Our Unit, THSC602, focuses on children and childhood, and makes a sustained effort to listen to “the voice of the child,” to
use a phrase from the sociology of childhood. That is, we will attend closely to the experience of children, seeking to understand the world on their terms. In a second step, our Unit will interpret children’s experiences from the perspective of the Christian theological tradition. We will see that Christian theology has great resources to bring to interpreting children’s experience. The approach taken in this Unit, therefore, presupposes that there is an integral connection between Christian faith and human experience, both the experience of children and of adults. The aim of this first module is to help us think deeply about the connection between faith and experience. To facilitate that process we will begin by reflecting on our personal experience.

The connection with personal experience is important because before Christian faith is a message, it is an encounter, a contact. Not a set of abstract, theoretical answers to the puzzles of life; rather, faith is the response of a people to God’s presence among them. Of course, theology does deal with life’s deepest questions, but it begins with an encounter, an experience. Anglican theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams conveys one of the implications of this truth when he says: "If the risen Jesus is not an idea or an image but a living person, we meet him in the persons he has touched". This suggests that for Christians, there is an integral relationship between personal experiences of God and the revelation of God in the scriptures. In this module we will explore the nature of that relationship.

**READINGS AND ACTIVITIES**

In Module 1 you will find links to:

- two short required readings with activities
- an additional non-required extension reading

Completing the readings and their related activity will enable you to complete the first Assessment Task: Forum 1.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

On successful completion of this module, you should be able to:

1. Interpret your own experience of God in the light of Christian faith, and;
2. Offer an account of the relationship between human experience of God and Christian faith

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REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 1

1.1.1 IDENTIFY KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF GOD

PURPOSE:
To bring to consciousness personal experience of God, and to identify its key characteristics.

RESOURCES:


TASK:
Christian Wiman is an American poet who, in his late 30s and as the editor of the prestigious journal Poetry, dramatically re-discovered God. For almost two decades he had been distant from Christian faith until three major life-events ‘tipped him upside down’ and led him to recognize God’s presence in a surprisingly new way. Read Wiman’s account of these events in his essay “Love Bade Me Welcome.” It will help to read it slowly, reflectively. After reading, ask yourself (perhaps, in answering these questions you’ll go back over the essay again):

- In each of the three dramatic life events, what was Wiman’s experience of God like; i.e.: what happened to him; how did he describe the experience itself?
- What difference did those experiences make to his life? and
- What were the features of Wiman’s experience of God – i.e.: what was God like for him?

Take your time over these questions. Notice Wiman’s uncertainty, his openness, and his surprising discoveries.


- Have you had similar experiences? Which of Edwards’s ten experiences resonated most with you?
- What do you find characteristic of each of the ten experiences—what makes them experiences of God?

In light of Wiman’s story, and of Edwards’s chapter, turn your attention to your own life. What has been your most significant experience(s) of God?

Go for a walk or spend some time in quiet reflection, going over your life’s journey, calling to mind these experiences:

- Who was there? What happened?
- How did you see yourself and others?

Jot down a few paragraphs about the experience:

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• Why do you see it as an experience of God?
• What distinguishes it from other experience?
REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2

1.1.2 INTERPRET OUR EXPERIENCE OF GOD

PURPOSE:
Reflect on and analyse the role that both the bible and the theological tradition play in our recognizing, naming, and understanding our experience of God.

RESOURCES:

TASK:
Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that all human experience is interpreted experience. Only with a language and within a culture can we experience anything. Without language and culture (broadly conceived) we would be less than human—we wouldn’t be able to interpret anything. So in terms of the immediate concern of this module: our religious tradition enables us to name and understand our encounters with God.

From this perspective, then, the Bible (particularly the New Testament) and the Christian theological tradition are essential for Christians engaged in the task of interpreting their experience of God.

Read Edwards, “Our Experience of God in the Light of Christian Faith.” In this chapter Edwards explores what the New Testament can teach us about the human experiences of transcendence and mystery. He says: “In the light of Christian revelation, then, our experiences of mystery and of moments of grace in our lives can properly be seen for what they are, the experience of a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. ²

After reading the chapter, ask yourself:

- What does the New Testament convey about your experience of God? What does it reveal about God and your life…and other people’s lives?
- What does the chapter imply about ordinary, day-to-day living and about the human spirit?
- What connection does Edwards make between our experience of God and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? And what does this imply about your life?
- In the concluding section of the chapter, Edwards lists about eight characteristics of our experience of God (e.g.: that it resonates with the gospels, that it connects us with the community of believers, that it is always a subtle experience of mystery, etc.). Which of these characteristics seem most important in your experience of God?

1.1.3 INTERPRET AND ARTICULATE YOUR EXPERIENCE OF TRANSCENDENCE

PURPOSE:
Interpret and articulate your own experience of transcendence from the perspective of Christian characteristics of experience of God.

RESOURCES:
The resources identified in 1.1.1 and 1.1.2.

TASK:
Contribute a post with two parts to Forum 1:

1. **Write** an account of one of your own particular experiences of God—of the mystery or transcendence of existence [250 words]. Describe the experience: who was there, what happened, and what shifted in you?
2. In light of the reading for this module, **reflect on** the connection between your experience and God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. [250 words]. What does the New Testament and the Christian tradition reveal about your own experience? How does it enhance your experience? How does it challenge you? What characteristics of our experience of God seem most important to you?

After contributing your own post, respond to one of your classmates’ posts, respecting his or her contribution, and aiming to contribute to the group’s learning [166 words]. You might:

1. Draw attention to something from your own experience that seems implicit in your classmate’s story;
2. Suggest further aspects of the New Testament and Christian theological tradition that appear relevant to your classmate’s post; or
3. Raise a question that could lead to further discovery on your classmate’s part.
1.2 THE JOURNAL IN THIS UNIT

Delving into new information about peoples, cultures, histories, philosophies, theologies, or worldviews is a fundamental
dimension of the learning process. But by itself, it is nothing. Integral to the learning process is the task of engaging with what is new – dialoguing with it – so that it influences our self-understanding and, in this case, our educational practice. **Assignment Task 2** aims to facilitate such a dialogue with the key theological themes presented in the Unit.

### 1.2.1 MAKE THE BIG PURCHASE!

**PURPOSE:**
Through using a journal, to integrate key biblical and theological insights explored in this Unit into your own self-understanding and educational practice.

**RESOURCES:**
One lined exercise book similar to the above! Forty-eight pages will be enough.

**TASK:**
Make the big purchase ($0.15 at Officeworks – a bargain!) and, at the end of each module section, session, or day, note concepts or understandings that surprised you, or confirmed your long-held view, or gave you new insight into faith or the endeavour of Catholic schools. At the Unit’s conclusion, you will be asked to submit an “integrative response” to your journal. Along each step of the way, you might find the following instructions and questions helpful:

1. Explain, in a few sentences, the theological concepts or truths that have caught your attention and given you new insight.
2. How do these insights challenge, confirm, or extend your previous understandings or assumptions?
3. If you took these new learnings on board, how would they change your self-understanding, your approach to life, or your educational practice?

So, let’s start right here and now!

**Respond in your journal:**
- What new insights, challenges, or confirmations have emerged for you from your engagement in this module?
- Respond to the three questions immediately above.