models, individuals construct their personal understanding of God, or God image. God image is a product of both experience and development. Notably, one's God image is never complete. People, particularly young people, do not suddenly arrive at an immutable God image. Daily life continues to shape and inform God image. The formative college years prove ripe for the development of a God image.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study examined the aspects of the college experience affecting God image. The study did not seek to identify a causal relationship between a particular experience and a student's God image. The current study had an eye toward discovery and allowed the participants' experiences to lead the way. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study captured the essence of the participants' experiences around the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, the central phenomenon of this study was the reasons for change in God image throughout the college career.

Phenomenological research focuses on determining variables based on responses rather than looking for particular answers. The method strives to "provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). For this reason, this research mainly sought to understand which elements of the college experience most significantly impact God image. The participants reflected on their unique personal experiences surrounding how their understanding of God has changed during college. Synthesis of these responses revealed patterns about which college experience elements have the greatest effect on God image.

### **Participants**

The 14 participants in this study consisted of 11 female seniors and 3 male seniors from a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. This predominantly

white institution has approximately 2,000 undergraduate students. The seniors who participated in the study were enrolled in a required senior seminar course. Seniors were chosen as the participating population because they had spent the longest amount of time at the institution and consequently were able to reflect on more experiences than underclassmen. The researcher attended one of the class meetings to present initial information about the study and later followed up via email (see Appendix C) with students who indicated their willingness to be interviewed. Seniors were also chosen as the study population because this research attempted to discover themes across the *whole* college experience. The experiences of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors in this area, though valuable, did not present the most helpful perspectives for the current study.

### **Procedure**

The procedure for this study had two parts: a written prompt, followed by semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The researcher provided appropriate explanation of the risks and benefits to all seniors at the class meeting. All interview participants signed statements of informed consent (see Appendix D).

**Pilot.** A recent graduate of the university participated in a pilot study to test the effectiveness of the written prompt and interview protocol. The pilot study allowed the researcher to correct vagueness in the prompt and protocol. The pilot interview was not included in data analyzed (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, two other recent graduates provided feedback about the interview protocol questions.

**Written prompt.** At the class meeting, the researcher provided each senior with a copy of the written prompt (see Appendix A). The prompt was optional but encouraged. The students in the course had one week to complete the prompt. Of the

prompts distributed, 87 were returned to the researcher, and 29 indicated a willingness to be interviewed.

The goal of the first phase of research was to initiate thoughts about God image in the students' minds and encourage them to examine the way their understanding of God may have changed throughout their college career. The prompt provided each student with four boxes. The participants were asked to think about their college careers and identify where, if at all, their understanding of God transformed. The participants then explored that change by dividing their college careers into two to four seasons reflecting their changing God image. In the boxes, the participants used words, images, or both to describe how they understood and viewed God during that time. Each box consequently represented a snapshot of the participant's God image during his or her time in college.

**Individual interviews.** After the initial screening, 14 participants agreed to be interviewed, with the number of participants exceeding the 8-10 needed for saturation for the study (Creswell, 1998). The researcher utilized purposeful, homogenous sampling to contact willing participants, allowing the researcher to have an expressed preference toward those who demonstrated a mature understanding of their God image. The detail and depth of thought reflected in the prompts determined which students the researcher contacted. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to select the individuals who best fit the study (Creswell, 2012).

Twenty-four hours prior to the interview, the researcher returned to the participant his or her written prompt via email for review and provided the hard copy of the prompt for use during the interview. During the interview, participants used their written prompt as a guide to describe the changes their God image underwent during their college

experience. The researcher used a semi-structured method to allow for follow-up questions that aided the study. The interview protocol contained nine questions and required the participant to think critically about his or her God image and the reasons why it had changed since the time the participant entered college. The interviews averaged 28 minutes in length, with a maximum length of 45 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews before coding the interviews with MAXQDA coding software. The software aided the organization of the themes and subthemes, but the process of coding followed Creswell's (2012) suggestions. Creswell suggested that an effective coding process for qualitative research involves a sequence: beginning with an initial read-through, dividing the text into chunks of information, labeling those chunks with identifiers, reducing the overlap of those categories, and finally "collapsing codes into themes" (p. 244). In order to ensure reliability of the study, the researcher employed triangulation by corroborating evidence through the experiences of multiple participants.

Though the written prompts provided valuable insight into the way students perceive God through images and metaphor, the purpose of the research was to identify the experiences feeding into a change of the understanding of God during college. For the purposes of this research, the prompts were only used in the interview; the researcher did not look for themes or otherwise analyze the prompts separately.

### **Benefits**

The students involved in this study benefitted from metacognitively reflecting on their God image and the ways that image changed over the course of their college

experience. They contributed to the growing body of research on spiritual development for 18-to-22-year-olds and the effect of college on the process.

This study was designed to identify experiences during a student's college career that shaped the student's understanding of God. By identifying settings and experiences that foster growth for this area of development, college administrators and student affairs professionals can concentrate resources, time, and effort in those places in order to promote the spiritual development of their students. The question of which experiences during the college years have the greatest effect on the God image builds into current trends in research on college student spirituality with an eye toward how to develop it in students.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

A phenomenological approach distills the lived experiences of the participants into an essence (Creswell, 2012). Through this approach, an overarching essence of the current research emerged from three major themes. The essence of this study was that college students' God images change when their understanding of God expands. The major themes identified participants' lived experiences with the greatest impact on their God images. The three major themes—relationships that allow and invite question-asking, engagement with new settings, and seeing God at work—depicted the experience of these students based on their explanation of their college experience. Supporting themes comprised each main theme and reflected specific experiences or relationships mentioned a significant number of times during data collection.

The interview protocol contained two questions about the participants' thought process during prompt completion as well as analytical questions about the prompt contents. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher asked the participants to explain (1) how they chose to divide their experiences into seasons and (2) how they chose which words, phrases, or images to include in each box. The data from the first two questions produced themes distinct from the rest of the interview questions. These themes strengthened the study's reliability and validity. The results from the "thought process" questions are presented first, followed by the major and supporting themes.

### **Criteria for Dividing the Seasons**

The written prompt (see Appendix A) asked the students in the senior seminar course to divide their college experience into two, three, or four seasons reflecting how their understanding of God changed during college. Notably, all participants used semesters or other markers of the university's academic calendar as units for the divisions between the seasons. Of the 14 participants, 5 chose to divide their experiences primarily based on the school years (the first box represented freshman year, the second, sophomore year, etc.), and 2 expressed that they would have preferred a different format for the boxes. These two participants saw their journey as "cyclical" rather than linear. The majority of the participants (seven) divided their experiences primarily based on events or markers that defined the changed in God image. Participant 8 remarked,

Well, initially I was going to go by the years, but then I was trying to figure out where the shifts were in my faith, my image, or my understanding of God, and so that's kind of where there were milestones along the way so that's where I divided it.

### **Choosing the Content of the Boxes**

God image encompasses the feelings people harbor towards God as well as the way people think God feels toward them. Four participants explicitly mentioned meditating on feelings or emotions they felt toward God as they chose which words, phrases, or images to include for each season. Additionally, three participants stated they chose words deliberately. Participant 14 shared, "I spent a lot of time thinking . . . I was trying to be as specific as possible without compromising the integrity of it. How did this make me feel? Or, what was it that made me feel that way?" It felt important to the



participant to convey that feeling correctly. Two participants primarily drew from interactions with or actions of God in their lives to depict the content of each season. These initial questions about thought process gave the researcher confidence the participants did the prompt correctly and understood the construct of God image rightly.

### **Relationships that Invite Question Asking**

After the initial questions, the remainder of each interview focused on the lived experiences of the participants, as is the nature of a phenomenological study. The first theme to emerge was relationships that invite question-asking. The interview protocol contained a question that directly inquired about the role people played in the participants' seasons. However, even before the researcher asked about people who affected God image, 12 of the 14 participants talked about specific people or relationships instrumental in their faith journey during college. When asked, the two who did not initially mention relationships readily named influential people. A theme throughout these different relationships was permission to ask questions and wrestle with unknowns. Friends, mentors (including professors), conversations in class, and books all represented contexts within which participants felt safe enough to engage hard questions about God. Through these relationships, the participants also experienced positive traits of God.

**Friends.** Eleven participants commented on the role of friends in the development of their God image. They talked about not only their roommates and close friends but also the residence life leaders on their floors and upperclassmen role models. Across all of these friendships appeared a theme of conversation. The participants expressed a deep value for the informal conversations in the residence halls and for the

love, patience, and kindness of God they felt in the way their friends cared for each other.

Participant 4 discussed the value of these kind of conversations:

I've had a lot of good conversations with friends that I've lived with and grown close to while at [this university]. We've spent hours talking about this kind of stuff [spiritual development] and sometimes arguing and debating, um yeah. It's done me well to have good friends who are willing to struggle and converse about this and that...just a lot of mundane and everyday life, meals, and all of that . . . people just sit around and find themselves in discussion.

With their friends and on their floors, participants felt safe asking hard questions and engaging in, as Participant 6 said, "real, honest conversations, even if they weren't always pleasant."

In the midst of these questions and the challenges the participants faced as their understanding of God changed, friends were resounding ambassadors of God's love.

Participant 1 described how her roommate's actions promoted a positive God image:

I would say [love] is the main characteristic that I take away from God of just like this all-accepting love and that's something that my roommate has always given to me because I do have the minority view on a lot of issues. . . . I can imagine that wasn't the easiest thing to live with but she has just shown a lot of love in the way that she accepted me and in the way that she never tried to change me so I really appreciate that in her.

After seeing her roommate's example of unconditional love, Participant 1 had a more loving understanding of God.

**Mentors.** In addition to the impact of faithful friends, five participants noted the value of mentors in their lives. These mentors were professors, pastors, counselors, resident directors, and other student development professionals who not only allowed space for questions but also spoke truth into participants' lives. Participant 3 stated, "[My mentor] was one of the key people in showing me God is forgiving and showing me what reconciliation looks like just from her sharing things in her own life and hearing me out." Through the leadership of mentors, participants built a positive understanding of God's character. Mentors provided a sense of safety in tough conversations because they modeled question-asking and wrestled with their own questions. Mentors who demonstrated commitment to participants' personal development caused the participants to feel valued. Participants felt like they mattered when mentors took ownership of their leadership role and showed care through it.

**Classroom conversations.** Eight participants mentioned classroom conversations in conjunction with their heart understanding of God rather than head understanding. The pattern is notable, as most classroom conversations enforce God concept over God image.

Eight participants talked about the conversations they had in and surrounding their Bible classes. Whether the Old Testament, New Testament, contemporary beliefs in Christianity, or history of the Christian faith, class content and surrounding conversations upended participants' previous understandings of God. Participant 9 remarked he "had a lot of discussion with people who are just from different denominations and have completely different understandings of God and of the Bible and specific texts" that extended God to be more personal than he had previously understood God. Additionally, Participant 14 noted classes as spaces she "really had the freedom to learn about different

theories and find what I think is truth.” Within the classroom, participants could tackle hard questions and engage with their classmates.

**Books.** A non-relational category, books represent another context within which six participants noted that questioning allowed their God image to grow and shift. This theme belongs with the themes of friends, mentors, and classes because mentors or professors recommended or required the majority of the books mentioned. Often, books marked a transition to a different view of God because they introduced timely metaphors or raised new questions that created a stark difference between their God image before reading the book and their God image after reading the book. Participant 4 talked about his experience with a book that changed his understanding of God:

Through those relationships as well as through the book, which I ate up, I kind of learned to change my view of God from a slot machine to much more relational and personal and caring and liking me as well as loving me and that kind of stuff. . . . so that kind of changed my view to seeing God as someone who loves me in spite of my wrongs. I wrote down graceful and empathetic which is something that I knew—um—I would have said God is graceful and empathetic and personal and all of that but before my thinking was much more like “but he’s not, actually.”

Reading this book challenged Participant 4’s previous understanding of God and caused him to think differently about God at work in his life.

### **Engagement with New Settings**

Participants also punctuated the changes in the seasons on their prompt with transitions to new environments. As explained previously, these movements into new

places and communities marked change in the way they understood and thought about God. The participants expressed a variety of experiences that fit into this theme. Within this theme fits the supporting themes of global engagement, transitions to new settings, and immersion in both on- and off-campus organizations.

**Global engagement.** Eleven of 14 participants marked a change in their God image with an experience in a new setting. Among these settings were study abroad trips, mission trips, and the experience of living in a different part of the United States.

*Study abroad.* Six participants noted the effect study abroad—from one month to one semester away—had on their God image. These experiences expanded participants’ understanding of the world, consequently affecting the lenses through which they interpreted God and his involvement in their lives. Participant 8 called her a trip to Israel

. . . the connection that I needed between the theology that I had been learning but also the emotion associated with the relationship with God. And so Philippi or going to Corinth or seeing the jail or all these things that were physically in the Bible and the people that we've been reading about and these stories actually happening in these cities and walking on the same stones that you are walking on was just unimaginable. And it was so hard to like put into words what it means but now as I read those stories.

Participants described myriad ways their experiences abroad affected them personally, vocationally, and spiritually. As Participant 13 noted, “I am so just being more open to just kind of letting myself rediscover who God is as I came back.” These experiences not only influenced their understanding of God on the trip but also started a movement for continued change upon returning to the university.

***Missions trips.*** Four participants used mission trips to explain a change in their God image during college. Some trips were domestic, some international; the length of trip ranged from one week to two months. All participants who mentioned mission trips claimed them as either significant contributors to the change between seasons or significant components of the seasons themselves. Unlike the study abroad experiences, the mission trips each had an element of self-sacrifice or daily hardship that challenged and grew each participant's God image. Participant 11, who experienced debilitating sickness while on a mission trip, summed up her experience by stating, "I feel like I learned a lot about God and felt a lot closer to him through like my complete weakness and inability to do anything." In a new setting, without the comforts of home, participants understood God differently as they experienced him in new ways.

***Living in a different part of the U.S.*** One participant, who did not talk about study abroad or missions experiences, mentioned two experiences of living in new parts of the U.S. Though the experience was seemingly close to home compared to the experience of her peers, Participant 1 explained, "Even like getting out of one place, one physical place, was huge to impacting my spirituality." Whether domestic, abroad, for study, for missions, or for experience, global engagement marked the change in seasons and thus the understanding of God for the majority of the participants in this study.

**Transitions.** For 8 of the 14 participants, transitions marked moments of significant change in their understanding of God. The most significant transitions were the transition to college and experiences of acclimating to a new community.

***Transition to college.*** Three participants talked about their transition to college as a significant marker of their first season. Participants noticed a difference in their

understanding of community after arriving at college. It was a challenge to adjust to a setting where everyone subscribed to the same basic tenets of faith. In this new context, they found it harder than expected to create a new support system.

**Acclimating to new communities.** The transition to college sparked subsequent transitions into new churches and new organizations. Most participants mentioned their experience transitioning into a new community of some sort—for some, it was only on the larger scale in the transition to college itself. However, others noted the nuance of transitions into specialized communities embedded in the college experience. Through the communities they entered on their floors, mission trip teams, study abroad cohorts, and sports teams, they indicated a sense of discovery within new groups of people.

Participant 11 described what she learned about God while studying abroad:

I guess the other things just—like God not necessarily meeting my expectations of the trip but doing his own thing was better. I don't know—I didn't imagine I'd meet people like . . . there were just people who I didn't know existed and like I didn't know it was going to be a part of my experience.

Participant 11 expressed deep appreciation for not only her experience abroad but also the community she joined there, noting she did not expect such rich development to come from the community itself.

**On- and off-campus organizations.** Six participants credited their experiences in organizations as factors shaping their God image during college. Three participants mentioned on-campus involvement in and leadership of organizations, and three talked about how off-campus summer internships opened their eyes to new ways to see God.

*On campus.* Of the three participants who mentioned specific organizations, two talked at length about campus clubs, housed in student activities, that changed the way they view God because they felt they could fit in those places. Both participants talked about feeling isolated on campus because they held the minority view on a variety of issues. However, in these groups, they found “enough room” for them to “fit” in the faith-based community because they understood God in a new way. Participant 6 stated,

There was this underlying feeling of “I know you're on my team no matter what.” And I think that’s what a safe space is. So, I think that really shaped my understanding of God because I was very much like if other people who are Christians are practicing this safe space with one another like maybe that's something that God can and wants to do with me.

When Participant 6 experienced the feeling of a safe space in her new setting, she could understand the space God creates for her.

*Off-campus internships.* The three participants who discussed internship experiences contrasted them to the experiences at their faith-based school. Though not all internships took place at secular organizations, all participants realized the valuable opportunity of the university’s faith-based community. They were also exposed to examples of God at work beyond the faith-based community. God felt present and accessible to the participants in new ways due to the experience in a new organization.

### **Seeing God at Work**

The third major theme came from six participants who noted their understanding of God changed when they saw him at work in themselves, in others, or through sharp changes in relationships such as a break-up, a death, or parents separating.



**God at work in self.** Participants talked about times when seeing God at work in themselves and others caused them to feel and recognize God's deep care for them.

Participant 14 described,

I also feel like little moments where I felt moments of comfort from that class were like intentionally put there. Like I felt that way for a reason. And I feel like that was another sort of like divine intervention.

Overall, participants nurtured positive feelings towards God when they saw him at work in their lives.

**God at work in others.** Participants also emphasized the positive effects of seeing God at work in and through others. Participant 2 drew a teeter-totter to represent one of her seasons. The teeter-totter symbolized moments of feeling high and low and included another person sitting on the other end. Participant 2 found hope in the "understanding that there is a Lord, like he is here in these words, in this person across from me" as she perceived God using the other person to reassure and teach her.

**God at work through sharp changes in relationship.** Four participants used sharp changes in relationships to divide their seasons. The effects of a break-up or a death altered their lives and perspectives in such a way that they understood and interacted with God differently. Depending on the circumstances of the relationship change, the differences in the interactions afterward were both positive and negative. Though challenging, Participant 1 recognized and appreciated how God worked through her during a painful time because "it was just like a constant reminder that I did like come to find God through that event." She could point to that event as a moment when she clarified her commitment to God and trusted his commitment to her despite the pain.

### Aspects of College that Shape God Image

One question on the interview protocol asked participants to describe in their own words what parts of college had a positive effect on how they understood God and what parts of college had a negative effect. Table 1 summarizes the significant data points from this protocol question in alphabetical order.

Table 1

#### *Experiences During College that Affected God Image*

<u>Experiences</u>	<u>Positive</u>	<u>Negative</u>
Bible classes	X	X
Christian jargon		X
Counseling	X	
Exposure to brokenness in the world		X
Friends	X	
Integration of faith and learning	X	
Living in a residence hall community	X	X
Mentoring	X	
Professor attitudes	X	X
Study abroad experiences	X	
Transition to college		X

Some experiences had a positive and negative effect on the participants' understanding of God. This paradox is not contradictory. For some participants, living in a residence hall community had an exclusively positive effect on their understanding

of God; for others, there were seasons when the residence hall was a place that negatively impacted their understanding of God due to relationships or experiences they had.

### **Essence: Expanding Understanding of God**

After examining the major and supporting themes, an overarching theme reveals the essence of the study. The essence of this research is that students' God images change when their understanding of God expands. Nine participants used language of size to explain how their God image grew "bigger." All used language of size to describe the way God expanded. Some described God as feeling "vast" or "big" or "great" or that there was "more room" within God's character and for diversity of thought, opinion, beauty, and understanding, among other things. This theme of God's massive physical, mental, emotional, and relational size was often the key factor in determining whether a relationship, experience, setting, or moment shaped or affected a participant's God image. Consistently, the events, people, and experiences that catalyzed change shared a common thread: allow God to exceed your expectations, and your God image will grow.

### **Summary**

The current study strove to answer the question, "What aspects of the college experience have the greatest effect on a student's God image?" Therefore, the purpose of the research was to find elements of the college experience that shape God image. The main themes of relationships that allow and invite question-asking, engagement with new settings, and seeing God at work represent these elements. The supporting themes—friends, mentors, classroom conversations, books, global engagement, transitions to new settings, on- and off-campus organizations, seeing God at work in self, and seeing God at work in others—provide tangible examples of each of the main themes. Throughout the

themes and interviews, one common essence emerged: students' God image changes when they encounter God in a way that makes God feel bigger than before. These results presented pathways rich with opportunities for student affairs professionals to intentionally encourage spiritual development in their students.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the essence of the aspects of college affecting a student's God image. Because God image is dynamic and changes as a result of relationships and experiences (Rizzuto, 1979), this qualitative phenomenological study used exploratory interviews to identify significant themes that shed light on the experiences during college that influence this construct. The main themes found in the exploration of these seasons showed that God image is affected by (1) relationships that invite question-asking, (2) engagement with new settings, and (3) seeing God at work. The essence of the college experience aspects that promote change in God image is that God image changes when students recognize God as bigger than they had previously understood him to be. The following discussion highlights the connection between this essence, the main themes, and implications for practice.

#### **The College Experience Positively and Negatively Shapes God Image**

The current study sought to answer the question, "What aspects of the college experience have the greatest effect on a student's God image?" This question assumes God image develops during the college years, and aspects of the college experience directly impact God image. God image, by definition, changes over the course of life, unlike the more rigid God concept that tends to remain the same through experiences.

God concept is the intellectual knowledge of God that people access through thought rather than emotion (Davis et al., 2013; Lawrence, 1997; Rizzuto, 1979).

All participants recognized and identified changes in their God image during college. That finding proves congruent with the work of Fowler (1981), Parks (1986, 1989), and Astin et al. (2011), who affirmed the need to provide direction and framework for faith development during college. However, this study found that not all changes in students' understanding of God are positive. Table 1 shows it is possible for the same factor to affect positive change in the life of one participant, while affecting negative change in another's life. The following implications for practice are rooted in the hope of creating space for positive change and proactively working against negative change.

#### **Students Understand God Differently in Relationships that Invite Question-Asking.**

Relationships are a significant part of the college experience. Displaced from home communities, students seek attachment to new people and hope to find a new safe space. Every participant talked about people and communities present during their time in college. All of the important relationships mentioned by participants invited question-asking and allowed for uncertainty in some areas, yet remained faithful in the relationship despite unpredictability. Within the context of those relationships, the participants noted they understood God and felt their understanding of God change through the unconditional love and acceptance they felt from friends, mentors, and professors; within classrooms; and even between the pages of books that significantly influenced their lives.

**Encourage question-asking about faith and other matters.** When participants saw both questions and commitment can exist within the tension of human relationship, they developed deeper attachments to their communities and to God. Participants valued

the people in their lives with whom they engaged uncertainty. For this reason, student affairs professionals must encourage question-asking, even when answers are unclear. Students hesitate to ask questions when they feel afraid to fail or appear unintelligent. Student affairs professionals need to offer themselves as not only safe, nonjudgmental mentors, but also individuals who model how to ask questions even when answers do not exist. As Fowler (1981) depicted in the individuative-reflective stage, traditional college students need room to question previously held religious symbols and ideas and allow for new meaning-making processes. Encouraging students to engage in unknown, gray areas in their faith or elsewhere provides spaces where they can experience God.

**Challenge and support.** However, it is simply not enough to encourage students to ask questions. As shown in Table 1, some parts of college were labeled as positive aspects for one participant but as negative for another. This paradox denotes the need for both challenge (in the form of encouraging question-asking) and support during crucial seasons of growth. Sanford (1966, 1968) developed the theory of challenge and support and showed that, in order for students to grow, appropriate measures of both were needed. When students felt supported to explore big questions and lean into new ideas, their willingness to engage the challenge of understanding God increased, and God became bigger. The same experience may expand two students' understandings of God, but, if no permission or space exists into which the student can lean and feel safe in that environment, it feels more exposing than edifying.

### **Students Understand God Differently through Engagement in New Settings**

College consists of a battery of new settings even from the first day on campus for freshman. Participants indicated that these new settings—whether introduced through

studying abroad, going on missions trips, moving to college for the first time, or learning how to work in and cooperate with a new club or campus activity setting—stood out as markers not only of their college experience but also of their journey of faith during that time. As Participant 1 described, “Even like getting out of one place, one physical place, was huge to impacting my spirituality.”

As participants experienced what it was like to be away from the norms of their faith-based college culture, the church homes they grew up in, and many other forms of comfort, they were challenged to believe that, in order for God to be present in other places, their understanding of who God was needed to change. It is particularly relevant to note that these effective trips ranged from one week to one semester in length and that, regardless of trip length, participants gave a lot of time and energy to discussing their mature thoughts and reflections from that time. This emphasis on physically traveling to new places and experiencing new things runs parallel to Parks’ (1989) work in faith development that used the pilgrimage or journey metaphor. Parks found it necessary to pay attention to the faith *journey* itself and not just to specific moments of it, because, through this journeying to new places and new experiences, people make meaning.

**Provide opportunities to engage in spaces outside the norm.** Students’ perception of God’s size increased with the engagement in spaces that pushed them out of their daily rhythms and comfort zones. Within these settings, God image development happens readily. Colleges must provide experiences that disrupt students’ previous understanding by introducing them to new concepts, traditions, and settings. It is important to note that, with these experiences, God image is what changes, not God concept. God concept (or head understanding) changes when people learn in the Bible



about God's generosity to his people in times of trouble. God image, the deep heart understanding, changes when a student *experiences* generosity as an act representing the care of God. This emotional, feeling response causes a true, deep, positive change to God image.

### **Students Understand God Differently when They See God at Work**

The third theme from the data was that participants noted a change in their God image at moments when they saw God at work in themselves, in others, or in the challenging relational situations in which they found themselves. Seeing God at work was something participants often mentioned as confirmation that God was real and was someone in whom they believed. Significant events such as a break up, the death of a close family member, or parents separating proved to have both a positive and negative impact in terms of how participants interpreted that event in light of how they viewed God. The event negatively affected their understanding of God in the short term and positively affected it for the long term because participants could see God at work through that situation. Seeing God at work affirmed participants' God image because it confirmed God did not intend challenge without good.

### **Limitations**

This study contained a number of limitations, including the small sample size from which the data came. Additionally, more than half of the participants were female. All were seniors and were asked to self-report retroactively about their experience of God throughout their four years; thus, their understanding of the important moments for spirituality could differ from what it was at another given time during college. Another study limitation was the lack of ethnic or racial diversity among participants. Hoffman et

al. (2008) discussed how the different understandings of spirituality within this conversation across different ethnic groups would come into play, had there been any diversity in this sample. The homogeneity of the sample reflected the demographics of the institution but does not transfer to the wider college student population.

Additionally, the researcher selected study participants through purposeful sampling, which allowed the researcher an eye toward to students who included more depth and detail in their written responses. This selectively led to data containing more mature ideas and themes than other students from the same institution who may have less vocabulary or initiative to think about this aspect of their own development.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The most fertile area of further research is to bring this study to different institution types. Because this study was conducted at a faith-based school, the students have had consistent prompting to think about their experience through the lens of faith. At a non-faith-based school, research would differ because students would have myriad concepts of who God is and the parameters they place on a higher power. All students go through faith development, however delayed; extending this study to a public university would most likely require modification to the written prompt and interview protocol.

Another direction for further research is to delve more deeply into a student's self-efficacy and self-authorship of his or her own God image. Such research could entail a longitudinal study in which, throughout their four years at college, a group of students commits to having conversations about their God image at specific times throughout their experience in order to gauge and understand an appropriate sequencing of these high-impact experiences for shaping God image.

## Conclusion

Though participants' actual God images were fascinating and diverse, this study looked only at the college experience aspects causing change from one understanding of God to another. In tandem with this idea is the final, overarching theme: in all the spaces, relationships, settings, and contexts that changed participants' understanding of God in some way—positive or negative—there appeared an element of understanding God as larger, bigger, or broader than he previously seemed. Often, participants used language implying that, before the named experience, God fit in a box of predetermined size.

J. B. Phillips (1952) published *Your God is Too Small*, a well-known work that challenged readers to see God outside of the human constraints they place on God. Phillips encouraged his readers to see God for who God is, further supporting the themes from this study. The events and relationships that most directly and significantly affected God image development were the ones that shattered the preexisting box and the participant experienced God's literal and metaphoric expansion.

For this reason, student affairs professionals must be thoughtful about the experiences and relationships in which college students engage. Is the college giving students opportunities to engage in settings and relationships to which they would not otherwise be exposed? How are students engaging with God in ways that allow God to exist in a space larger than the box in which they previously kept him? The development of God image is one thread in the larger fabric of the college experience. However, if they experience challenges during college without support, students may develop a more negative view of God. Opening our eyes to the value of considering how we understand and feel about God has implications for practice beyond simply church walls.

## References

- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2011). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Benson, P., & Spilka, B. (1973). God image as a function of self-esteem and locus of control. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 12, 297–310.  
doi:10.2307/1384430
- Beier, M. (2004). *A violent God-image: An introduction to the work of Eugen Drewermann*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc.
- Bentz, V. M., & Shapiro, J. J. (1998). *Mindful enquiry in social research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Bohler, C. J. (2008). *God the what? What our metaphors for God reveal about our beliefs in God*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss (Vol. 1)*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Buri, J. R. (1990, May). *Psychoanalytic bases for one's image of God: Fact or artifact?*  
Paper presented at the 62<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, IL.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Inc.
- Davis, E. B., Moriarty, G. L., & Mauch, J. C. (2013). God images and god concepts: Definitions, development, and dynamics. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 5(1), 51–60. doi:10.1037/a0029289
- Dickie, J. R., Ajega, L. V., Kobylak, J. R., & Nixon, K. M. (2006). Mother, father, and self: Sources of young adults' god concepts. *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, 45, 57–71. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2006.00005.x
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Freud, S. (1918). *Totem and taboo: Some points of agreement between the mental lives of savages and neurotics* (A. A. Brill, Trans.). New York, NY: Norton.
- Freud, S. (1928). *The future of an illusion* (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York, NY: Norton.
- Garber, S. (2007). *The fabric of faithfulness: Weaving together belief and behavior*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Glucksberg, S. (1998). Understanding metaphors. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 7, 39–43. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.ep13175582
- Golke, J. (1994). Images of God in abused and nonabused college students (Master's thesis). Retrieved from eScholarShare@Drake. (1994 .G581)
- Harms, E. (1944). The development of religious experience in children. *American Journal of Sociology*, 50, 112–122. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2770961>

- Hoffman, L., Hoffman, J. L., Dillard, K., Clark, J., Acoba, R., Williams, F., & Jones, T. T. (2008). Diversity and the God image: Examining ethnic differences in the experience of God for a college-age population. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 26*, 26–41.
- Kirkpatrick, L. A., & Shaver, P. R. (1990). Attachment theory and religion: Childhood attachments, religious beliefs, and conversion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 29*, 315–334. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1386461.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3ae51b56fc9f71eae55bfd52cf12b7c>
- Knabb, J. J., & Pelletier, J. (2013). Effects of parental divorce on God image among young adults at a Christian university. *Marriage & Family Review, 49*, 231–250. doi:10.1080/01494929.2012.762443
- Knight, G. D., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1981). *Religious orientation and the concepts of God held by university students* (Research Report No. 7-81). Retrieved from National Institute of Education, Educational Resources Information Center: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED220757.pdf>
- Lawrence, R. T. (1997). Measuring the image of God: The God image inventory and the God Image Scales. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 25*, 214–226. Retrieved from <http://www.godimage.org/25-214.pdf>
- McFauge, S. (1982). *Metaphorical theology: Models of God in religious language*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

- Moriarty, G. L., Hoffman, L., & Grimes, C. (2006). Understanding the god image through attachment theory: Theory research and practice. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health, 9*(2), 43–55. doi:10.1300/J515v09n02\_04
- Parks, S. (1986). *The critical years: The young adult search for a faith to live by*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Parks, S. D. (1989). Home and pilgrimage: Companion metaphors for personal and social transformation. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 72*, 297–315. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41178479>
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students (Vol. 2): A third decade of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Peloso, J. M. (2008). Adult images of God: Implications for pastoral counseling. *Journal of Pastoral Counseling, 43*, 15–31. Retrieved from <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=6f6b1f67-e554-4550-a2be-d886c4b0d8ea%40sessionmgr103>
- Phillips, J. B. (1952). *Your God is too small*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Rizzuto, A. (1979). *The birth of the living God: A psychoanalytic study*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sanford, N. (1966). *Self and society: Social change and individual development*. New York, NY: Atherton.
- Sanford, N. (1968). *Where colleges fail: A study of student as person*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- TeSelle, S. M. (1974). Parable, metaphor, and theology. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 42*, 630–645. doi:10.1093/jaarel/XLII.4.630

Tisdell, E. J. (2003). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education*.

San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Winner, L. F. (2015). *Wearing God: Clothing, laughter, fire, and other overlooked ways of meeting God*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Woodrow, J. (2006). Institutional mission: The soul of Christian higher education.

*Christian Higher Education*, 5, 313–327. doi:10.1080/15363750600860778



## Appendix A

### Written Prompt

**Jessie Woodring | MAHE Thesis Research**  
**Questions? Please ask! [jessie\\_woodring@taylor.edu](mailto:jessie_woodring@taylor.edu)**

Please respond to the following and bring completed prompt to class 9/14/16:  
My understanding of God has changed in some way since I entered college.  
Agree/Disagree

Please respond to this prompt:

**Prompt:**

**Think about your entire college career. Using 2, 3, or 4 boxes on the sheet provided, divide up your college career into 2, 3, or 4 seasons that reflect your God image during each of those seasons. In words, images, or a combination of words and images, please use the box to express your God image during each season.**

**For this exercise, God image is a construct that encompasses a “heart” understanding of God. It can include anything about the way you feel about God, how you think he feels about you, images, metaphors, emotions, symbols, or representations of how you understand him. There are no wrong answers.**

Would you be willing to be contacted for potential participation in a face-to-face interview with the researcher to further discuss your answer to this prompt? Yes/No

If yes:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

\*24 hours prior to beginning interview protocol, the researcher will return to the participant his or her completed written prompt (prompt can be found in Appendix A) for reference.

\*Before beginning the interview, the researcher will define “God image” and “God concept” for the participant.

1. Tell me about how you chose where to divide your experience for this exercise.
2. How did you choose which descriptive words and/or images to include in each box?
3. You have already completed a prompt that required you to think about the way your view of God has changed throughout the past few years. Please use your response to the prompt to chronologically tell me about how your personal understanding and view of God, that is, God image, has changed since you entered college. Include as much detail as you deem necessary.
4. Are there particular events that define the separation between the boxes?
  - a. If so, tell me about the connection that you make between the event and the progression from one box to another.
5. Are there particular people that characterize any of the seasons represented on your prompt?
  - a. If so, tell me about the connection that you make between the presence of that person in your life and your God image at that time.
6. What parts of college have caused you to have a more positive view of God?
7. What parts of college have caused you to have a more negative view of God?
8. Imagine you are about to talk with an incoming freshman who is highly motivated to grow in their God image. What advice would you give that freshman about ways that the college experience will impact their personal experience and understanding of God?
9. Which pieces of your college experience stand out as the most formative when you think about how your God image has changed?

## Appendix C

### Sample Email Correspondence

The following email was sent to the participants who indicated that they are willing to be contacted for a semi-structured, face-to-face interview with the researcher.

Dear *Participant Name*,

My name is Jessie Woodring and I am a Graduate Student in the Masters of Arts in Higher Education program here at Taylor. I am contacting you because you are a senior in Senior Seminar who has indicated willingness to be interviewed regarding the written prompt that you completed about your God image.

The purpose of this interview is to gain more of an understanding of the prompt that you completed in order to gain understanding of the way that your college experience has impacted your understanding of God. This research will encourage you to think about how your God image has changed and formed over the course of the college career and will benefit the future work of student development professionals in the area of spiritual formation during college.

There are no significant risks to this research. Before your interview, you would sign an informed consent agreement that outlines your willingness to be a part of the study, to be audio recorded, and for your interview to be included in the data for the study. You are free at any point to withdraw from the study without penalty.

Thank you for your expressed willingness to participate. If you are still interested in participating further in this study, please respond to this email and indicate which interview time works for you:

*Interview Time 1*

*Interview Time 2*

*Interview Time 3*

I welcome your questions and concerns. I can be reached at [jessie\\_woodring@taylor.edu](mailto:jessie_woodring@taylor.edu).

I greatly appreciate your interest in this research project.

Thank you,

Jessie Woodring, Researcher

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development 2017 Candidate

## **Appendix D**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **The Impact of the College Experience on God Image Development**

You are invited to participate in a research study of how the college experience affects the development of the college student's God image. You were selected as a possible subject you are a senior who is enrolled in the senior seminar course who displays detail and depth in your expression of your God image. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Jessie Woodring, Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development 2017 candidate.

#### **STUDY PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the aspects of the college experience that most greatly affect how college students understand God through character traits, models, and metaphors.

#### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 10-15 subjects who will be participating in this research.

#### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

1. Participate in a 1-on-1 interview, lasting approximately 35-55 minutes.
2. Agree to be quoted and/or have your experiences referenced in the results of the researcher's study.
3. The study will take place throughout the Fall 2016 semester, but your participation will simply consist of your interview.

#### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While in the study, the risks of completing the interview include possible emotional risk or spiritual doubt associated with confronting one's understanding of God and recalling parts of the college experience. The Taylor University Counseling Center and Jon Cavanaugh, Campus Pastor, will be available if you desire to talk more in a safe environment.

#### BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

Though direct benefits are unknown for this study, thinking about how one's God image has changed and formed over the course of the college career could have possible positive effects on the participant's self-awareness. It also will benefit the future work of student development professionals in the area of spiritual formation during college.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Transcripts and recordings will be stored in a password-protected computer. Audio recordings of interviews will only be made accessible to the researcher and will not be used for any other purposes.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher or faculty advisor:

##### **Researcher:**

Jessie Woodring  
[Jessie\\_woodring@taylor.edu](mailto:Jessie_woodring@taylor.edu)  
 (978) 844-1659

##### **Campus Pastor:**

Jon Cavanagh  
[jncavanagh@taylor.edu](mailto:jncavanagh@taylor.edu)  
 (765) 998-5360

##### **Faculty Advisor:**

Dr. Tim Hermann  
[tmhermann@taylor.edu](mailto:tmhermann@taylor.edu)  
 (765) 998-5142

##### **Taylor University Counseling Center:**

Contact Patty Stigers to make an appointment  
[counselingcenter@taylor.edu](mailto:counselingcenter@taylor.edu)  
 (765) 998-5222

Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the Chair of the IRB, Susan Gavin at (765) 998-5188 or [ssgavin@taylor.edu](mailto:ssgavin@taylor.edu).

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University.

**SUBJECT'S CONSENT**

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I agree to take part in this study. *A copy of this consent form is available to you if you would like one for your records.*

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

