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# Praying with a Pen in Hand : An exploration of the effects of creative writing on people's images of God

**In this piece of practical theology Kate Bruce describes research she has carried out through questionnaire and quiet days into the place and use of creative writing when exploring a person's images of God. She enquires into the purpose and place of creative writing in Christian spirituality, and ends by offering a variety of ways in which creative writing can be used to encourage people to explore their internalised God-images.**

## Introduction

Do our images of God matter? Where do they come from? Could creative writing enable some people to uncover and explore their images of God? What is happening theologically when we engage the imagination and pray with a pen in hand? These questions underpin the following small scale study, involving exploration of the roots and significance of the god-image, theological reflection concerning the role of the imagination in religious faith, reflection on the process of creative writing and empirical research into how creative writing affects people's images of God.

## What is meant by the term 'God-image'?

Ana-Maria Rizzuto speaks of the 'God concept' and the 'God image'. The God-concept is the God of the theologians and philosophers, which is 'fabricated at the level of secondary process thinking.'<sup>1</sup> Rizzuto argues that the God-image is formed from the child's experience of its primary objects. Held, cared for, fed, loved, nurtured, seeing herself reflected in her parents' eyes, a child has the raw ingredients for a positive God-image. Neglected, left hungry, without physical contact, left unseen (or feeling unseen), the child has the ingredients of a dangerously exalted, impassive God-image or of a disappointing God- image which may lead to later rejection of God and the protective embrace of unbelief. Long before the child encounters the God-concept, she has already begun to form her images of God: 'no-one arrives at the "house of God" without his pet God under his arm.'<sup>2</sup> A key question is whether for some people creative writing might open up the potential to engage in discovering and re-imagining this 'pet God'.

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1 Rizzuto, 1997: 47

2 Rizzuto, 1997: 8

## Transitional space

'Transitional space' describes that overlapping space between the subject and the object, the I and the not I. A teddy bear is invested with the comfort of the object, for example, a primary caregiver, but it clearly is not the object. At the same time it represents the subject's need for comfort and care; yet it clearly is not the subject; the teddy bear as transitional object inhabits transitional space; the place for comfort, growth and new understanding. Arguably, the process of creative writing can create transitional space; the overlap between the subject (the writer) and the object (that which is written), here, dynamic growth can occur through the exploration of the God-image.

## Do God-images matter?

Why is it important to explore the resources available to help us test and challenge our God-images? The God-image touches on a wide range of issues: there is a correlation between God-image and politics, seen, for example, in the invasion of another country because 'God is on our side.' How we image God has an effect on morality and ethics. In terms of our understanding of mission, the God-image has influence; if God is regarded as a forgiving father, rather than a holy and wrathful judge, then the basis and practice of mission is likely to be affected. Our God-images matter profoundly, not least because of the intimate connection between the God-image and self-image.

The God in whom we do, or do not believe, is likely to become a powerful object in our inner worlds,<sup>3</sup>

In MacKenna's thesis, as we develop in psychological and spiritual terms our internal God-images will grow and change. Perhaps as we open ourselves up to the possibility of addressing and challenging those God-images, through the medium of creative writing, we will experience psychological and spiritual development?

## The imagination in the life of faith

Paul Avis, in *God and the Creative Imagination* argues that:

Divine revelation is given above all (though certainly not exclusively) in modes that are addressed to the human imagination, rather than to any other faculty (such as the analytical reason of the moral conscience.)<sup>4</sup>

This assertion takes seriously the role of the imagination as transitional space in which God communicates with us. This is not difficult to see: God's revelation in the scriptures is not articulated with 'clarity, precision and literalness, but in the obscure and opaque figures of metaphor, symbol and myth.'<sup>5</sup> These figures reside in the heartland of the imagination; hermeneutics is an imaginative venture. The formulation of doctrine is an endeavour of huge imaginative insight. Formulated statements of belief come from reflection on and discussion of the universal, revelatory symbols embedded in the biblical narratives. As such, systematic theology is a work of the imagination. Without the engagement of the imagination, liturgy becomes an empty series of word, gesture and movement, signifying

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<sup>3</sup> MacKenna, 2002: 332

<sup>4</sup> Avis, 1999: 3

<sup>5</sup> Avis, 1999: 50

nothing. Without imaginative engagement the sermon becomes like toast without butter; dry, choking, regrettably dull (and possibly lethal!) Pastoral praxis too is an act of the imagination as we seek ways to co-operate with the divine initiative of mapping the kenotic paradigm onto the fabric of the world. In concrete terms this might be seen in intercessory prayer, in the setting up of a prison visiting scheme, in the embrace of love in the shadow of death. Such Christian praxis is born in the imagination and requires imaginative vision to bring it to maturity. Without such imagination, where is hope?

There is no life of the spirit without the imagination.<sup>6</sup>

### **Creative writing in the life of faith**

‘The scope of our art is to give wings to the soul’, writes Gregory Nazianzen,<sup>7</sup> words which express beautifully the purpose of creative writing in the life of faith. The point is not to produce a polished piece of art, though that may be a possible result. The true aim is to engage in a formative experience, bringing to the page the writer’s lived experience of God and by grace discovering more of God through the process of working the words on the page. Creative writing can take many forms: poems, stories, parables, letters, psalms, webs of associated words, vignettes, descriptive prose, and arguably journal entries which may weave together recollection and interpretation in creative ways. Such writing has the potential to become a conversation between our God-concepts, framed in the external world of liturgical engagement and theological reflection, and our God-images, formed in the internal world of early experience, question, doubt and desire. Understood in these terms, creative writing becomes the equivalent of praying with a pen in hand. The act of prayer requires that the supplicant be open to and present before God, relinquishing control in the sense of setting aside time and laying aside a self driven agenda.

### **Creative Writing in the Christian Tradition**

There is nothing new about engaging in creative writing in order to ponder, discover, express, and communicate, to the self and others, thoughts and feelings about God. The book of Job is a great example of the ‘what if’ power of creative writing. What if God and the satan strolled the courts of heaven and God allowed the satan to test Job to the very limits? What windows might that open onto our understanding of theodicy? The psalms demonstrate the power of human creativity to produce rich, moving meditations expressing the full gamut of human emotion and reaching out to new understandings of and images for God. The scriptures offer a prodigious range of creative pictures of God – from God as knitter or furious mother bear robbed of her cubs, to God as the lamb, the bread of life, the living water. The biblical writers stretch language, drawn from their culture and experience, to capture and convey their understanding of God. It is not special language somehow separated from the ordinary course of life, magical language which pins down God as God is in God-self. The special status of biblical imagery lies in the normative value placed on it in the unfolding of the tradition, a process in which some scriptural images (God as male, king, father) have become, for many rather unhelpfully, more normative than others, (God as mother, potter, friend). The biblical

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6 Ulanov and Ulanov, 1991: 3

7 Jones and Paulsell, 2002: xi

words and names for God are not themselves God and we must not allow images of God to become idols, whether they are biblical images or images arising in the process of our own creativity. This raises questions of authenticity and truth which will be dealt with later.

Augustine's *Confessions* are another example of the place of writing as a means of communicating with God and the self (as well as with a wider audience). Commenting on the purpose of his *Confessions* Augustine says:

They are meant to excite men's minds and affections toward him. At least as far as I am concerned, *this is what they did for me when they were being written* and they still do this when read.<sup>8</sup> (my italics)

This clearly underscores Augustine's understanding of the power of the writing process in general as a means of drawing near to God. Spiritual writers such as Theresa of Avila used creative writing as a way of engaging with God in her image of the interior castle, or her images of the garden as a metaphor for prayer. *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, represent other powerful examples of creative writing as a resource in the Christian tradition. In these examples the benefit to us is through reading such material, but engaging in the act of creative writing also holds enormous transformative potential.

### **What are the truth claims of the imagination?**

Maintaining that imagination is central to Christianity is not the same as saying that faith is imaginary. Setting imagination against reason, regarding the former as a source of embellishment and potential excess, and the latter as cool, safe and logical, the guardian of truth, is a fallacious polarisation. Reason cannot operate without the imagination to enable reflection and interpretation. Where would the world of scientific exploration be without the essential service of the imagination to open up new ways of seeing and exploring? Imagination enables people to re-engage the world, to re-shape it through active participation. Jesus sought to re-shape the world by ushering in the reign of God. To do this he adopted:

the aid of the imagination. It was through the poetry of parable, of prayer and of dramatic action, that he elicited recognition of and encounter with what he called the reign of God; and in this way he made new perception possible, marshalled emotion and moved people to action'.<sup>9</sup>

The extent to which the imagination can be seen as an agent of truth is the extent to which it brings about transformation in line with Christ's vision of the Kingdom of Heaven; by its fruit will its truth value be known.

### **Creative writing and authenticity**

Creative writing offers the possibility of privacy, allowing for the censor to be 'assassinated'! We can give ourselves permission to play with different ways of looking at God, free of the constraint of theological orthodoxy whilst playing in the transitional space created by imagination, pen and page. But isn't this a recipe for heresy? Where is the touchstone of authenticity for our images of God?

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<sup>8</sup> Outler, A(ed), *Augustine's Confessions*,<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/a/augustine/confessions/confessions1.0.pdf> , (13.07.06)

We all have many images of God, some known and explored consciously, some operating in a less obvious way. In both categories there will be inauthentic images of God, not consonant with the nature and character of God as revealed in the life of Christ. The dangerous images are not those which are inauthentic but known, but those which are inauthentic and unknown. Writing is a way of making known what was unknown, helping us to shape and concretise what was formless and void. What we do with that is a secondary question. In all this it is important to remember that any form of writing about God is a mixture of audacity and humility:

Audacity, for attempting to write anything about God at all; humility, because all ones attempts will have to be revised and, even then, will never be wholly satisfactory.<sup>10</sup>

St Paul points out that ‘now we see through a glass darkly’ but there will come a time when we see face to face and will know fully (1 Cor. 13 12). In the meantime faith, hope and love remain. The touchstone of authenticity for our images of God is the extent to which they inspire us to acts of faith, hope and love in the kenotic model of Christ. The fiduciary tradition in epistemology calls us to trust in order to test. This same tradition can be operative in the creative process. Sanctified imagining in creativity is simply offering the imagination to God from a position of trust and humility, in the context of a relationship in which it is all right to make mistakes since love creates the context for freedom. Avis points out that we don’t apprehend the faith more clearly through ‘steadily more precise and accurate interpretations of its doctrinal formulae, but through its life of worship, prayer, fellowship, service and suffering’<sup>11</sup>. There is no reason why creative writing cannot be a life giving aspect of this praxis, in the understanding that it is perfectly possible to speak the truth without being literal about it.

## What happens when we write?

### Shaping thoughts

Writing is a process of expressing and developing our thoughts. It is not the case that we think first, then stop, then write. There is a complex interaction between the words as they appear on the page and the thoughts that are generated in the mind. ‘By writing we find out what we know’<sup>12</sup> – but not in the sense that the pen acts as a camera taking a snapshot of a slice of pre-existent, static knowing. Writing is a dynamic process of formulating, shaping and developing ideas to the extent that what is written may well cause surprise. This is an experience reflected by many of the participants in the workshops I ran as part of this research (my italics):

I found the ‘writing a letter to God’ really useful. In fact I wrote quite a lot of things which I *never expected to* which reflected my perception of God.

I discovered *what* I really think God is, what he’s about, and opened myself up to him in *a new way*.’

There was movement and life in the writing – which *surprised me*. In the writing I went into *new pictures, new places* in my understanding of God – gave me a thirst for more.

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9 Mackay, 1986: 22-23

10 Jones and Paulsell, 2002: 22

11 Avis, 1999: 141

12 Smith, 1994: 35

Charles Taylor writes, 'When we come to articulate a feeling in a new way, it frequently is true to say that the feeling changes.'<sup>13</sup> Following this logic, when we image God in a new way, do our feelings about God and ourselves change?

### **Concretising thoughts**

Writing has a peculiar power. To begin with it concretises our expression at a particular moment, enabling us to lay down a marker, to say 'I have been here'.

Writers can look at the language they produce in a way that speakers cannot. Writing is a tangible construction.'<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, one of the participants in Workshop 3 wrote in the feedback questionnaire of their hope to continue 'writing pieces regularly and using them for reflection and *as markers to establish and hold present thoughts, insights and experiences which inform future experiences and perceptions.*' A similar point is made by Gillie Bolton, in an article about writing in primary health care<sup>15</sup> 'It can help to clarify and organise thoughts. It can encourage development and expansion of understanding *because it forms a lasting record which may be worked on later* (My italics).

### **The contemporary use of creative writing in personal development**

Creative writing has long been regarded as a key tool in personal development. The Ira Progoff method of using writing, in this case journaling, to 'drop underneath the daily problems to find the deeper issues lying below,'<sup>16</sup> would be one such example. The popularity of courses such as *The Artists Way*<sup>17</sup> underscores the potential offered by creative writing in self-development, so why not in spiritual development? In 1996 the Association for the Literary Arts in personal development (LAPIDUS) was established, funded by Arts Council England.

At its core is the belief that words used creatively can be a powerful tool for health and personal and community development – through the writing, reading and performing of poetry, prose, fiction, drama and story.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Self on the Page*,<sup>19</sup> there are examples of the use of creative writing with people with learning difficulties, with terminally ill people, with dementia sufferers, and in primary health care. Why not with church groups and individuals?

## **Empirical Research**

### **Methodology**

In order to explore the effect that creative writing might have on people's images of God, I sent out a postal questionnaire to 53 spiritual directors and I designed and ran three creative writing workshops, gathering data through the use of a questionnaire at the end of each session. The research with spiritual directors was to establish whether my assumption that a person's image of God is of central importance in spiritual development is accurate. I also wanted to know how, if at all, directors work with their directees' images of God and whether they ever use creative writing as a means of helping a person explore their God images.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, 1985: 213 -292

<sup>14</sup> Smith, 1994: 16

<sup>15</sup> Bolton 'Writing or Pills?' in Hunt and Sampson 1998: 78 - 92

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.ac4r.com/progoff.htm> (14.07.06)

<sup>17</sup> Cameron, 1985

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://www.lapidus.org.uk/> (14.07.06)

<sup>19</sup> Hunt, C. and Sampson, F (eds.) *The Self on the Page: Theory and Practice of Creative Writing in Personal Development*

The aim of the workshops was to take participants through a structured, safe and engaging process with creative writing in the hope that we might discover more about God and about ourselves. Given that such a venture might give rise to painful feelings, as well as liberating and empowering ones, I was aware of the need for each workshop to be a safe 'holding environment' (Winnicott). It was important to recognise at the outset that for many reasons, related to school experiences, fear of failure, and so forth, writing may cause anxiety. I began with assurances that there would be no compunction to share anything publicly and that the purpose was not about literary criticism or competition. I set the workshops up with a variety of optional activities to help people into the process of writing and then I simply invited participants to be open to the possibility of God in the imaginative process; a form of praying with a pen in hand.

At the end of the workshop participants were given a questionnaire the broad purpose of which was to establish how useful the participants found creative writing in helping them to explore and extend their images of God and to discover whether they would consider the ongoing use of creative writing for this purpose.

## **Results and Analysis of the Four Research Areas**

### **1. Questionnaire for Spiritual Directors**

From the 53 spiritual directors contacted, 18 completed questionnaires were returned. 89% of these responded that a person's images of God are significant in the process of spiritual direction. Since spiritual direction is concerned with a concentrated focus on a person's spiritual life, and images of God are regarded as crucial in this, then it seems reasonable to argue that images of God matter in the more general context of life. In other words – this study focuses on a real and relevant subject.

33% of directees record that the subject of images of God is one which directees bring up frequently/often. 50% said it was a subject seldom brought up. Therefore, 83% stated that at some point, ('seldom', 'frequent' or 'often'), the subject of images of God is brought by the directee to the session. The fact that 56% of the directors say they challenge a person's God-image must mean that, more or less frequently, the issue arises in the course of direction and is therefore a 'live' issue.

When asked a general question about resources, only 17% of the directors make reference to writing as a tool identified as being used to help directees address their image(s) of God – though not specifically creative writing. When prompted directly, however, 72% of the sample is currently using writing in some form as part of the process of spiritual direction. Why is there a 55% increase in respondents claiming to use writing within the context of spiritual direction when the directors are asked directly? Either they change their response, giving the answer they feel is 'right', or they do not recognise that writing is a resource that they are already using, and could perhaps develop.

### **2. Workshop 1 (Quiet Day on Images of God and Creative Writing)**

#### **Results of Participant's Questionnaire**

All 8 participants were female. Does the gender bias suggest that women are more interested in issues of spirituality and therefore more likely to attend a quiet day and/

or that women are more likely to express an interest in creative writing? Consultation with the particular spirituality centre where the workshop took place indicates that the majority of their quiet day participants are women. They suggest this is due to the gender bias of the church in general. This raises the question of how and if men might be encouraged to engage with creative writing on a spiritual subject.

The majority of the participants were over 50. This may be due to a variety of factors: older people may have greater freedom from family commitments and therefore be able to attend such an event; it is possible that a quiet day by its nature appeals to an older age group; perhaps creative writing appeals to an older age bracket – although experience in teaching and working with younger people suggests that creative writing can appeal to a spectrum of ages. Perhaps the association between creative writing and images of God appeals to an older age group. If this is the case, can creative writing around God-images be introduced to a younger age profile? How might this be done? In what context? Could it, for example, be done in workshops in a secular school environment? Could it be done with church groups – youth groups and wider whole church courses?

All participants were highly educated. This may reflect the catchment area served by this particular spirituality centre or it may indicate that attending a quiet day is likely to appeal to such a participant group. Is the use of creative writing something which only appeals to an educated group? Or is it the case that with the design of appropriate support materials, anyone can engage with and enjoy creative writing?

Participants were asked “Through your own creative writing today, can you identify any aspects of God which you had not considered before?” 7 of the 8 participants identified new aspects of God they had found through their writing on the quiet day, suggesting that the hypothesis that creative writing does affect some people’s images of God is well founded.

When the participants were asked what resources they used to help them develop and explore their images of God, reading, praying and reflection on scripture were most frequently mentioned, writing of any form scored low; only one person mentioned journaling as a means of deepening the God image. When they were asked if, after the workshop, they would use creative writing as a resource, seven out of the eight responded affirmatively. Why is there such a discrepancy between the responses to these questions? Either the group were responding affirmatively in order to meet perceived expectation, or they genuinely did think, after the workshop experience, that creative writing is a valuable way of engaging with God. The only way to test this conclusively would be to engage in a longitudinal study and follow up a group at say six monthly intervals.

### **3. Workshop 2**

This consisted of 19 young people aged 14 – 19 and 2 leaders in their late twenties (9 males and 12 females). I wanted to work with a younger age group to test my hypothesis that creative writing is a valuable resource with all ages and I was interested in counteracting the gender bias of the other workshops.

When participants were asked what resources helped them to develop and explore their images of God, the group most often referred to worship and prayer,



music, and sharing with friends. Once again, writing of any nature, let alone creative writing, scored low as a recognized resource to help a person develop relationship with God. When asked specifically 'Have you ever previously used creative writing to help you to explore your image of God?' only one participant answered affirmatively. This is an age group largely engaged with exams and revision – is it possible that writing is associated negatively with study? However, in response to the question 'Did the writing exercise today help you to think about God?' 100% answered affirmatively. Such a result is remarkable and suggests either a fault in the research method, the most likely being that the group felt obliged to give a positive answer. However, this needs to be counterbalanced by their ability to articulate what they discovered:

*I discovered what I really think God is, what he's about, and opened myself up to him in a new way.'* (Male 16)

*'It helped massively. I could take time over my thoughts and actually really appreciate what sense they made in prose.'* (Male, 17)

*'Thinking of God as a person was an interesting way of re-discovering God's love for and understanding of people. Particularly good as a group activity.'* (Male, 17)

*'It helped me to understand God in terms of the amazingsness of creation and how I fit in with all that.'* (Male, 17)

*'It was very revealing how I thought about my relationship with God. I feel secure in my thoughts about God, but I often feel afraid to be real about how I respond to God.'* (Male, 29)

*'It was brilliant. I have not felt so much peace for a long time. It is difficult to turn off the "I shouldn't be writing this; what will people think?" button. I am amazed how people's fears and loves are expressed through this medium.'* (Male, 19)

*'I discovered that God probably wants us all to think of him in our own ways.'*(Male, 15)

*'Didn't really put anything on paper, but gave me a different perspective and clearer view on my relationship with God.'* (Male, 14)

*'I found the exercise solidified an image of God in my mind, but I found it difficult to get that image across in my writing.'* (Male, 17)

*'Helped me to think of God in a very different way.'* (Female,14)

*'I totally felt like God used the piece to connect with me – reach out to me – revealed something new.'* (Female, 30)

*'Discovered he can be seen in many different ways.'* (Female, 17)

*'I discovered that God can do powerful things and move you to write things about him that relate to scripture, not knowingly.'* (Female, 17)

*'I found a way of finding how I truly am with God. The writing showed my weaknesses so I can work on them.'* (Female, 16)

*'It made me think how I viewed him and what I doubted of him, it also reassured me in my writing – like it felt maybe that he put that there?'* (Female, 16)

*'I really like the way it makes me think about and contemplate God. It has made me challenge myself a bit more – I want to let my imagination grow and expand around God.'* (Female,15)

*'Even though I thought I would have no ideas, after thinking for a few moments, I realised I did.'* (Female 15)

*'I just never let myself consider how awesome God is.'* (Female, 16)

*I was surprised that I actually had something to write about. I think it really helped me think of God in a very different way.* (Female, 14)

*I find it difficult to envisage God in any form and found it quite hard to write. I thought it was good as it revealed some things about my relationship with him.'* (Female, 15)

These comments underscore the hypothesis that creative writing does have potential in helping some people to explore and develop their image of God. Only three people expressed difficulty in communicating through this medium, one implicitly, since he didn't write anything and 2 explicitly (14%). Therefore, 86% of the participants expressed a very positive attitude towards working with this medium. 77% of the males expressed a positive response and 92% of the females. The unexpectedly high positive response rate from the males is encouraging, suggesting that creative writing may be a useful medium for some males in the exploration of the God-image.

These statistics become more startling when we consider the answer to the question: 'After today, would you consider using creative writing as a way of expressing and exploring your images of God?' 100% answered affirmatively, with one saying they would do so in a group but would find it difficult alone. The only way to test this would be to conduct a longitudinal study and re-interview the group in 6 months. Nevertheless, the fact that the intention was expressed implies that the workshop had a powerful effect on participants and supports the conclusion that creative writing can have a powerful image on people's images of God.

#### **4. Workshop 3**

This workshop attracted 10 females and 1 male, spanning the age range from late thirties to early sixties. Again, the gender bias is striking. Interestingly, in Workshops 1 and 3 people opted in, whereas I took the material to workshop 2 and the group did not know beforehand what the session was about. Would the males have opted out if they had been aware of the subject before hand? Is it the case that men perceive creative writing to be a 'female' pursuit and therefore make the assumption that they will not enjoy or gain from the process? How might creative writing be 'sold' to a male audience?

Asked to identify what helps them in their relationship to God, sharing with others, prayer and bible reading were mentioned most frequently. Other than the reference to 'word pictures' (which one person mentioned), there is no mention of writing as a resource used to help any of the participants in their relationship to God. However, when prompted directly, 'Have you ever used creative writing before today to help you to explore your image of God?', 55% claim to use creative writing in their exploration of their God image. Either they had overlooked it as a resource, or they answered affirmatively because they felt obliged to do so. However, the fact that many could specify what exactly they had written in the past<sup>20</sup> mitigates against the obligation factor.

When asked if the writing exercises had helped them to explore their images of God, 82% responded positively. In response to the question, 'What, if anything, did you discover?' participants made the following responses which I have grouped according to the highest educational qualification each participant gained to see if there is any correlation between educational background and the ability to engage with this medium.

*'A wonderful freedom of conversation, building a better relationship with God.'* (GCSE)

*'I know that he is here, there and everywhere.'* (GCSE)

*'I discovered that I don't really have a physical picture of God more a sense of how God feels/is – eg powerful, loving, vulnerable (to being hurt) joyful etc.'* (GCE)

*'I discovered doubts within myself about eternal life with God and learnt more about his love and felt reassured by him, but need to trust him more. I discovered more about his nature, and maybe a negative image I had.'* (Diploma)

*'Found out more about myself. The sense of call yet fear of 'letting go', being overwhelmed/destroyed.'* (Degree)

*'I found it extremely helpful to look at God as a bridge, to think about where that idea leads me.'* (Degree)

*'It was VERY liberating. I actually found loads about myself and a little about God. That's a start!'* (Degree)

*'Needed to get past set pictures of how I should see God. Surprised to discover pain in how I saw God.'* (Degree)

*'There was movement and life in the writing – which surprised me. Reminded me of the dynamism in relationship. In the writing I went into new pictures, new places in my understanding of God – gave me a thirst for more. Writing is a helpful way to make thought processes real and lasting.'* (MA)

*'It was safe and revealing – both about myself and the way God is experienced by me. I should apply myself to this as part of my spiritual development.'* (PhD)

*'A brilliant way of being inspired to describe God.'* (PhD)

The comments don't bear out the assumption that to benefit from creative writing you need to be highly educated; although to really test that assumption the study would need to be developed and tested with people who have no formal qualifications. Experience of teaching creative writing in secondary schools suggests that people with very little language facility can, with the right support and encouragement, engage positively in the process of creative writing.

Asked, 'After today, would you consider using creative writing as a way of expressing and exploring your images of God?' 10 participants answered affirmatively and 1 left the question blank. Again, the fact that people had an idea of how they might engage with such writing after the workshop suggests at least the intent to continue. Only a longitudinal study would be able to test that.

## Summary of Data

This research project set out to explore the effect of creative writing on people's images of God. The spiritual directors' questionnaire supports the idea that the

subject of the God-image is a 'live' one. The workshops all demonstrated that for the vast majority of participants the process of creative writing did affect their God images as they discovered more about God and themselves. The workshops also demonstrated the desire on the part of the majority of participants to carry on engaging with forms of creative writing as part of their spiritual development.

## **Ministerial Outcomes**

### **i. Pastoral**

Given the link between self-image and God-image, there is pastoral benefit in helping people to explore their images of God and to this end creative writing can benefit some people. Therefore, enabling spiritual directors, youth workers and ministers to help people engage in creative writing, opens up a possible means of healing and growth. Creative writing could be used as a 'station' in a healing service, or as a workshop as part of an event focused on healing and well-being.

### **ii. Spiritual**

A connection to spiritual development lies in the question of how well a minister understands his/her congregation. How do we know what images of God are being carried by individuals in the church and which ones are the most influential in that community? One way of revealing this, however partially, would be to run a parish day in which creative writing is an element and then to encourage shared reflection on the writing which is produced.

### **iii. Liturgical**

Empowering people to engage in creative writing could enable the congregation to have a greater stake in the shaping of the liturgy. There is potential for introducing home-grown elements into the liturgy, in the Service of the Word, and in more alternative styles of worship. The tradition sermon need not always be present – a creative reflection on the Gospel could be formed by a small group engaging with creative writing, informed by the Gospel/ biblical reading. Just as projected images have huge power, so does the written word, which could also be projected, or performed within the liturgical space. The clergy/ readers do not need to have sole provenance over the Word; in fact it might set more people free if they didn't!

### **vi. Missiological**

Creative writing and images of God potentially impact on missiology in two ways. Firstly, the writing process offers potential to explore the images of God underpinning our understanding of mission. Why are we engaging/not engaging mission? How do our images of God shape our understanding of the way we engage in mission? Are the espoused images the same as the operative images? For example, it would be quite possible to speak of God as loving, self-giving and so on, whilst engaging in mission out of fear of being punished for not doing so. How many churches engage in mission out of a sense of 'we ought to', rather than 'we want to' – and what underlying images might be at work here? Could a creative writing workshop help a church to explore thoughts and feelings about mission and the images of God informing such thoughts and feelings?

Secondly, could creative writing be used as a tool in mission? In facilitating the workshops with church groups, I wondered how it might work with secular groups. Would it be possible to run the workshop in a secular context? This would offer a means of discovering where people are starting from and stimulating discussion on the nature of God as revealed in the biblical texts and the Christian tradition.

## Conclusion

The research bears out the idea that creative writing enables some people to explore their images of God, discovering what they already knew, but were not aware of knowing. Writing gives people a concrete record of their journey; the ability to meditate on and develop their earlier ideas. The space on the page can operate as transitional space, a place for the subject (the writer) to explore the (object) – in this case God – through what is written.

Creative writing is almost always fuelled by personal experience and so carries profound truths behind the fiction. Inherent in the process is the power to transform, and make positive use of, some of life's most perplexing and painful issues.<sup>21</sup>

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