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THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE ON A COLLEGE STUDENT'S  
GOD IMAGE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Josiah Peterson

May 2021

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

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Josiah Daniel Peterson

entitled

The Impact of the First-Year Experience on a College Student's  
God Image: A Phenomenological Study

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

Master of Arts degree  
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### Abstract

The first year of college comes with many new experiences, including those that impact and change a student's faith. This phenomenological study investigated how the first-year experience of students at a Midwest, faith-based, liberal arts college impacted faith development and particularly God images. Results revealed that the community around the students, the difficulties and struggles they faced, and the new perspectives they encountered led students to view God in more relational and loving ways than prior to their first year of college. The discussion introduces readers to opportunities for student development educators to engage with first-year students in their faith development on both the one-on-one and programmatic levels.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis process has been one of the most pruning experiences in my life thus far. Conducting research for the first time and devoting hundreds of hours to this thesis has taught me much about myself. Ultimately, I realize that I cannot do much on my own. In light of this, there are several people to acknowledge and thank for their help and support throughout the completion of this thesis. I'll keep this brief, but know that I am indebted, beyond thankful, and will look back with fond memories of all those who have encouraged, supported, and been present with me from the beginning to the completion of this master's thesis. Tim, thank you. I'll tell you more in person, but know that I am very thankful to be one of your students, have you as my thesis supervisor, and be one of your friends. A special thank you to my friends Serena, Jana, Luke, and Pat who have edited iteration after iteration of these chapters. I am a better writer and a better person for knowing you. I am filled with the right kind of pride as I think of all the people and support God has blessed me with throughout this process.

Finally, c'mon, Yates, you knew I was going to give you a shout out.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Looking back on his life, author William Paul Young said that it took him fifty years to get the face of his father off the face of God (Pamer et al., 2017). His sentiment in expressing this truth reveals the impact his God image had on his life. He knows who God is, theologically, but when he pictured God he saw his father. Students on a Christian college campus have an understanding of God; however, their knowledge— theological and intellectual—about God is separate from their experiences with God. The rational understanding of God is one's God concept, while the representation of God shaped through experience is one's God image (Lawrence, 1997). Christian scripture reveals many different images of God which include a shepherd, a king, a father, and even a mother hen (Winner, 2015), but students, like everyone else, may have different images of God born out of their own personal experiences. For example, a student may know that God is Father, but could think of God as distant because his or her father was never around. Therefore, if these are all images or representations students may have of God, what causes them to think of God with a different representation? More specifically, does the first-year experience impact a college student's God image? This study is in search of an answer to these questions.

Before the study can take place, relevant terms need to be defined. The two constructs used in this study are *God image* and *first-year experience*. This chapter introduces and defines these constructs. College student faith development is also

necessary to understand how students grow in their faith during their college years, therefore, faith development theory will be introduced. The literature review will dive deeper into the constructs and show connections between them within a Christian higher education setting.

### **God Image**

God image is defined as “a psychological working internal model of the sort of being that the individual imagines God to be” (Lawrence, 1997, p. 214). One’s God image is how one makes sense of their experiences and their view of the divine. In contrast, one’s God concept is how one makes sense of what they have learned about the divine and therefore how one thinks about God (Davis et al., 2013). The difference is necessary to name, but the remainder of this thesis will only address students’ God images.

One does not need faith in God in order to have a God image; all people have an image in their mind when they think of God or, more generally, a higher power. A person’s God image is not a fixed picture. Instead, it is what Dr. Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) calls, a “compound memorial process” (p. 54), an object collecting and compiling memories attributed to God (Lawrence, 1997). God images are complex. These metaphors for God or views of God are developed from “contextual factors” which have effects on different aspects of a person’s life (Hall & Fujikawa, 2013). Rizzuto (1979) studied God representation and how it is created by a child based on the experience with his or her caregivers. One’s God image matters because it actually affects the individual. Research has suggested connections between one’s God image and positive or negative

life experiences (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Cook et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2015; Stroope et al., 2012).

God can be viewed in almost any way based on experiences people have that they attribute to God or a higher power, resulting in a God image. Some view God as judge, while others may other view Him as friend. Even so, others may view God as a combination of judge and friend and therefore hold those two in tension (Bohler, 2008). Images of God can be as diverse as people's experiences. This study looks at how one common experience, the first year of college, affects the God images of students.

### **First-Year Experience**

For the purpose of this study, a first-year student will be defined as a student in his or her first college year. First-year experience is defined as “the sum of all experiences students have in their first year at college” (Hunter, 2006, p. 6). The first year of college is filled with many experiences including the often-challenging transition from living at home to moving away to attend college. It is the sum of everything that happens in the first year including classes, adjusting to life in a residence hall, making friends, and playing intramurals (Hunter, 2006).

Students often come into their first year of college with a sense of dualism: a sense that in virtually every situation there is a clear right way or answer. In their classes, they discover that they are asked not only to absorb information from their professors, but also to think for themselves and learn how to explain why they think the way they do (Kidwell & Reising, 2005). Experiences like these in the classroom as well as other experiences combine to make the transition from high school to college difficult for many students. Almost immediately, first-year students are introduced to new ways of teaching

(Brinkworth et al., 2008) that place greater responsibility on their active engagement.

Additionally, they must make the adjustment to a new place surrounded by new people.

Some of the new people they are surrounded by become friends. These friends end up being the people that make the greatest impact on the student (Astin, 1979). The first-year experience is best described as transition in which many changes occur such as learning to live with a roommate, meeting new people, academic changes (Kidwell & Reising, 2005), and also changes in one's faith. Research shows that in the midst of this transition, first-year students desire to know the purpose of their lives and grow in their spirituality (Astin et al., 2003; Bryant et al., 2003).

### **College Student Faith Development**

In this study, college faith development will be defined as the process of change in one's faith as one moves through college. Dr. Sharon Daloz Parks's and Dr. James Fowler's work in the study of faith development will be used to describe the stages through which college students in their first year may be transitioning. Fowler (1981) describes faith as the way in which one seeks meaning in their life. Parks (2000) defines faith as "the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience" (p. 4). Like all people, college students experience faith (Andrade, 2014). Students are in a critical time of meaning-making and the first year of college provides students with a new experience and environment to develop their faith.

This process of faith development is important during college because the process of changing one's faith and beliefs over time is part of holistic development. In caring about the holistic development of college students, Christian institutions, such as schools in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), specifically hope to

nurture their students' faith development and help students grow during their college years (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004). Where one finds meaning influences other parts of one's life (Siner, 2018). Understanding faith development for college students provides a framework for connecting first-year students' God images and their experience in college.

### **Conclusion**

A student's God image is based on experiences he or she has which are connected with God (Lawrence, 1997). Therefore, it is important to ask how the first year of college impacts a student's God image. The first college year is a time of major transition as students from many different backgrounds are brought together in a new environment. Utilizing research on first-year college students (Bryant et al., 2003; Clydesdale, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009;) and understanding their faith development (Fowler, 1981; Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004; Parks, 2000), the purpose of this study is to discover the impact the first-year experience of a first-year student has on one's God image. The research question guiding the study is:

What impact does the first-year experience of college students have on their God images?

The results of the study will help educators in faith-based institutions to better support students in the important process of faith development.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The God image is an abstract picture of an even more abstract person: God. Greely (1996) says, “one’s picture of God is, in fact, a metaphorical narrative of God’s relationship with the world and the self as part of that world” (p. 124). Though it may be difficult to explain, God images have an impact on people, because they are representations of one’s relationship with oneself with the world they live. First-year college students have entered a new world on their college campuses. Has their God image changed? The literature reveals trends in the first-year experience, where students are most likely in their faith development, and possible correlations between people’s God images and life experiences.

This chapter explores the literature surrounding the experience of first-year college students and God image. In exploring the literature of first-year experience, special focus is given to the spirituality of first-year students. In discussing the literature on God image, attention is given to why God image matters, its effect on a person’s life, and its connection to attachment theory. At the conclusion of this chapter, the researcher reveals how these two constructs interact with one another and discusses research on God image within the realm of Christian higher education.

### **First-Year Experience**

The transition from high school to college is filled with many changes. Most students are paying for school for the first time, which results in the feeling to approach

their education seriously (Arnett, 2015). In the midst of these changing environments, students learn how to manage their relationships with peers, parents, and authority figures as well as develop ways to take care of their physical needs and explore who they are as individuals (Arnett, 2015; Clydesdale, 2007). First-year students entering college are open to a new environment and are given the opportunity to learn and explore alongside others in the same circumstance. Some research indicates teens do not have a “willingness to connect their daily lives to deeper values or larger purposes, or to consider those values and purposes thoughtfully” (Clydesdale, 2007, p. 40). A relatively small number of first-year students engage in self-reflection and actively search for their life purpose. Specifically, Skipper (2005) reported that 26% engage in self-reflection, and 35% are searching for their life purpose. Instead of spending time in reflection, first-year students are studying, relaxing and socializing, working for pay, commuting to school, engaging in co-curricular activities, and or taking care of their parents (Fosnacht et al., 2018). Throughout their first year of college, students are exposed to new environments with many new opportunities as they try to form habits that shape who they will become.

### ***First-Year Student Faith Development***

Fowler’s research on faith development led him to describe six stages of faith development, which range from early conceptions of God to a faith that demands complete self-sacrifice of the individual. People develop through the stages based on how their faith is constructed rather than the content of their beliefs. Earlier stages are based on concrete knowledge of the world while advanced stages are founded on critical reflection and the ability to hold more complex ideas of faith in tension (Parker, 2011). It is necessary to understand faith development and the stages of faith first-year students

might be operating from in order to grasp the factors of what could lead to change in God image. Because of age and development, first-year students would either be in stages three or four which are characterized by students having faith identity (Andrade, 2014). Stage three, Synthetic-Conventional Faith, is when individuals begin to build their faith based on relationships they have with others and their ability to take in the perspectives of others. In stage four, Individuative-Reflective Faith, however, a student critically reflects on their faith and can articulate their reasons for belief (Parker, 2011). The lack of willingness of first-year students to connect to larger purposes (Clydesdale, 2007) may reveal why some of the first-year students that are in stage three are not yet in stage four of Fowler's faith stages, where they begin to reflect on their own faith after being exposed to different faiths or ways of thinking; but instead remain in stage three, where there is not much reflection on their faiths (Andrade, 2014). In a study of students from six different institutions in the CCCU (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, n.d.), of the 120 first-year students interviewed, all but a small percentage entered college in stage two or three of Fowler's faith stages. A student in stage two, Mythic-Literal Faith, does not engage in any reflection upon his or her faith and instead relies on gut feelings (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004). Synthetic-Conventional Faith, stage three, is generally developed during adolescence. In this stage, a person begins to form an identity around his or her faith. However, his or her faith is not under critical reflection. People who do not examine or reflect on their faith remain in stage three. When a person begins to reflect on their faith, the transition to stage four, Individuative-Reflective Faith, begins (Fowler, 1981). Some students might move into stage four during their first year of



college because they are exposed to new ways of viewing or experiencing faith which are unlike the faith traditions they were raised in (Andrade, 2014).

Crises are a driving force behind movement through Fowler's faith stages. Understanding college student faith development allows educators to know "the ways in which such 'contents' of faith are 'structured' and 'processed' by various people in a faith community" (Dykstra & Parks, 1986, p. 257). Studying God image is a lens into faith development which can aid educators and institutions to help students grow.

### ***First-Year Students and Spirituality***

Clydesdale (2007) describes spirituality as the vegetables in the buffet line for American teens. The teens know that the vegetables are good for their nourishment, but they do not desire to put them on their plate of priorities. Overall, first-year students describe the same faith they had at the beginning of the year at the end of the year. The only difference is that their religious involvement (e.g., attending church) declines (Clydesdale, 2007). Knowing first-year students may claim the exact same faith as their last year of high school, would they also describe God with the same representation?

College is a critical time where students are looking to find purpose and meaning in their lives (Bryant et al., 2003). The first year of college then marks the beginning of this journey for many students to search for purpose. Bryant et al. (2003) argue "the first year of college holds the potential for having the greatest impact on students' religious and spiritual lives as they become inundated with campus culture, diverse points of view, and possible positivistic biases for the first time" (p. 727). Although it may have the potential for greatest impact, some first-year students may not take advantage.

The 2003 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) study of the Spirituality of first-year students reveals many students are ready to take advantage by showing interest in spirituality and many more also begin making a practice of religious activities. Eighty percent of students were interested in spirituality and 75% of students reported that they were searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. Also, over 75% of participants believed in God. Beyond believing in God, 74% of students studied reported having a “sense of connection with God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self” (Astin et al., 2003, p. 4). With a high percentage of students interested in spirituality, the ground is fertile for a change in their God images.

College students tend to become less religious than they were in high school but see the importance of integrating spirituality into their lives after their first year. In this context, *religious* refers to practices, like attending church, and *spirituality* refers to finding meaning and is a more personal experience (Bryant et al., 2003). Cherry et al. (2001) concluded many of the undergraduates they studied at four colleges were more concerned with the personal experience of spirituality and seeking purpose than the practice of religion. Bryant et al. (2003) saw factors that led to trends in religious involvement. The students that showed more religious involvement after their first year were students who attend faith-based institutions, read for pleasure, are involved in their community, and make it a goal to integrate spirituality in their lives. Ma (2003) added another factor to the increase of faith development on faith-based college campuses: living on campus. In addition, women are more likely than men to grow in their faith development at faith-based institutions (Ma, 2003). Knowing the trend to decline in

religious involvement and the increased interest in spirituality, research is needed to see how one's God image may be impacted.

### **God Image**

Going further into the literature, God image proves to be a complex subject. Generally, God image is the result of human beings putting God or a higher power into representations or pictures based upon their emotions and experiences with God or with what they attribute to God (Hoffman et al., 2008; Lawrence, 1997). Stroope et al. (2012) explain Greely's description of God images as "theological narratives" (p. 27). These narratives play a role in how people live in the world. God image is not fixed, but instead it "exists on a continuum ranging from positive and health inducing to negative and health diminishing" (Hall & Fujikawa, 2013, p. 277). Overall, God images are broken down into a positive image or negative image, but there is a wide continuum of experiences in between these two extremes. A key component in understanding God image is that one's God image reveals how one views themselves both in the world and in their relation to God (Greely, 1996). God image is a combination of how one feels about God and what one believes God feels about them (Nguyen et al., 2015). For example, one who views himself or herself as lovable would be able to have a God image of a loving God who loves him or her.

American Christians typically view God as "a divine mind who is suited to meet their needs and who looks like them." (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 10). This God image relates to the research on American teenagers and emerging adults by Smith and Snell (2009). These researchers studied emerging adults and found many ascribed to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), which reveals God to be a deity that ordered the world but is

relatively uninvolved unless those who believe in Him run into a problem. One's relationship with God does not matter, and as long as one is good, he or she will go to heaven (Smith & Snell, 2009). The God image presented through MTD shows something similar to the research presented by Jackson et al. (2018). Because no one has seen the face of God, images of God are influenced by what one understands as His characteristics. The researchers found American Christians view and experience a God that looks like them. In other words, they are likely to view God as similar to themselves physically and ideologically. One's God image affects and is affected by one's experiences. The God images of first-year students can help educators better understand their worldviews and views of self.

### ***Relevance of God Image***

God image affects a number of different areas of one's life including one's levels of resilience (Nguyen et al., 2015), ability to cope with negative life events (Park & Cohen, 1993), how one responds to moral dilemmas (Cook et al., 2013), self-esteem (Benson & Spilka, 1973), and one's level of purpose or meaning in life (Stroope et al., 2012). Research regarding resilience and God image among Vietnamese immigrants showed that higher levels of resilience were associated with positive God images (Nguyen et al., 2015). High school students with more vindictive views of God also had lower levels of self-esteem. Conversely, images of a loving God were associated with higher levels of self-esteem (Benson & Spilka, 1973).

Stroope et al. (2012) studied people's God images and asked whether this impacted their sense of meaning and purpose in life. The participants who reported a loving image of God were two times more likely than all other respondents to report

having purpose in their lives. Jackson et al. (2018) sought to discover if political orientations play a role in how American Christians view God. The conservative participants viewed God as more masculine, wealthier, powerful, and older than the liberal participants. Liberal participants were also reported viewing God as more loving and more African-American.

Cook et al. (2003) studied the God image of both first-year students and seniors at a Christian liberal arts institution, based on their moral decision-making and their relationships with God. The study revealed that students are more likely to view God as a rule-giver than as a close relational figure. However, some of the participants view God as both a relational figure and a rule-giver; these participants were labeled “transcenders” because they could balance these two relations to God (Cook et al., 2003). Research shows one’s God image has an effect on the spiritual struggle in the lives of college students. Spiritual struggle is defined “as intrapsychic concern about matters of faith, purpose, and meaning in life” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 2). College students who view God as close and benevolent or show no interest in God report less spiritual struggle than those whose image of God is a “divine mystery,” “teacher,” or “universal spirit” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 15).

More research needs to be conducted to understand how God image affects college students. Woodring (2015) studied the effects of the college experience on God image, revealing that students’ images of God changes when their understandings of God are broadened. Looking at the effects of one’s God image show the value in understanding how the God image develops. With the current study, the researcher hopes to reveal what changes in God image during the first year of college.

### *God Image and Attachment*

John Bowlby developed attachment theory after studying an infant's relationship with his or her mother. Although it does not guarantee proper development, secure attachment between caregivers and children are important to development (Bretherton, 1992). Attachment is "an emotional bond between a child and his or her caregiver(s) characterized by mutual feelings of love and closeness" (Baucum & Smith, 2004, p. 386). There are three different types of attachment: secure, avoidant, and anxious (Baucum & Smith, 2004). One with secure attachment feels safe and warm with one's caregiver and even depends on others. Conversely, one with anxious attachment worries that they will lose the security they have and so clings to it out of fear. One with avoidant attachment moves away from others, refusing to let themselves attach (Buser & Gibson, 2016).

Researchers have connected these same types of attachment with one's relation to God. The God image is born in the mind of a person soon after they are physically born. From early childhood development, a God image is formed because of one's relationship with one's caregiver (Fowler, 1981; Hall & Fujikawa, 2013; Rizzuto, 1979). Fowler (1981) describes the images of God developed by infants as pre-images of God which occur in infancy as babies are in close relationship with their caregivers. The pre-images then take the form of their mother and or father as the trust with them deepens through dependency even before language and other cognitive skills are developed (Fowler, 1981).

Much of the literature on God image suggests a strong relationship between God image and attachment theory. Lawrence (1997) argues the roles of the attachment figure—to be a secure base and a safe haven—are also the foundation of one's God

image. This foundation can be one of either security or insecurity. What one believes about God affects one's attachment to God. And one's attachment to God affects how one acts (Horton et al., 2012). Bennett (2015) claims that without a secure attachment to God, relationships with others suffer: "Without God as our secure base, our love of others easily becomes distorted by our fear of loss" (Bennett, 2015, p. 31). Therefore, in order for someone to feel secure in their relationships with others, their attachment to God must be secure. One's God image either is in line with their attachment to others (secure or insecure) or is secure out of response of having only insecure attachment relationships with others (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Numerous studies exist which show the effects of attachment to God on the lives of participants. Buser and Gibson (2016) studied 599 college-aged women and their attachment to God and bulimic symptoms. The results showed that there was a positive correlation between anxious and avoidant attachments to God and bulimic symptoms. There was a stronger correlation with anxious attachment to God and bulimic symptoms than avoidant attachment (Buser & Gibson, 2016). In a similar vein, Horton et al. (2012) found that alcohol use among college students was significantly correlated with an avoidant attachment to God. The results also showed that those with avoidant or anxious attachment to God were more likely to report using marijuana in the previous month. In the results, however, it was significantly gender-specific, meaning the correlation of anxious or avoidant attachment to God with drug and or alcohol use was only found among male college students (Horton et al., 2012).

Through having a secure attachment to God, people feel that they are loved and secure which results in having a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life. On the

other hand, those who have an avoidant or anxious attachment to God may find the opposite to be true (Stroope et al., 2012). As motivation plays a role in developing a God image, one's motivation for attachment would also affect God image. People who desire secure attachment but who have not received it may view God as someone who is always present and loving because it is something they desire (Jackson et al., 2018).

Studying the relationship between God image and attachment theory can be a benefit for counselors as well as student development educators in higher education. Buser and Gibson (2016) write, "understanding a client's visual representation of and way of relating to God/Higher Power may illuminate the anxious or avoidant stance with which a client often approaches this connection" (p. 133). Understanding one's image of God and how one relates to Him would be helpful to know how to move forward in walking alongside students as they grow and change during the college years. Therefore, the study of first-year students' God images can be beneficial for helping students grow in their spiritual and personal development throughout the remaining years of their college experiences.

### **First-Year Experience and God Image**

As noted earlier, the first year of college is a time of great transition which results in students either forming new habits and identity or remaining in the same habits they had from high school (Arnett, 2015; Clydesdale, 2007). In this time of change, first-year students reportedly decrease in their religious involvement yet increase in their desire to integrate spirituality into their lives (Bryant et al., 2003). The state of first-year students begs the question of what changes occur, if any, in their God images. Many researchers contend that each student has a God image like every other individual, whether they



believe in a higher power or not (Hoffman et al., 2008; Lawrence, 1997). In the 2003 HERI study on first-year students' spirituality, 56% of participants believe God is love or a creator. Also, 49% of first-year students view God as a protector (Astin et al., 2003). It is clear from these statistics that first-year students are thinking about spirituality, religion, and God. As students think about who God is and what His characteristics are, an image of a higher power is shaped and molded. Many different experiences and factors impact and change one's God image (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Nguyen et al., 2015; Park & Cohen, 1993; Stroope et al., 2012); research needs to be conducted to see if any experiences specific to the first-year experience play a role in these changes.

### **Christian Higher Education and God Image**

The study by Holcomb and Nonneman (2004) helps draw a connection between Christian higher education and God image. The researchers studied students at Christian colleges to understand how they develop in their faiths through college. The results showed how crises are a driving force for development. The students who entered into a "sustained period of self-examination do so out of recognition of conflict or inadequacy in their own values and reasoning" (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004, p. 100). Examples of crises are being exposed to diverse ways of thinking, extensive multicultural exposure, and emotional turmoil. Students who experienced these crises and, in response, engaged in critical self-reflection grew in their faith development. It is easier for students to grow in their faith development when they are in a community that fosters their growth by providing both challenge and support. Christian institutions in the CCCU care about the holistic development of their students, which includes faith development, so it is important to provide research to provide more insight into how college affects the

spiritual lives of students (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004). God image is a part of one's faith development, and so the purpose of this study is to provide a clearer picture of the faith development of first-year students through the change in their God images.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the first-year experience of college students, faith development according to Fowler's faith stages, and God image. The literature suggests faith development as a component within the transition from high school to college. Fowler's faith stages provide a framework to evaluate the faith development of students, and God image is a component of faith development. As seen through the literature, one's God image has effects on one's life such as how people act, respond, and view themselves. The literature also specifically connected God image to attachment theory in that one's God image is affected by their attachment to God. It is important to study the God image of first-year students to better understand how they develop in their faith and the impact it could have on the remainder of their college experience.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the current study of first-year students and the development of their God images was conducted. The research question guiding the study was: What impact does the first-year experience of college students have on their God images? This chapter explains the qualitative approach chosen to investigate this question. Information on the context of institution where the study occurred is presented as well as how the participants were recruited for the study. This chapter also explains the procedures for the study and the data analysis process.

### **Approach**

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach, studying the phenomenon of God images. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the essence of the individual experiences of the participants who all share the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the phenomenological approach was chosen in order to best understand and describe the shared experience of the participants, how the participants experienced it, and whether it changed or impacted in some way through their first year of college (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the study, the shared experience of the individuals was condensed to reveal the essence, “the culminating aspect,” of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77). The condensing of data into significant quotes, themes, and the essence of the phenomenon occurred in the data analysis process.

**Context**

The study was conducted at a small faith-based liberal arts university in the Midwest. The university is a predominately white institution and has approximately 1900 undergraduate students. The gender makeup is 60% female and 40% male. The institution places a strong emphasis on students' holistic development and is a member institution of the CCCU. Because of its emphasis on holistic development and membership in the CCCU, the institution is committed to the faith development of its students. According to its website, this institution values faith integration into the learning experience both inside and outside the classroom. Outside of the classroom, students are encouraged in their faith development by a variety of activities and programs including chapel, small groups, local and global service initiatives, and committing to the covenant the university designed to develop a Christian community on campus.

**Participants**

The study consisted of six male and six female students in the beginning of their sophomore year. Students in their sophomore year were chosen because they had recently finished their first year of college and had time to reflect on their experience over the summer months. The participants were recruited by purposeful sampling, specifically critical sampling (Creswell, 2015). Critical sampling is used when the researcher seeks to study participants that are critical to answering the research question. Pertaining to the present study, choosing reflective participants who could articulate their faith well allowed for the researcher to make logical generalizations of the impact of the first-year experience on a student's God image.

To recruit participants, the researcher requested help from the residence hall directors to identify two students from each of their halls they believe to be reflective students able to articulate their faith well and who would be willing to participate in the study. The researcher emailed this sample of students and invited them to take part in the study through face-to-face interviews. Because the researcher served as a residence hall director at the studied institution, he did not invite two students from his hall in order to bracket out his bias of knowing the participants prior to the study. For the duration of their involvement in the study, participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

### **Procedures**

Before the interviews began, the participants were sent a consent form (Appendix A), and they signed the form before the interview started. The participants' involvement in the study was completely voluntary and participants were informed that they could have chosen to end the interview at any time. After the consent form was signed, the researcher proceeded with the questions outlined in the interview protocol (Appendix B). The interview protocol consisted of 13 questions which asked about the students' God image, first-year experience, and faith development.

### ***Pilot Interview***

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received but prior to scheduling interviews, the researcher conducted two pilot interviews to test the protocol to assure that it accomplished the intended research purposes. The questions that did not provide the intended data were modified as needed before conducting the study (Creswell, 2015). The two participants in the pilot interviews lived in the researcher's

residence hall, a choice to make sure that the participants of the pilot test would not be possible participants of the study.

### ***Interviews***

The interviews, which ranged from 20 to 55 minutes in length, included questions about participants' first-year experience of college, their relationship with God, and their God image. The researcher chose one-on-one interviews because the nature of the questions were personal and reflective. At the end of the interview, the researcher gave the participants the opportunity to draw a visual representation of God. The participants could complete the drawing during the interview or finish it and return it to the researcher the next day. The researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews. To validate the study, the researcher conducted member checking by emailing the participants the themes that emerged through the data analysis and summary of the interview in order to check for its accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed, coded, and themed. The themes which emerged from the interviews are discussed in Chapter 4. The researcher gathered themes from the study by combing through the interview transcriptions and highlighting "significant statements" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). These statements or quotes from the participants enabled the researcher to understand the phenomenon of the first year of college as it pertained to God image development. The statements were then broken down into themes explaining the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the impact of the first year of college on the God images of first-year students. Twelve participants—six men and six women—participated in the study in the first month of their sophomore year of college. This chapter reports the results obtained in the analysis of the interviews. The following themes emerged:

- Impact of the community
- Experiencing struggles
- Experiencing God through nature
- Gaining new perspectives
- Difficulty in articulating their mental picture of God

#### **Impact of the Community**

The researcher asked the participants what moments, events, and people in their first year were most impactful to their experience. Through analyzing the data, the theme of community emerged. All twelve participants communicated having a good experience with the community around them. The important elements of community varied among the participants: the floor or wing they lived on in their residence hall, their circle of friends, the small group(s) they were a part of, sports teams, and the campus community as a whole.

Michael described the community on his residence floor as “what Christian community is supposed to be.” When asked how her image of God changed from “like a genie” to “knowing that He’s always there, like He’s a father figure,” Becca said,

I honestly think the people here have just really helped me. Just being around just good Christian people that are genuine and kind and are willing to step out of their way to talk to you about this stuff that you might not want to talk about.

The community Becca was involved in helped shape her image of God. Other participants, like Alex, described the community as something that significantly shaped their first year: “I would say the people I was surrounded by,” with specific mention to his coaches and hall director as main supporters. The community at the institution studied was a key theme in describing the first year of college and how participants viewed God. Therefore, the communities in which the participants were involved shaped their year and impacted their faith and, thus indirectly, their God image.

### ***Small Groups***

Involvement in small groups surfaced as a sub theme of community. Five of the twelve participants were involved in small groups during their first year of college. John described the community he found in a small group that took place on his residence hall floor: “It was a good outlet for me. It was a safe place to share how I was doing, and to listen to how other people were doing.” Hannah was involved in several small groups during her first year and she describes two effects of these groups: “I think also accountability came with that. And having people who are studying the same thing and also perspective, getting other people’s perspectives instead of just my own because everyone has different thoughts on it.” Involvement in a community impacted the participants by challenging them to grow as well as providing a place for them to belong.



### *Campus Culture*

The campus culture arose as a sub theme of community. The institution researched for this study is known for its intentional community. Six of the twelve participants addressed the intentional community of the institution when referencing their experience with the communities in which they were involved. Aang noted how the Christian community as a whole impacted his faith:

When you live in a community that's a Christian community and you see most of your friends, or most of your peers being intentional Christians it also kind of encourages you to be that type of person. So, just being with students at [Institution] changed my perspective about Christ and faith.

The institutional type also aided in a smooth transition to college for some of participants.

Becca noted,

I think the [Institution] community and just from my hall director, to the friends on my wing, to the academics and professors and my basketball coach, I mean it was just such an easy transition; they're so supportive and it's cool how these people actually cared about you as a person before anything else... I felt at home when I first got on my wing. I didn't feel scared or nervous or anything like that.

It was just very welcoming.

Campus culture played a role in welcoming first-year students to the community. The culture also influenced how Aang pursued his faith in God and even changed his perspective.

### *Seeing God in the Community*

Participants seeing God's character in the community around them emerged as a third sub theme. Four participants noted seeing God in other people. For example, participants noted the selfless actions of others as such evidence. Regina stated that she could see God in the community at the institution. She explained, "[I] just kind of like feel His presence and with the way that people treat you, just I can feel God through that." Dave connected the image of God in all people to the reason he sees God in others. Dave said, "overall it has changed my view and appreciation for God just the different way every person reflects God." Through a conscious effort to see the image of God in others, Dave's God image expanded.

A key portion of the participants first year of college was their involvement in a community. These communities were either part of the structure, such as their residence hall floor community, or they were chosen by the participants, for instance, a small group. Participants also saw God at work in the community around them. The community was a distinguished aspect of their first year and played a role in how the participants picture God.

### **Experiencing Struggles**

Participants experiencing difficult times and struggles was a common theme. Six of the twelve participants referenced experiencing struggles of various kinds. Alex, Amy, and Rachel, in particular, faced hardships which shaped their first year. Reflecting on a struggle with which he received help from others on campus and where he experienced God, Alex said, "I didn't realize how open His arms were. In a sense of like I didn't realize that He could be a gateway out of a deep hole that you were set into." Amy also

encountered struggles during her first year of college which influenced a change in her God image: “I really struggled halfway through second or first semester with that. And that’s when I really sort of began to see God as more of a Comforter and sort of less as only a ruler.” Amy also went as far to say that her God image may not have changed without these struggles. “Maybe I’m being a bit dramatic, but usually the only way my God image sort of changes or morphs or grows is through times when I’m really going through it, really struggling with x, y, or z.” Alex and Amy both described changes in their God images when talking about struggles during their first year.

In reflecting on her first year and how her faith has changed, Rachel said,  
So coming to college, I was very dry in my faith, I didn’t have a lot of substance to it. But throughout my first year, throughout staying at home all summer, and I was challenged in so many ways that really pointed me to God and said like, ‘I have no idea what’s going on, I have no idea who to believe, but I know that God is still true and still right and still loves me.’ And that has really impacted me and benefited me. So, the end of my first year was really when a change sort of started in my faith because I started to look to God more and trust Him more.

The struggles faced by participants like Rachel prompted them to view God differently and grow in their faith as a result. God images expanded to include these understandings and pictures of God as a result of the struggles participants faced in their first year.

### **Experiencing God through Nature**

Another theme that arose from the data was participants experienced God through nature. Six of the twelve participants mentioned how they see God in nature and how different characteristics of God are evident to them through looking at creation. Two

participants, Lacey and Regina, shared similarities in reporting how the wind reminded them of the presence of God. In describing why the wind makes her think of God, Lacey said it was “just the constant reminder that He’s there at least, as a friend, as someone to talk to.” The moments with the wind provided a connection to their image of God as being a constant presence in their lives. God as a friend, always there, a constant presence, and as great and mighty are the images of God believed by the participants through their encounters with creation. For Lacey and Regina, seeing God through nature was a phenomenon which came after they started their freshman year. Before college, Lacey described God as, “a little more distant overall,” and Regina said, “He was just kind of there.” Yet, in their first year, their God images changed in that they viewed God as closer and more relational with them. This change in God image is evident through their descriptions of God by the wind. The other participants who mentioned seeing God in nature spoke about God as the Creator of all things, so by looking at creation, He is revealed. John noted that creation reminded him that God is present. The God images of the participants were revealed as they experienced and saw elements of nature.

### **Gaining New Perspectives**

Being exposed to new perspectives arose as another theme from the data. Participants encountered these new perspectives in classes as well as in interactions with professors, friends, and small groups. Eight out of the twelve participants gained new perspectives during their first year of college. Five participants were exposed to new perspectives in their first-year seminar, two in small groups, and one from friends she made. Rachel described the impact her friends had on her during her first year: “Being a

part of that [group of friends] I got exposed to so many different things than I was ever exposed to in my high school and that has shaped me a lot.”

### *First-Year Seminar*

The impact of the first-year seminar emerged as a sub theme of new perspectives. The course, which all first-year students take their first semester, gives students, as Aang said, “a basic understanding of [my] relationship with God, [my] relationship with others, [my] relationship with myself, and [my] relationship with creation.” Five of the twelve participants explicitly stated how the material covered in the course changed their perspectives. These perspective changes revolved around their beliefs about those four relationships: one’s relationship with God, others, self, and creation.

Aang described his response to learning the material of the course:

It really shaped my understanding of how I should interact with every single thing around me. And also that courses I took integrated God into them, I also thought it gave me a better picture of my relationship with everybody and the importance of making [a] good relationship with God, so those ideas really shaped me.

Amy noted how the material in the course caused her to think about how she wants to live her life. Three of these participants also mentioned one professor in particular who taught part of the first-year seminar. Michael described what he appreciated most about this professor:

We didn’t always agree with each other on everything but that’s what I appreciated about him—was how he made me rethink... just the way he made me think about what I believe in and made me kind of wrestle with some of those things that I just assumed were true for a long time.

As the material in this course challenged participants' beliefs regarding their relationship with God, the course also affected how participants viewed God. Aang said, "the... [first-year seminar] as a course ultimately, like, helped in changing, like, my perspective towards my spiritual faith." Regina stated how one of the professors of the course affected her view of God:

If we have questions, he wants to answer them, and that's more important than maybe the topic of that day. And so I think also knowing that just kind of helped, because mainly you can see God in that too I feel like, because we have a lot of questions as humans.

This professor's ability to receive questions from students reinforced how this participant views God as one who listens.

During the first college year, friends, small groups, professors, and classes introduced new perspectives to these participants. As the participants engaged with these perspectives, some reflected on how their views on their purposes in life, God, and relationships with God may change. The first-year student's experience involves gaining new perspectives, some of which help shape their images of God.

### **Difficulty in Articulating Their Mental Picture of God**

The difficulty of forming or identifying one's image of God is another theme found in the data. Participants were asked about their relationship with God and their God images before and after their first year of college. Half of the participants found difficulty describing their God image, even though they could describe growth in their relationship with God. However, their descriptions of who God is and how they relate to God

revealed the participants' images of God. Participants could describe God and how He relates to them, but often could not describe a particular image.

Participants were given the opportunity to draw a visual representation of God to better portray their image of God. However, this element of the protocol proved to be less helpful than anticipated. Nine participants expressed that they were not good at drawing or lacked artistic talent before deciding to draw God or declining the offer. Because drawing God did not aid the researcher in gaining greater understanding of the participants' God images overall, it was dropped from the protocol.

### **Essence: The First Year of College Impacts God Image**

The data obtained through the interviews affirms the conclusion that the first year of college impacts a student's God image. The essence of the research is not only that the first-year experience impacts a first-year student's God image, but also that participants' God images are more loving and relational after their freshman year. Of particular note, the hardships faced by the participants, the community around them, and the exposure to new perspectives had the most observable impact on the change in God images. The participants pictured God as closer, a comforter, a good father, and more trustworthy than prior to their first year of college. Some of the participants articulated an explicit impact and change of their God image, while this change was implicit for others. Overall, eleven of the twelve participants expressed a change in God image that included more loving or pleasant images of God; also, all twelve articulated growth in their faith through their first year.

All of the participants described having a relationship with God prior to their freshman year, but all reported a lack of depth in this relationship. Two participants

described having held their parents' faith, while others used descriptors of their faith as "one-dimensional," "transactional," and having less depth than where it is now. Some participants used distance as a descriptor when putting their relationship with God prior to their first year into words. Six of the participants described God as "up in the sky." For most of the participants who used this descriptor, they were describing how God was not near to them, but far and "up in the sky."

On the other hand, Alex had an image of God that continued to describe God "up in the sky," but still involved in his life. When asked how he would describe God, Alex shared, "I see Him up in the clouds, reaching out His arm[s]. I see you can just tell how big He is or how full He is of love and passion, happiness and just having his arms out for you." Alex's image of God described the proximity and closeness that many other described when asked how their God image changed through their first year of college. In describing a positive God image, the participants overwhelmingly used language of proximity and relationship, referencing God as being closer to them now than before and realizing that He is always there for them. Amy and Rachel were two participants who articulated a more complete God image after their first year. Other descriptors participants used to describe God and their image of Him include God always being there for the participants, being a close father figure, and being a friend. Daniel and Alex both articulated a clearer picture or understanding of God. Looking back at her first year, Regina noted, "I actually feel like I can depend on Him more, and I know He's always going to be there even when He's silent." Through all the shaping events and moments which occur during one's first year of college, the participants experienced a positive God image change overall.



## **Conclusion**

The research question which guided the interview protocol was: What impact does the first-year experience of college students have on their God images? Participants encountered many new things in their first year of college: a new welcoming community, some struggles, new perspectives from others, and new experiences with God. Throughout their first year of college, all of the participants grew in their faith in God and all but one developed a more relational and loving image of God compared to prior to the start of their freshman year. Therefore, the essence of the data is the first year of college has an impact on a student's God image. The participants reveal this impact by describing images of God that are clearer or more complete, that show God to be closer than before, or that reveal Him as being a more relational figure.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The pictures, metaphors, and experiences that come to mind when one thinks about God makes up one's God image. In *Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer (1961) says first, "what comes to mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (p. 1). If God images are important, then the experiences that impact these images are significant. The findings of this study indicate that living in community, gaining new perspectives, and experiencing struggles shape and develop a college student's God image during their first college year. The final chapter of this thesis provides discussion on the results, examines the implications for practice, outlines suggestions for future research, and finally, discusses the benefits and limitations of the study.

### **Discussion**

The first year of college impacts a student's God image. This study indicates that first-year students changed their images of God from distant, impersonal, and unclear to representations that are more complete and reflective of God as more relational and loving, closer, and more present in their lives. The main influences that participants noted as leading to these changes were the communities in which they were involved, the new perspectives they encountered, and the struggles they faced. Past research indicates that many factors impact one's view of God (Hall & Fujikawa, 2013). This study indicates

that the first year of college can be one of these factors. Therefore, it is important to consider how the first year of college may shape one's picture of God.

Through the data analysis, themes emerged which spoke to the research question: What impact does the first-year experience of college students have on their God images? The experiences of the first year of college changes students' God image. As noted, this research revealed the positive impact hardship had on a first-year student's God image. More specifically, participants who faced struggles noted growth in their faith and increasingly viewed God as one who helped them in their trials. Participants' God images also changed when they encountered new perspectives from their peers, professors, or material covered in class. One class in particular, the first-year seminar, organized around examining one's relationship with God, self, others, and creation, caused some participants to view God differently. The private faith-based liberal arts institution in which this study took place is known for its culture of intentional community. Participants noted the intentional community of the university as an important element of their first-year experience. Many of these participants indicated that they felt welcomed to campus and encouraged in their faith. Some participants expressed the particular impact involvement in small groups had on their faith. Overall, the impact of the challenges, new perspectives, and communities that students encountered lead to God images that were increasingly characterized as relational and loving.

This thesis contributes to the broader literature on God image and the first-year experience in several ways. The results of this research connect to findings outlined in Chapter 2. Lawrence (1997) cites Rizzuto's (1979) description of God image as an object resulting from collected memories and experiences attributed to God. Hall and Fujikawa

(2013) reveal that the God image is affected and changed by the experiences and environment surrounding the individual. The present research adds to the existing literature by providing examples of several particular first-year experiential factors that influence God images. Like the work done by Cook et al. (2003), this study observed some participants who were transcendents, those who could hold the tension of viewing God as both a judge and friend. Conversely, these findings contrast with Clydesdale's (2007) conclusion that students in their first year of college make no movement toward connecting their experiences to the larger purposes of their lives.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this research carry implications for how educators in student development can walk alongside first-year students in their faith development. In interacting with students one-on-one, it is important to talk with them about their God images. As revealed in this study, God image is a new idea for many students as many found difficulty in expressing their image of God. However, students do have experiences that shape how they image, picture, or view God. Giving students room to articulate and reflect upon these images may be helpful in their faith development, as is part of the mission of institutions within the CCCU: "to develop the whole person, including not only the intellectual, physical, and social aspects of being human but moral and spiritual dimensions as well" (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004, p. 93). Asking students to describe God or articulate their mental picture of God may provide opportunity to engage with them in conversations on faith from a new direction.

Furthermore, this research has implications for curriculum and programs for various areas across Christian college campuses. Educators could use this research in

first-year seminars, the training of student leaders, orientation for first-year students, and in the training and debriefing of service-learning trips. Because one of the subthemes was the impact of the first-year seminar, educators at other institutions could devote part of the curriculum of the first-year seminar to God images. Specifically, this portion of the course could focus on images of God described in scripture. The impact of scripture on first-year students' God images in this study was not a theme and was not mentioned by the participants. However, scripture is full of images of God and different metaphors to describe God's character. Therefore, using scripture to teach students about God images could be helpful to first-year students as they measure what scripture says about God and how they experience and picture God.

Using images of God found in scripture would also benefit the training of student leaders, orientation, and service-learning trips. In these three areas, there are opportunities to engage students in how they picture God both to help students reflect on the experiences that shaped and molded their image of God and to make them aware of how their God image may change with new experiences. Training student leaders in how the first-year experience impacts students' God images could prepare them to walk alongside the first-year students they serve and be attentive to their faith development. Giving first-year students a brief overview of God images in their orientation could prepare them for how their first year of college may impact their God image. Lastly, as new experiences such as service-learning trips are available to students, giving them opportunity to reflect on their image of God before and after the trip could allow them to see how their image of God changes. Overall, this research provides opportunity for

Christian institutions to care holistically about first-year students on both one-on-one and programmatic levels.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The present study reveals areas for further research on the first-year experience and God image. Further research done at other institutions within the CCCU would be helpful in order to examine if the themes found in this study are typical of the larger body of first-year students at faith-based institutions. In addition, it would be interesting to research the God images of students from public institutions in comparison to the God images of students at faith-based institutions. Unlike the present study, future research could instead involve two data collection times, one at the beginning of the first year and one at the conclusion of the first year, instead of a single data collection at the beginning of the second year. Additionally, the God Image Inventory developed by Lawrence (1997) could be used in a quantitative or mixed methods study by asking participants to take the inventory at the beginning and end of their first year.

In future research, more attention should be focused on clarifying the language of God image for the participants. The interview protocol needs to be monitored for clarity so that each participant is focused on their experiential view of God rather than what God may look like physically. The definition of God image needs to be explained to the participants prior to their participation in the study in order to collect the most accurate data possible. While this thesis added to the body of research on God image, there is great opportunity available for further exploration.

## **Limitations**

There are a few limitations to this study. The chief limitation is the lack of clarity over God image. The researcher did not define God image for participants prior to the interviews, and as was revealed in the themes, some had a difficult time articulating the change in God image. Precision and clarity over the definition of God image would have proved helpful for participants to know prior to their involvement in the study.

The other limitation was the interruption caused by the global pandemic (COVID-19). Although it did not surface as a major theme in the data analysis, COVID-19 forced the institution to move to an online format halfway through the second semester. Therefore, the participants in the study were unable to finish the full year on campus. Due to the transition to an online format, the researcher was unable to collect data at the end of the first year and had to wait until the beginning of the participants' second year. Therefore, the potential impact of the summer in between the first and second year of college on the participants' God images is a limitation. Furthermore, a greater limitation than the data collection timeline is the effect of the global pandemic on the lives of the participants and their images of God. Studies are yet to be published on its impact, but the presence of COVID-19 surely affected the participants' first-year experience.

## **Benefits**

This thesis project is beneficial to both the research community and the student development community. Overall, this study added to the research on God image development and the first-year experience of college students. The focus on God image rather than faith as a whole benefits student development educators who seek to find new ways to explore the faith development of their students. The themes revealed by the

research benefit student development professionals who seek to understand what impacts the faith development of first-year students. As this study proved beneficial to the participants as they reflected on their faith development through the lens of God image, educators and students could have the same benefit by reflecting on their own God image. This study on God image offers a framework for students, educators, and researchers to reflect on, study, and interpret faith development.

### **Conclusion**

The research question which guided this study was: What impact does the first-year experience of college students have on their God images? Through looking at research on the first-year experience of college students, God image, and college student faith development, this study examined the impact of the first year on students' God images. Five themes emerged from the interviews: the impact of the community, experiencing struggles, experiencing God in nature, gaining new perspectives, and difficulty to articulate one's mental picture of God. The twelve participants in the study revealed that the first year of college impacts a student's image of God. Every participant grew in his or her faith, and eleven out of twelve developed more loving and relational images of God through the factors that shaped their first college year.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent**

A Study of the Impact of the First-Year Experience of College on a Students' God Image.

You are invited to participate in a research study of the impact of the first year of college on students' God images. You were selected as a possible subject because you are a second year student at the participating university. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop the interview at any point. The study is being conducted by Josiah Peterson – MAHE Student at Taylor University

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the first-year experience of college on students' God image.

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

10-12

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

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in a voluntary one-on-one interview with the researcher (Josiah Peterson). Your participation in the study will be completed when the interview is finished or at any point that you choose to end the interview. All interviews will be recorded and then transcribed, coded, and themed by the researcher.

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

While on the study, the risks and/or discomforts are:

The risks of completing the interview is potentially being uncomfortable answering the questions.

To minimize this risk or any discomfort you may experience you may tell the researcher you feel uncomfortable or do not care to answer a particular question. You are not required to answer any question you prefer not to. You may decline to answer or withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason with no repercussions or penalties.

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

The benefit to participation is the opportunity to reflect on how your first year of college may have impacted your image of God and faith development.

#### **ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

There is no alternative to taking part in this study.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Though great care will be given to keep your personal information confidential, it is impossible to 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. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings of the interviews and the recordings will be deleted following the completions of the research study. When data, transcriptions, or any other sensitive material related to this study is stored as a digital copy on a computer, the computer will be password protected with a password known only to the investigator – Josiah Peterson. Your anonymity will be guarded by replacing your name with a pseudonym. You will be able to choose your preferred pseudonym before the interview begins. The interviews will be categorized by the pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

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.

#### COSTS

There is no cost to participate in this study.

#### PAYMENT

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

#### COMPENSATION FOR INJURY

In the event of physical injury resulting from your participation in this research, necessary medical treatment will be provided to you and billed as part of your medical expenses. Costs not covered by your health care insurer will be your responsibility. Also, it is your responsibility to determine the extent of your health care coverage. There is no program in place for other monetary compensation for such injuries. If you are participating in research which is not conducted at a medical facility, you will be responsible for seeking medical care and for the expenses associated with any care received.

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher Josiah Peterson at [Josiah.peterson@taylor.edu](mailto:Josiah.peterson@taylor.edu) or (240) 691-3026 as well as his supervisor, Dr. Tim Herrmann, at [tmherrmann@taylor.edu](mailto:tmherrmann@taylor.edu) or (765) 425-6754. 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).

#### 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. And, as previously mentioned, you are also free to skip any questions. 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 or any of the researchers involved in this study

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.



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

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

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

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

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking part in this research. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the first year experience on the ways college students understand or envision God. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and you may opt to stop at any point in this process. Your participation will be completely anonymous and at no time will your name or any identifying information be known to anyone other than me. All interviews are being recorded and will then be transcribed so that I can analyze this information. No one but I will have access to this information. The results of the analysis will be reported in aggregate form and again no individual identifying information will be reported. Are you ready to begin?

What impact does the first-year experience of college students have on their God images?

1. How would you describe God?
2. What images come to mind when you think of God? What does He look like?
3. How would you describe your relationship with God?
4. How would you describe God and your relationship with God before coming to college?
5. What images came to mind when you thought of God before college? What did He look like then?
6. Please describe your transition to college.
7. Please describe your experience of your first year of college.
8. Were you involved in any campus activities or hold any leadership roles on campus during your first year?
  - a. How did this impact your first year?
9. What moments, experiences, events, or people most significantly shaped your first year of college? Please explain.
10. Has your faith changed since coming to college? If so, how? Please explain.
11. Has your image of God changed since coming to college? If so, how? Please explain.
12. Some people find it helpful to draw a visual representation of God. Would you find this helpful? If so, would you be willing to take a few minutes to draw God?

Or, if you would prefer, you can take this piece of paper with you and get it back to me tomorrow. Would you like to do that?

13. Is there anything else related to your God image or your first year of college that you believe would be helpful to this research for me to understand?

Thank you again for your participation in your research. If you have any other questions, please reach out to me.

