The Sociology of God: The Case of Homeless Believers

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF GOD:
THE CASE OF HOMELESS BELIEVERS

by

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ABSTRACT

This research began as personal curiosity about the religious beliefs of persons experiencing homelessness, and in particular their beliefs about God. What do they believe about God, and how are their beliefs socially constructed? Social research has generally limited its focus to assessing religion as an asset in ameliorating homelessness as a social problem with little attention to the religious behaviors and thought processes of persons experiencing homelessness themselves. I conducted a classic grounded theory (CGT) analysis based on 14 in-depth interviews with homeless believers (HB’s) and three interviews with pastors-service-providers (PSP’s) for comparative analysis. The findings include two major theoretical categories: The God Who Provides (TGWP); and, the core category, Believing in the God Who Provides. The results include two hypotheses: first, that there is no particular concept of God unique to HB’s as a substantive unit; and second, that there is a similar five-stage process of believing by HB’s and their domiciled counterparts.
This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Judi, who convinced me again and again that this project was too important not to finish just as I was looking for reasons to quit. The time invested represents a significant portion of our forty-three plus years of life together and, God willing, will be completed in time for our forty-fourth. Happy Anniversary, Sweetheart!
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BGWP-------------------------------- Believing in the God Who Provides
CGT -------------------------------- Classic Grounded Theory
GT ----------------------------------- Grounded Theory
HB ----------------------------------- Homeless Believer
PSP------------------------------------ Pastor-Service Provider
SOG------------------------------------ “The Sociology of God” (title of dissertation)
TGWP---------------------------------- The God Who Provides
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

_Homelessness as a Problem_

Since the mid-1980’s the American public has recognized homelessness as a major social problem (Bassuk 1984; Elliott and Krivo 1991; Burt 1993; Burgh 1993; Wright, Rubin, and Devine 1998; Hopper 2003; Foscarinis 2012; Dresner 2018). To illustrate the enormity of the problem, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) introduced its 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress and conclude that “on a Single Night in January 2020 580,466 people – about 18 of every 10,000 people in the United States – experienced homelessness across the United States” (HUD 2020:6).

In recent decades not only the sheer numbers but also the age, sex, and ethnicity of people experiencing homelessness contrasts sharply with the “old” homelessness of the pre-1950’s (Rossi 1990; Wright, Rubin, and Devine 1998), typified by the traveling hobo, tramp, Skid Row bum, or professional vagrant (Fox-Strangeways 1924; Bassuck and Franklin 1992; Lee, Tyler, Kimberly, and Wright 2010; Hix 2015). Today the demographics of homelessness reflect the expanding diversity of the American population as a whole (Hobbs and Stoop 2002). Similar changes are reflected in today’s homeless population, which, in contrast with “old” homelessness, is disproportionately female, non-white, non-Anglo, and includes children under 18, some living alone, others with families (Burt 1993; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2020).

Research on the homelessness problem has expanded exponentially since 1980’s¹, both in reconstructing an “old” homelessness of the pre-1980’s era (Bassuk and Franklin 1992; Dennis, Locke, and Khadduri 2008²) and what appears in contrast to be a “new” homelessness associated
The causes given for homelessness include lack of employment opportunities, decline in available public assistance, lack of affordable health care, domestic violence, mental illness, and addiction (National Coalition for the Homeless 2020). Causes are understood as both structural and individual (Burt 2003), with researchers’ emphasis falling on a continuum between the two (Clapham 2003). “Old” homelessness research typically emphasized the individual’s responsibility for his or her state (Anderson 1923; Fox-Strangeways 1924). More recent researchers tend toward the structuralist view, characterizing the former as “blaming the victim” (Bassuk and Franklin 1992), typical of the majority’s perception of itself in relation to its most vulnerable members (Cronley 2010; Schwan 2016).

Nearly fifteen years ago Wright (2009), representing the structural side of the continuum, identified solutions to the homelessness problem as less poverty and more low-income housing, corresponding to the two root causes of the problem. More recently Olivet listed four “simple” ways to solve the problem once and for all, abbreviated under four headings: housing, services, social connectedness, and prevention (Olivet 2017).

Two persistent areas of homelessness research involve defining who is and is not homeless — and thus eligible to receive services — and counting how many homeless people there are (Cordray and Pion 1991). The question of who determines the criteria for identifying and enumerating any subpopulation is inevitably a political matter (Shlay and Rossi 1992; Williams 2012). Since 2007, HUD, the official designee of Congress, has submitted its Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress listing estimates “specifically target[ing] persons living in shelters or in places not meant for human habitation” (Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, 2007:2), later abbreviated simply “sheltered” and “unsheltered” (Annual Homeless
Assessment Report to Congress, 2016:2,3). Each year local organizations, termed Continuums of Care (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012), conduct counts on a single “point in time” (PIT), an undisclosed night in January, resulting in what is believed to be a reliable estimate (Snow 2016). Whether it is accurate or not, the AHAR report is the legal, and thus the “official,” entity specified by Congress for the appropriation of funds.

Advocacy groups, such as the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), dispute the government’s numbers and the methods for obtaining them, arguing that the PIT estimate is dangerously low for the delivery of necessary services to a much higher number of potential clients (National Law Center on Homelessness Poverty 2017). Individual researchers either cite HUD’s figures as “evidence of reasonable scope” (Burt 2003), join in the debate (Hopper 2003), or detail the complexity of the methods involved from a theoretical standpoint (Garfinkle and Piliavin 1996; Wright 2009). Others trace the construction of terms like “homeless” to a current temper or ideological conviction of the public at a given time, which, in turn, drives policy (Bassuk and Franklin 1992). It might be added that HUD’s Continuums of Care5 (CoC’s) compete with each other to receive funding from the federal government (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2019). Not only researchers but also service providers have an interest in the “especially political” (Shlay and Rossi 1992:132) process of defining homelessness in the United States.

Another important area of social research examines the organizations, both public and private, which offer services of any kind to people experiencing homelessness, and the relations of these organizations with each other, acting independently (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013a), or in partnership (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013b; Clarke and Ware 2015). One is the relationship between secular and faith-based organizations (FBO’s) (Aron and Starkey 2002; Beielefeld and
Cleveland 2013), both in theory (Vidal 2001) and in practice (Twombly 2002). Analysts compare what these two organizational types have in common (Aron and Starkey 2002) and what sets them apart (Sager 2018; Clarke and Ware 2015). In an international context, the delicacy of the role of FBO’s (Johnsen 2014) and their participation within the boundaries of the law (Kong 2010; Gravell 2013) are discussed.

**Defining the solution**

The solution to the problem of homelessness is, ultimately, to facilitate the exit of individuals from homelessness and, in the meantime, to service the daily demands of survival (National Coalition for the Homeless 2020). The health of the homeless (Wright and Joyner 1997) and the means for accessing healthcare resources (Donley and Wright 2018) are frequent concerns of this research. In addition, a broad area of research comes from clinical service providers who interact with homeless clients on the front lines, typically in the disciplines of nursing (Davis 1996; Brush and McGee 2000; Flaskerud and Strehlow 2009; Hurlbut, Robbins, and Hoke 2011) and social work (Stern 1984; Williams and Lindsey 2005; Bender et al 2007; Farrell 2012; Petrovich and Cronley 2015). Analysts test the positive and negative association of health histories (Winkelby et al 1992; Donley and Wright 2018) or personal behaviors (Wright and Joyner 1997; Fitzpatrick, La Gory, and Ritchey 2003) with health outcomes and, thus, the relative likelihood of surviving and eventually exiting the homeless state (Tsai and Rosencheck 2011). Research also investigates social and institutional barriers unintentionally placed before potential clients and clients’ motivation to add health concerns to even more pressing demands of daily survival (Donley and Wright 2012).
The Problem of God

The religious preferences and practices of homeless persons, alluded to above, are among the many elements of daily experience to come under the scrutiny of researchers. Spirituality, God, and a Higher Power have played a central role in substance abuse recovery since the middle of the last century (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001) and are frequently named by recovering homeless clients today (Torchalla et al 2014; Wendt et al 2017). Religion, broadly understood, has been related to attitudes and behaviors relating both to daily survival (Hodge and Horvath 2011) and eventual departure from homelessness (Washington, Moxley, and Weinberger 2009). Religion was related to coping (Anic and Sikic-Micanovic 2019) and self-esteem (Chatham-Carpenter 2006) among homeless women; was named a source of hope (McBride 2012), and a sense of protection and source of strength by homeless youth (Bender 2007). Religion and spirituality, jointly or separately and positively or negatively, were associated with depression and anxiety (Fitzpatrick 2018). Religion and spirituality can play a unique role in the development of an identity for persons who, in lacking a secure place of residence, are isolated from a sense of self (Boydell, Goering, and Morrell-Bellai 2000; Button 2018).

A more recent literature investigates the importance of soliciting clients themselves directly for their religious values, opinions, and worldviews as an important part, if not a “first step” (Davis 1996:181), in a holistic approach to servicing the survival of and exit from homelessness (Costello, Attinaja-Farrel, and Hedgberg 2012). In this literature religion by various names (religiosity, religiousness, religious affiliation, relationship with God-Higher Power, spirituality) has evolved as a nuanced lexicon of variables related to practical outcomes. Sometimes the terms are used interchangeably (Brush and McGee 2000; Chatham-Carpenter
2006; Gravell 2013), sometimes in marked contrast with one or more terms (Williams and Lindsey 2005). Articles surveying the literature are beginning to provide standard definitions for religion for use in further research (Lamis et al 2014) and in training programs for service providers in their direct interactions with homeless clients (Hurlbut, Robbins, and Hoke 2011).

In the literature cited above, God is frequently mentioned as a subcategory of religion as a variable, and typically as a facet of religious affiliation, past or present (Dhanani 2011). Based on previous informal interactions with persons experiencing homelessness, I have come to assume that the experience of God is deeply personal and, further, that it comprises a form of social interaction that has little in common with clinical conceptions of God, spirituality, or a generalized Higher Power. To my knowledge there is no systematic sociological analysis of God deriving from personal accounts of people experiencing homelessness.

The purpose of this research is to develop the concept of God as it is used by persons experiencing homelessness over an extended period. This purpose is twofold: ultimately, to contribute to the expanding literature on personal religious beliefs and practices gathered from in-depth interviews with respondents experiencing homelessness, systematized in a form that helps facilitate competent interactions by professional service providers in a field setting. More immediately, the purpose is to develop a theoretical conception of believing in God from a sociological perspective. The case of homeless believers is just that: a single case in the development of theory.

The Organization of this Research

Following this introduction to the problem of homelessness, Chapter Two reviews existing research, both practically and theoretically oriented, on the place of God in the lives of homeless
persons and their service providers. As is shown, while this literature is varied in its approach to religion, it is generally driven by the need to solve the homelessness problem. While the priority of this need is incontestable, it biases the research toward the concerns of the problem solvers rather than of those whose problem it is. Based on its priority in application, the literature only superficially regards the importance of God in the daily lives of believers.

Chapter Three reviews theoretical constructs from classic writers in sociology and psychology. The theoretical analysis that followed did not seek to verify those theories but to suggest hypotheses based on the research questions. Some of these questions are incorporated in the Discussion section at the end of the paper and developed further in Chapter Seven below.

Chapters Four continues the “story” of the grounded theory strategy that emerged in the analysis that follows. It includes a standard overview of the history of grounded theory (GT) as a movement in qualitative research. The chapter concludes with an account of the shift from a constructivist to a classic GT methodology based on early data collected in the interviews.

Chapter Five presents a detailed overview of the classic grounded theory (CGT) methodology as it was used in the collection and analysis of the data. It concludes with an introductory overview of the theory that follows.

Chapter Six presents the theoretical findings of the research: a grounded theory of believing. The chapter includes two major sections with findings for each of the research questions. One focuses on the beliefs and the other on the believing of persons experiencing homelessness.

Chapter Seven reviews the process recorded in this research. It includes an assessment of the findings relative to the original research questions and their theoretical implications. It discusses the practical implications of this research relative to the problem of homelessness and
the literature devoted to its solution. The chapter includes a discussion on the use of theological language throughout the paper and contrasts it with the language and method of the social sciences.

Chapter Eight summarizes the problem faced by participants in this study as revealed in the data and explains participants’ positive solution. The chapter concludes with personal reflections on how my view of society and my place in it was changed in the process of completing this sociology of God.
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Social Construction of a Problem

“...[I]n identifying social problems sociologists have consistently taken their cue from what happens to be in the focus of public concern” (Blumer 1971:299).

As the literature amply demonstrates, homelessness research is primarily and appropriately directed to solving the problem of homelessness and, in the meantime, of mediating the effects of undomiciled existence. The religious experience of homeless individuals has been found in several disciplines to have significant influence on the attitudes and behaviors of homeless persons from day to day. Personal beliefs have come to light mainly in relation to the overall problem. Hence, knowledge of beliefs is scattered and indirect with minimal systemization.

According to theorists, a social problem has its own natural history (Fuller and Myers 1941) or career (Blumer 1971) consisting of identifiable stages (see Table 1 below). According to Blumer (1971), before a problem can be addressed at a societal level, it must be recognized by appropriate authorities as “their” problem. Society at large intimates that certain valued conditions are being routinely disrupted (Fuller and Myers 1941). A discernible problem emerges from the chaos of random events (Weber 2011:78) into public awareness (Fuller and Myers 1941:320) and now demands a response from their representatives (Blumer 1971:301). Troublesome conditions have become familiar but have not yet been assigned an official name. Once the problem has been appropriately recognized by legitimate authorities, appropriate representatives begin a long, perhaps permanent, competition for ownership of the problem (Stern 1984). Alternative plans are discussed and debated based on the interests of disparate parties. Finally, a plan is cobbled together based on an apparent consensus, resources are
allocated, and the plan is implemented. As specific outcomes are reported and analyzed, and the problem is redefined, new and old stakeholders prepare for action, and the implementation stage is renewed (Fuller and Myers 1941), perhaps indefinitely (Blumer 1971; Shlay and Rossi 1992). The problem is solved, not necessarily when the initial causes and conditions have been ameliorated, but when the problem as defined no longer commands the interest of the responsible parties, due perhaps to the attention span of constituents, its political relevance to their representatives, or the availability of public and private resources (Stern 1984).

Table 1. Stages of a social problem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blumer</th>
<th>Fuller and Myers</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emergence:</strong> a troubling set of events or conditions is identified as a potential problem</td>
<td><strong>Awareness:</strong> the awakening of local groups to conditions that threaten their shared values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legitimation:</strong> the problem achieves recognition via “official” institutions and the media</td>
<td><strong>Policy Determination:</strong> interest groups debate over alternative solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobilization:</strong> competing interests vie for “ownership” of the problem</td>
<td><strong>Formation:</strong> An official plan is enacted based on an official definition of the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation:</strong> As the plan is implemented, a new process of collective definition begins</td>
<td><strong>Reform:</strong> administrative units put formulated policy into action</td>
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The literature addressing the homelessness problem has its own history (Rossi 1990; Bassuk and Franklin 1992; Cronley 2010). As such it has its own special importance, but also its own special limitations. A crucial point must be kept in mind: homelessness *as a social problem* (Blumer 1971; Stern 1984) is not the difficulty a certain population has availing itself of available economic resources, most notably housing, with all the attendant risks to physical,
emotional, and spiritual well-being. The social problem is the special property of those who set out to solve, and hence to define it as “society’s” problem. As such, the problem consists of the innumerable interactions that bring the circumstances to public attention (or don’t), that draw certain groups (and not others) into the competitive arena of providing solutions, and that control the purse strings, not to mention the practical difficulties faced in garnering support from local constituencies (Shlay and Rossi 1992).

The chronology and formation of homelessness as a social problem is subject to interpretation. By the time Ellen Bassuck’s seminal article appeared in 1984, homelessness clearly had emerged as a social problem well on its way to legitimation by public authorities. A consensus of scholars traced the causes of the problem (Bassuk 1984; Bassuk and Franklin 1992; Burt 1993 and 2003; Wright 1998; Cronley 2010; Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010; Foscarinis 2012; Olivet 2017), now full blown in public awareness, to the early to mid 1980’s, and generally attributed to shifts in economic and political conditions. Drawing on Blumer’s scheme (Blumer 1971), Stern traced its emergence to the severe winter of 1981-82 and economic recession the following year. He associated the legitimation of the problem to the widely publicized deinstitutionalization of mental health patients during the previous decade, during which, he claimed, the problem had been cemented in the public mind (Stern 1984:294).

By the mid-1980’s too many people were now homeless compared with other times when the numbers were presumably manageable and, hence, not a real problem. “Whatever the number is, everyone agrees it is growing” (Bassuck 1984:40). Now the sheer weight of numbers, combined with a new array of demographics, reinforced the perception that today’s homelessness was not yesterday’s in a slightly different form. By now the necessary problem constituted a “national disgrace” (Rossi 1990:957), and hence a “real” problem. Today’s
homelessness was something new (Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010), calling for more far reaching response from public and private resources. While its solution was simple (Olivet 2017), it would draw on the concerted efforts of many research disciplines.

To solidify the awareness of a new problem, scholars constructed a chronology of demographic measures recalling the “tramp” and “skid row” eras of the early twentieth century until the 1980’s (Bassuk and Franklin 1992; also Burt 1993; Wright, Rubin, and Devine 1998; Hopper 2003; Lee, Kimberly, and Wright 2010). Alternative histories extend the modern period of homelessness to include successive “waves” of homelessness as far back as the colonial period to the present (Dennis, Locke, and Khadduri 2008). Regardless of the timeline, old-versus-new, or yesterday-versus-today, quickly became the standard typology for comparative analysis (Shlay and Rossi 1992:140). It highlights the marked contrast between two distinct periods of American culture, not only in size and diversity of populations, but also in socio-economic circumstances. As products of collective definition cycling and recycling through various stages (Fuller and Myers 1941; Blumer 1971; Stern 1984), the bifurcated chronology reinforced experts’ claim that homelessness was society’s problem.

As a social problem, the quantitative changes in homelessness reinforce the qualitative changes that make it a new problem. While this is appropriate, it leaves a dimension of the research unexplored. The same public that was amused by Red Skelton’s TV portrayal of Freddie the Freeloader in 1952 and danced to Otis Redding and Carla Thomas’ rollicking hit “Tramp” in 1967, was now aghast at the destitution confronting them on the daily thoroughfares of affluent postwar America. Blumer’s historical frame raises a pointed question: what had changed in those populations not directly affected by income and housing shortages so that the problem of homelessness was felt as their problem (Blumer 1971:302)?
Within the natural history schema of homelessness as a social problem, research on the religious interests of homeless people falls in the ongoing definition of the problem as well as the mobilization of resources toward solving the problem. Here much crucial work is being done toward ameliorating the problem. Other research, as mentioned, is put on a back burner (Costello, Atinaja-Faller, and Hedberg 2012:277).

God as a Social Problem

In the collective definition of homelessness as a social problem (Blumer 1971; Stern 1984; Cronley 2010), references to God, both colloquial and professional, are appropriate at any definitional stage. While logically distinct, the individual stages overlap in practice (Fuller and Myers 1941). Nonetheless, they can serve as descriptive types to facilitate comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967). A quick sketch illustrates God’s place within the conceptualization of homelessness as a social problem.

The problem of homelessness had emerged in secluded monastic communities before it was regarded by the mainstream of feudal societies (Fox-Strangways 1924); and, certainly, long before Ellen Bassuk’s article in 1984. The Rule of St. Benedict (516 C.E.) devotes a chapter to receiving as honored guests “the poor and the pilgrim” who frequented Benedictine houses (Rule, ch. 53). More than a millennium later Teresa of Calcutta would follow this same tradition, directing her Sisters of Charity to care for the dying and the destitute as Christ himself. With the development of the printing press a biblically literate Protestant public could identify the homeless person with Christ “who hath not where to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Nonetheless, homelessness had not emerged in public consciousness as a structural problem, and, whatever sort of problem it was, it was blamed on the homeless victim (Davis 1996). Henry VIII is
reported to have hung tens of thousands of “sturdy vagrants” structurally displaced by the royal seizure of religious houses previously owned by the Roman Church (Fox-Strangways 1924). New England’s Puritan municipalities enacted laws banishing homeless vagrants and flogging or imprisoning repeat offenders (Dennis, Locke, and Khaduri 2008).

As predicted by Blumer, the implementation stage, accomplished in this country since HUD began its annual report to Congress (NCH 2006), brought with it a renewed process of collective definition (Blumer 1971). Public and private stakeholders would repackage and resell the homelessness problem, constantly inventing ways to rekindle public outrage and concern. It was legitimately their problem. New mobilizations of segments in society would be added to old.

In recent years, “Homeless Jesus,” a bronze sculpture by a Canadian artist, has begun appearing in cities throughout the United States (Chen and Durantes 2015), Canada (Abma 2018), the United Kingdom (Hillard 2015; Crews 2018), and the Vatican (Rome Reports 2016). The purpose of the sculpture is to mobilize attention around a problem that is too often “invisible” and to help form a plan of action (Chen and Dorantes 2015; Crews 2018). Not surprisingly, reactions to the sculpture have been mixed, with critics complaining of its being in poor taste and a misuse of funds that could have gone toward serving the same homeless depicted in the sculpture (Chen and Dorantes 2015). Many would like the sculpture, and the problem it symbolizes, to “go away” from public consciousness and thus, by definition, to cease being a social problem (Williams 2012). Meanwhile, local politicians invoke the same homeless Jesus in a holiday message to constituents to mobilize support for their candidacy, if not for programs endorsed by the candidate (see Grayson 2015).
“Here [in the UK] if you speak about God you might be breaking the law...” (Gravell 2013)

Research on homelessness and religion can be framed theoretically within the collective definition, now ongoing, of homelessness as a social problem. As mentioned, religion as a variable is typically related to coping with the daily struggles inherent in the homeless condition (Williams and Lindsey 2005; Tsai and Rosencheck 2011; McBride 2012; Torchalla et al 2014; Testoni et al 2018), achieving or maintaining spiritual or psychological well-being (Childs 2010; Hurlbut, Robbins, and Hoke 2011), overcoming destructive behaviors that reduce the likelihood of survival or exit from homelessness (Bender et al 2007; Hodge and Horvath 2011; Testoni et al 2018), and the list goes on. Here religion is variously defined as religiosity (Ferraro and Koch 1994; Dhanni 2011; Hurlbut, Robbins, and Hoke 2011; Fitzpatrick 2018), religiousness (Zinnbauer et al 1999); institutional affiliation (Dhanni 2011; Johnsen 2014) and attendance at religious services (Childs 2010). A distinction is made in the literature between religion as historically understood in Western societies and spirituality (Gay and Lynxwiler 2013), understood as a personal worldview, value system, or set of practices that bolster personal health (Chatham-Carpenter 2006). Both religion and spirituality are related to solving the problem of homelessness (Belcher 2003; Fitzpatrick 2018).

**God or...**

In the ongoing definition of homelessness as a social problem, the name of God appears frequently in a variety of contexts. The concept of God is typically operationalized to relate an element of religious experience to some outcome, condition, or population. Such relations can be
predictive (Brush and McGee 2000) or descriptive (Gravell 2013). In some instances God’s personal nature is stated or implied in reflective accounts operationalized as indicators of faith or belief. In such cases, while God may be one of the names assigned to the concept, the correlation is between the believer’s faith or belief and some outcome.

One common method for operationalizing the concept of God is to attach it to another concept or to multiple concepts. Most frequent examples are spirituality, higher power, or equivalent. While each term is defined differently in such cases, within the research they form a single concept or variable, typically labeled “God or….” Illustrations include God or a higher power (Zinnbauer et al 1997; Willard and Norenzayan 2013; Williams and Lindsey 2005), a supreme being (Brush and McGee 2000), a divine other (Daaleman and VanderCreek 2000; Chatham-Carpenter 2006), a universal spirit (Pew Research Center 2018), the church (Pargament et al 1988). Other expressions include God or gods (Preston and Ritter 2013), God or spirit or hope or light (Hobbes et al 1998), and God/Christ/Higher Power/transcendent reality/Nature/etc (Zinnbauer et al 1997; “etc” is included in the original text). Examples could be multiplied.

Thus, Miller and Thoresen (2003) report that over 90% of Americans profess belief in “God or a higher power,” noting that this figure has not changed significantly in half a century. Paley reports drastically different results in the UK totaling only 47%, thus establishing the USA as the most religious and the UK as the most secular of modernized nations (Paley 2007). To take a slightly different comparison: in 2016 Time Magazine featured Gallup’s responses to the question, “Do you believe in God?” from 1944 to the present (Johnson 2016). The article noted that in 1976 Gallup abridged the question to include “…or a universal spirit.” Thus, for Gallup “belief in God” measured the same social trend in 1944 that “belief in God or a universal spirit” measured in 1976. In the above cases the assigned term for divinity implies nothing about the
content of informants’ experience of, or belief in, the divinity, but tallies positive responses to the question as presented. It remains for researchers to interpret the aggregate response.

In interviews with 45 homeless young adults, Thompson et al (2016) related “a higher power or belief in God” with a positive life perspective which, in turn, predicted greater resiliency and coping abilities among participants. From the text it is clear that the meanings of the two terms are not interchangeable. Nonetheless, for the purpose of the study the two concepts, together or separately, indicate a single causal relation. In summarizing their results, the authors quoted one informant saying he had learned to ask God to meet routine daily needs and to trust God’s response to his request (Thompson et al 2016:66). The focus of the research was not to describe the God in whom the homeless youth believed but to present the informant’s own explanation for his positive attitude.

Williams and Linsey defined spirituality as an intensely personal connection between runaway and homeless youths and a Higher Power whom “most have labeled ‘God’” (Williams and Linsey 2005:21). Hurlbut and Ditmyer (2016) asked fourteen sheltered women to share what spirituality meant to them. Their analysis of responses included belief in “God or a higher power” as the first of five dominant themes. Bender (2007:8) found spirituality to be an indicator of personal strength on the part of homeless youth. In this study God is never defined but referenced euphemistically by one informant as “the man upstairs.”

Religion versus Spirituality

Over time the widening field of constructs for modern religious phenomena has narrowed to two generic types, religion and spirituality. God, as emblematic of traditional religious institutions and religiosity, was increasingly understood in contrast with, or opposition to,
spirituality (Dyson et al 1997). Gay and Lynxwiler (2013) note the increasing occurrence of adult survey respondents self-identifying as “spiritual but not religious” with the rise of “nones” as a demographic (Galen and Kloet 2011; Kenneson 2015; Johnson 2016; PEW 2018). Other writers recognize the dichotomy of religion and spirituality as just that — an arbitrary construct held over from a long social history dominated by religious institutions (Ammerman 2013). This construct was the product of scholars still under the shadow of “church-religion” (Luckmann 1963; Dobbelaere 1999) in spite of emphatic reference to secularization as a defining mark of modernity (Berger and Luckmann 1995) and an irreversible fact (Stark and Bainbridge 1981).

The concept of God is frequently nested within hierarchical constructs for capturing the meaning and function of religious phenomena. Brush and McGee (2000) used the Reed Spiritual Perspectives Scale (SPS), a 10-item survey using 6-point Likert scale, to relate spirituality to well-being among 100 homeless men in recovery. In their explanation of the SPS, they append “God or a supreme being” to the concept of faith, which is itself defined as a dimension of spirituality. The SPS was originally developed to operationalize an earlier conception of spirituality as an indicator of transcendence in terminally ill hospital patients (Reed 1987). While acknowledging the limited generalizability outside the 12-step environment, Brush and McGee were satisfied that further development of spirituality theory was warranted for clinical professionals (Brush and McGee 2000:183). In particular they concluded that an individual’s spirituality facilitated greater understanding of his or her life context (Brush and McGee 2000:186). For a wider readership, the study illustrates how general definitions of religious phenomena overlap and are defined in terms of each other.

In a review of nursing literature, Dyson, Cobb, and Forman (1997) found “God” (quotes included throughout original) from which a concept of spirituality might be developed. They
found that “…one of the major hindrances in defining spirituality is its relationship with religion,” where the term “God” was sometimes used interchangeably with religion and sometimes not. They note a transition in recent years from the “God” of traditional religion to “a more liberated and less restrictive view of ‘God’” (Dyson et al 1997:1185). Their conception of “God” from the literature is “essentially… whatever an individual takes to be of highest value in his/her life” (Dyson et al 1997:1183). By contrast, the more recent conceptions are thus “more realistic” and tend to be “healthier” relative to clinical outcomes (Dyson et al 1997:1185). Some might identify the authors’ conceptualization as biased toward the “secular orthodoxy” of the medical profession (Gravell 2013) or the “imperialism” of academia (Berger 1974). Based on such considerations Zinnbauer et al (1997) caution mental health workers against projecting their spiritual worldviews into clinical interventions while disdaining the use of religious solutions. In any case, the evidence brought forward by Dyson et al suggests a fruitful line of questioning regarding the experiential basis out of which conceptions of “God” arise.

**God in the Literature: Conclusion**

God is presented in the literature as a dimension of a broader category, the whole of which is related to some outcome or behavior. God is defined, or definable, primarily in relation to, or in contrast with, some other dimension of religious experience. The personal-interactive God is attested indirectly in varying levels of detail which await systematic development. The above review demonstrates the limited quality of this research and raises questions about how it might be focused more directly on belief systems themselves, and particularly on beliefs in a personal God frequently mentioned by people experiencing homelessness.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Introduction to a Sociology of God: Durkheim

Sociologists of religion speak of two fundamental ways of defining religion in relation to society (Furseth and Repstad 2006): substantive, which includes what all religions have in common; and functional, which explains the relation between religion and individuals or societies. More succinctly, whereas substantive definitions speak of what religion is, functional definitions speak of what religion does (see also Davie 2004; Roberts and Yamane 2016).

Sociologists have debated the so-called “definitional problem” of religion, critiquing the two classic definitions, adding additional types, and even debating whether more definitions are needed (Berger 1974; Furseth and Repstad 2006:23). Commenting on the elasticity of usage in the literature, McKinnon generalizes that writers use the term religion any way they want (McKinnon 2002:76).

Durkheim’s classic definition predates the strict bifurcation of his definition into types (Berger 1974). While he is often credited with the functional tradition writ large (Turner 2006), Durkheim’s definition presents both substantive and functional dimensions of religion — what it is and what it does (Luckmann 1967; Furseth and Repstad 2006:18). According to Durkheim, in all cases “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.” Equally in all cases, religious beliefs and practices serve the purpose of unifying adherents “into a single moral community called a Church (Durkheim 1995:44). “Church” is capitalized in the original, indicating Durkheim’s generic use of the term (1995:41 n.). Durkheim cites the existence of moral communities or “Churches” in all world religions, all of which possess both a recognized priesthood and a routine ritual gathering for solidifying a social identity (1995:41).6
Durkheim’s concept of Church as a sacred society is important for a study of the beliefs and practices of homeless believers (HB’s), who, as the present research will show, rarely acknowledge a current religious affiliation. The most frequent allusion to a ritual gathering of homeless persons is the recovery group (Brush and McGee 2000; Graham, Brush, and Andrew 2003; Washington et al 2009). Here members are united by a common commitment to recovery based on core beliefs (see, for example, the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services 2001:58). Such recovery “churches” are temporary, and the belief systems, while earnestly shared, are nonetheless obligatory, thus susceptible to a rote adherence (Torchalla et al 2014).

The problem of defining religious faith on the part of homeless believers becomes apparent with the attempt to locate the functional dimension of religion as specified by Durkheim. In a clinical context, the function of religious faith can readily be defined by its measured relation to coping skills (McBride 2012), self-esteem (Chatham-Carpenter 2006), or healthy lifestyle behaviors (Shaw et al 2018). In Durkheim, function does not relate simply to utilitarian mechanics in sustaining a functioning human organism, but rather to the function of a system of ideas or ideals (Durkheim 1974:xxviii) that comprise the collective conscience. It is these that unify the social system with which the individual identifies.

More recent theorists have developed Durkheim’s classic theory to account for religious expression in modern “organic” societies (Furseth and Repstad 2006; Roberts and Yamane 2016). Nonetheless, the relation between the individual and some functioning collective is especially poignant in the case of homeless believers and raises the following questions. What is the social matrix out of which the homeless believer’s system of belief and practice does or does not emerge? Does it derive from prior affiliations of respondents, or some exposure to traditional
faiths that left an impression, positive or negative? Is it present interactions with an active congregation, comprised mainly of domiciled or homeless persons? Are the beliefs organized upon reflection by the recollection of a community of which the individual was once a part, now fondly, or regretfully, remembered? Is the community rooted in the individual’s imagination, as eagerly anticipated? Are the religious concepts, including that of God, borrowed from common usage and adapted by the individual to his or her unique circumstances? Do they derive from a recent conversion experience, where once familiar language now takes on special meaning given the circumstances of day to day life?

All these questions arise from Durkheim’s inclusive definition of religion in relation to society and were incorporated into the interview process of the present research. A slightly different “Church problem,” that of locating and defining the collective in relation to the concept of God, emerged in response to the research questions as initially stated above.

**God Made Real in Society: Collins**

Collins develops Durkheim’s sociology of religion under the heading “The Sociology of God” (Collins 1992:30 ff.; Durkheim 1995:208), from which the present research gets its title. Echoing Durkheim’s observation that society and its god are “one and the same,” he rephrases it slightly: “there is but one reality that [has] all the characteristics people attribute to the divine. …It is *society itself*” (Collins 1992:35; italics in the original).

In Collins, as in Durkheim, God is the sacred expression of what a given society takes itself to be (Collins 1992:35). Consistent with the ethnological environment upon which Durkheim based his research, the relation of the gods or totems to the collective was evident to the detached observer. Only with difficulty can an all-encompassing symbol be inferred from
modern collectives (Durkheim 1997). Ritual gatherings of the ancients typically included a rehearsal of a society’s distinctive beliefs or creed amidst an electrified atmosphere of celebration (Durkheim 1995:216; in Bellah 2005) in which group identity was forged out of the various strata comprising the primitive society and presumed to be the prototype of all societies (Durkheim 1995:44).

According to Collins (1992; 2011), as ancient societies modernized, former beliefs in supernatural realities gave way to this-worldly moral and political ideas. Restrictive ritual and behavioral codes, once deemed necessary to the survival of the group, were replaced by universally approved ideals, then partisan ideologies (Collins 1992:53). In place of the ritual cult, where the collective proclaims a shared identity, Collins introduces Goffman’s theory of interaction rituals (IR’s; Goffman 1983). Here the identity of the group is conveyed piecemeal, and without drama, through passing interactions between individuals (Collins 1992:53 ff.).

In a later study, Collins (2011:2) develops Goffman’s concept of the interaction ritual (Goffman 1983) in a micro-sociology of religion (Collins 2011:2), where a highly differentiated social group ritualizes its solidarity through symbolic interactions. Such micro-interactions are transacted primarily through subtle exchanges (phrases, gestures) between individuals of sufficient emotive content to reinforce an acknowledged common identity (Collins 1992:).

In the case of HB’s, Collins’ and Goffman’s micro-rituals might include passing interactions between acquaintances reinforcing some common identity, whether as friends, as those who share a common space, or explicitly as fellow believers. By their intentionality, religious rituals can extend from interactions between peers to include internal interactions of individuals with themselves, as in prayer or meditation (Collins 2011:12).

Regardless of their minimal structure and appearance, interaction rituals are nonetheless
inconceivable apart from previously internalized social patterns (Goffman 1983; Collins 2011). According to Collins “all the key features of a strongly integrated society are produced by successful rituals” (Collins 2011:2). They are “successful” insofar as they produce a sense of membership in and an emotional bond with the collective (Collins 2011:2).

In the present research, the conceptualization of God within Durkheim’s functional macro- and Collins’ micro-sociology of religion proceed from the same premise. In the case of homeless believers, the question is, what society are we talking about in the assertion that God and “society” are the same?

The same question pertains to Collins’ micro-sociological conception of God. What is the projected image of society expressed in the passing ritualized gestures; and in the case of believers, what is the role of God in that projected society? Are homeless believers longingly, or enviously, professing faith in a God who exalts, and is exalted by, a society that has rejected, marginalized, stigmatized, or ignored them? Are they perhaps reacting against this representation of deity, constructing a deity who does not judge, reject, or adjusting the macro-society-God just enough so that they are included among the faithful? These questions are also incorporated in the data collection and analysis in this present “Sociology of God” (SOG).

**God Under Construction: Berger and Luckman**

*The Dialectic of Society*

In their collaborative treatise on the sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann (1966) ask, “How is it that subjective meanings become objective facticities?” (1966:18). *Subjective meanings* they define elsewhere (1995:11) as the consciousness of a relationship between past experiences carried into present and future interactions. They acknowledge *facticities* as a
paraphrase of Durkheim’s social facts, with emphasis on their nature as things (1966:30; citing Durkheim 1982). Through an intricate dialectical process subjective meanings are objectivated as part of a common store of knowledge, whose veracity is self-evident, unquestioned, and unproblematic to the individual. Such knowledge is of the everyday world and is taken for granted by the man [sic] in the street (1966:19). This world and its reality are very different from the that of the philosopher or empirical scientist (1966:vi), deriving from the mundane interactions (Blumer 1969) and instinctive practices (Bourdieu 2009) of daily life. This is the social construction of reality.

According to Berger and Luckmann, “to be in society is to participate in its dialectic” (1966:149), which they describe as three essential, though not necessarily chronological, moments:

…[T]he relationship between man [sic], the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one. That is, man (not, of course, in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other. The product acts back upon the producer. Externalization and objectivation are moments in a continuing dialectical process. The third moment in this process… is internalization …by which the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization… (1966:78-79; italics added).

The three moments occur within a lifelong process of primary and secondary socialization (1966:149 ff.). Primary socialization is that initial phase of familial contact in which the world presents itself a priori to the uninitiated as external, objective, self-evident, and unproblematic. The constructed setting in which socialization takes place is the symbolic universe, defined as “the matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings” (1966:55).

Primary socialization culminates with a child aggregating an identity from significant others into an abstract type or generalized other, to borrow Mead’s term (Berger and Luckmann
1966:153 and 230, n. 9). Upon maturity he or she embarks on a permanent process of secondary socialization in which any discordances between primary and secondary worlds are renegotiated and resolved (1966:152). At stake is the *plausibility* of the present institutional order of society (1966:111) and the continuity between the individual’s private identity and the general identity of the society with which he/she identifies. As a result of the dialectic interplay between the two, individual and collective identities evolve together. Alternatively, normal interactions fail and mutual identities are eroded, giving rise to counter-societies within incipient subuniverses of meaning (1966:104).

**God in Dialectic**

Berger and Luckmann’s dialectical model raises important sociological questions regarding the conceptualization of God. As a participant in society’s dialectic, the individual experiences God as an objectivated reality external to him- or herself mediated through significant others during primary socialization. This earliest reference may have been a name with no explicit reference or description, or a colorful figure well-known to the family as participants in a local church. The emotional content associated with God may be positive or negative, strong, weak, or indifferent. In all such cases, the constructed God acts upon the individual’s subjective experience as a real, existent, external object intuited by the individual as part of the world.

An alternative primary socialization is a setting in which God is never mentioned by significant others. In an American or European society such dis-acknowledgement of God would constitute a kind of censorship, perhaps as an attempt by significant others to shield children from their own negative associations with religion. At some point a child discovers God as
consistent with or discrepant from the world of primary socialization. The child is left to resolve inconsistencies between worlds during secondary socialization (1966:191).

Questions regarding homeless believers’ conception of God come into play in considering the relations between primary and secondary socialization. At some point a homeless individual has most likely transitioned from a domiciled to homeless status following precipitating events during secondary socialization. The transition to homelessness requires the reintegration of the assumptions and identities forged in primary socialization with discrepant realities of the present.

Where is God in this process? What facet of early interaction with what circumstances explains the homeless individual’s present concept of God? Positive and negative associations — or no associations whatever — all have some role to play in the present construction of reality. Whatever symbol of God the individual internalizes as plausible in his/her world to some extent mediates present and past identities of the individual as well as his/her relationship to society at large. God may provide the individual with an alternate world with which to identify, and hence an alternative identity apart from the stigma attached to homelessness.

Such questions can be summarized as responses to Berger and Luckmann’s introductory question (1966:18): How does the subjective meaning attached to the concept of God by the homeless believer become an objective facticity (1966:18)?

The emergence of God in the homeless believer’s secondary socialization raises the question of religious conversion subsequent to primary socialization, its role and meaning in the symbolic universe of the homeless believer. The question of the veracity and permanence of religious conversion among homeless adults is mentioned in the literature on recovery (Brush and McGee 2000). Berger and Luckmann contextualize personal conversion in relation to the construction of a plausibility structure. Does the conversion or “born again” experience take root
during secondary socialization in which the homeless believer, for better or worse, takes possession of the socialization process?

To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility (Berger and Luckmann 1966:177).

The sociology of God inferred by Berger and Luckmann’s dialectical model can be simplified with the question, what makes God real in the day to day world of the HB?

**God Within Human Consciousness: Luckmann**

Thomas Luckmann equates religion with the human experience of transcendence (1990:127), which, in turn, he defines as a universal aspect of the human condition (2003:276). Religion, therefore, has its most fundamental reference in anthropology and biology (1967:49) rather than “sociography,” the study of historical institutions and their evolving ideologies (1967:26). The fixation with church-religion (1963:150) has dominated the attention of sociologists since Comte’s prediction of humanity’s evolution from superstition to a positive philosophy of reason (2003:275).

Comte spoke for future generations of enlightenment “foot soldiers” (Berger 2001:448) in their disdain for religious ideas and institutions with their “monopolization of the production and distribution of worldviews” (Luckmann 2003:281). Luckmann found the identification of Western religious institutions, in a unique period of their development, with religion as a facet of human experience to be naively reductionistic, if not chauvinistic. The unquestioned advance of secularization, evident in the decline of the churches, is a major theme in what Luckmann calls “the myth of modernity” (Luckmann 1990:132).

Luckmann argues that religion, far from disappearing, has entered a period of possible
expansion. The experience of transcendence — defined by its anthropological function in bonding the individual with the collective (2003:276) — has been forced to relocate from external institutional structures to the “sacralized subjectivity” of the individual (1990:135). Human transcendence, like everything in the modern market economy, is thrust upon an open marketplace of world-view construction (1990:127), a market supplied by a bewildering variety of sources (2003:281. “The ‘autonomous’ individual today confronts the traditional religious representations… more or less as a consumer” (1963:159).

Luckmann develops the theory of secularization not as the end of religion as a passing stage in human development (2003:275) but rather as the privatization of the sacred cosmos (Luckmann 1979:123). He criticizes sociologists for having missed or ignored this fundamental trait of modernity due to reductionist conceptions of religion or the naive fixation upon the decline of church-centered religiosity (Luckmann 1963; 1967).

On the whole, the new sociology or religion gave up its claim to theoretical relevance and developed into a studious account of church organization in the form of parish demography (1963:148).

Luckmann’s shrunken transcendence within privatized social space raises the question as to the difference between the social spaces of individuals experiencing homelessness and those not. Are personal beliefs and preferred practices, with their respective hierarchies of meaning, distinguishable simply as competing consumer options (Luckmann 1963:159)? If so, what hierarchical system defines their meaning relative to each other? Are all sacred cosmoi, or life-worlds, created equal (Schutz and Luckmann 1973; Berger and Luckmann 1995)? Perhaps individuals in the throes of homelessness are experiencing the dissolution of modern society in an advanced stage, raw anomie divested of the trappings of order. Do their several life-worlds
reveal a dawning process of re-socialization? Do their sub-institutional experiences of
transcendence comprise a proto-form (Luckmann 1963:153) of religion revealing the inner form
of a world view, whose plausibility is neither obligatory (2003:282) nor enforced (Luckmann
1970:96), but freely chosen, with perhaps a sense of urgency? Is their’s the invisible religion of
pre- and post-modernity (Luckmann 1967), here devoid of cover and thus transparent to the
structuration of consciousness relative to meaning in day to day life? Finally, is their faith
experience, both internally and externally, more or less just like everybody else’s?

While Luckmann makes only passing reference to God as a symbol of the transcendent
(1963:153), his theory of human consciousness as its anthropological condition (1967:49) puts
all symbol systems on the same level. For the purposes of my research, God is a personal being
about whom the respondent speculates and with whom he or she claims some objective
relationship. This makes God different from other symbols from a theological, but not a
sociological, standpoint. Luckmann’s theoretical perspective informs a methodology that seeks
to explain the manner in, and extent to which these least powerful members of society by their
own initiative, and within their own power, construct relationships with the transcendent as

**God Beyond Human Consciousness: Berger**

In his sociology of religion, Peter Berger acknowledges the same sacred-profane
bifurcation of social reality as Durkheim and Luckmann. With Luckmann, he examines the
dilemma of modern socialization following the dislocation of transcendence from authoritative
institutions to private consciousness (Berger 1967a). With Luckmann, Berger defines
secularization as the diminishing influence of religious institutions in the lives of individuals and
culture and traces its source to modernization (Berger and Luckmann 1995; Berger 2001). Again with Luckmann, Berger elaborates the peculiar challenges in constructing plausibility structures without prior legitimation by religious authorities (Berger 2001:454).

Berger departs from Luckmann in stressing the substantive over the functional definition of religion in sociology — its believed contents versus its social-psychological function in generating a worldview (Berger 1974:125; Luckmann 1967:49). While both understand religious meanings as human projections within individual consciousness, they differ over what it is that is projected. Luckmann stresses the function of religion in relating self and society (Luckmann 1967:49). Berger, by contrast, cites Weber’s emphasis on understanding religious meanings in their own terms (Berger 1974:127), i.e., as they are understood by individuals as social actors. Berger criticizes Luckmann’s apparent identification of the religious with the human *tout court* (Berger 1967b:127).

Berger reports with some alarm that the scholarly tendency to stress the functional dimension of religion at the expense of the substantive has not simply relocated the transcendent but closed it off from scientific observation altogether (1974:132). He characterizes this tendency in various expressions: assassination through definition (1974:126), the domestication and delimitation of transcendence (1974:132); the systematic blinding of science toward religion (1974:133). In Berger’s view, the scientific study of religion has shifted from methodological atheism toward atheism as the “official” scientific worldview (1974:133). By reducing religion to its function within society the “specificity of the religious phenomenon is avoided by equating it with other phenomena” (1974:129).

Berger’s polemical focus is echoed in more general terms by more recent critics. Take the following example:
Sociologists must resist the temptation to subsume the study of religion into alternative, and for some at least more congenial, areas of interest. …It is in fact a further, if indirect, consequence of a tendency to think primarily in terms of secularization. So doing implies that the presence, rather than the absence, of religion in the modern world requires an explanation…. One way round this “problem” lies in arguing that what appears to be religion is “really something else…” (Davie 2007:7).

According to Berger, secularization as the radical transcendentalization of God (1967b:116) begins with a long exodus (Berger 1967b:115) of individuals as mythologically conceived collectivities (Berger 1967b:118) to modern rational actors in a disenchanted and demythologized world (Berger and Pullberg 1965:200). The individual as acting in history was developed further by the Protestant Reformation, where the conscious interaction of the individual apart from the ritualized consciousness of the collective determined one’s relationship with God (Berger 1967b:112). As the modern universe is thus historicized, the modern individual must appeal directly to the divine for recognition and approval, and no longer to earthly regents (Berger 1967b:117).

In developing his conception of radical transcendentalization, Berger begins with Durkheim’s substantive description of the sacred-profane dichotomy in observing religious phenomena. He departs from an exclusive consideration of Durkheim’s, and later Luckmann’s, functional analysis of religious institutions (Berger 1967b:175), focusing rather on religious experience over against the ordinary day to day experience (Berger 1974:129). He equates this with the “holiness” of Rudolf Otto’s phenomenology, that which is radically Other than anything in the natural world, and yet is reported in all cultures at all times. Otto understood this phenomenon as an a priori category of the human mind and, thus, as universal and irreducibly human.

…[N]ot only the rational but also the non-rational elements of the complex category of
“holiness” are a priori elements and each in the same degree. Religion is not in vassalage either to morality or teleology, ethos or telos, and does not draw its life from postulates; and its non-rational content has, no less than its rational, its own independent roots in the hidden depths of the spirit itself (Otto 1958:136).

According to Berger, it is this “otherness” that is subject to routinization and domestication (Berger 1974:132, alluding to Weber 1964:363 ff.), that historically has disrupted the normal commerce of societies and has been legitimated, and thus brought under control, by religious institutions. For Berger, as for Otto, Weber, and others, it is nonetheless this element of religious experience, and the meanings derived from it, that define the substance of religion.

The disorienting effect of secularization falls equally to all members of modern society, including individuals experiencing homelessness. Each rummages through the same fragments of former certitudes or orthodoxies — more or less familiar symbols whose veracity was once guaranteed by authority. The necessity to choose among failed certitudes Berger calls the heretical imperative, from hairēsis, to choose (Berger 1979). Within an enclosed sacred cosmology, and a controlled religious marketplace, to commit heresy once meant to tear the fabric of the collective mind, resulting in anomic chaos. For us in our nonchalant consumption of belief systems and “lifestyle choices,” this sounds quaint. Within an earlier universe of meaning, such wanton disregard for order was “to make a compact with the primeval forces of darkness” (Berger 1967b:39). Our cool rationalism may have similar effects nonetheless.

It points to a built-in condition of cognitive dissonance — and to the heretical imperative as a root phenomenon of modernity. …[It] means that the modern individual is faced not just with the opportunity but with the necessity to make choices as to his [sic] beliefs (Berger 1979:30).

With Collins and Luckmann, Berger affirms that the modern, highly differentiated individual has no option but to order a stable, ethically sound and fully functioning world
(Collins 1992). Most members of society, affluent and secure in comparison with their homeless neighbors, can “lose themselves” (Berger 1967b:55) in the illusion that yesterday’s social or religious consensus remains intact. Ironically, even yesterday’s orthodoxy is today’s heresy (Berger 1979). The difference is that affluent consumers have the luxury to indulge themselves in atheistic and agnostic speculations, comparing them to traditional notions as a matter of taste. Persons experiencing homelessness do not have this same luxury (Arnade 2013).

For the HB, the present world is by definition a precarious one (Berger 1961), where social order not only appears, but manifestly proves to be, tenuous at best (Fenn 2001:129). From a more limited or “specialized” market the HB makes his or her own rational consumer choices. The demand is more immediate — to construct a world of meanings that orders day to day life, making not just a plausible life-world but a plausible identity by which to order it (Berger 1967b:54).

Berger’s theory of the irreducibility of the religious consciousness at least in one respect levels the field upon which the affluent and the destitute construct their worlds. Each one is comprised of phenomena of consciousness (Schutz 1972), and potentially accessible as data (Glaser 1998). From this standpoint a collectivity of homeless individuals is as likely as any other to signal the “next” awakening to the transcendent (Berger 1974:133).

**God as Child's Play: Mead**

While Mead's social behaviorism makes frequent reference to religion, Mead does not present a systematic theory of religion comparable to those described in previous sections. Throughout his writings Mead utilized both substantive and functional conceptions of religion in detailing the social organization of the self. He conceptualizes religion in relation to those social
processes by which democracy and equality are formed in practice. Mead calls this process the religious attitude, an organized set of responses (Mead 1934:161) whose function is to conduct the individual self into the immediate inner attitude of the other (Mead 1934:296), thus completing the formation of the self (Mead 1934:154) and, ultimately, of society (Mead 1934:302).

In an outline of Mead’s biography, Shalin (1988) recounts Mead’s spiritual journey as the son of Christian ministers who attended an historic Christian university with thoughts of becoming a missionary. In the course of his training, Mead’s missions focus shifted from converting others to faith to reforming society. As an intellectual he had come to believe that the ideal society, typified by medieval monastic communities (Mead 1934:302), could be expressed universally apart from the theological and metaphysical particulars in which they were grounded. The latter might continue to function as “little deceptions” (Shalin 1988:921) drawing less sophisticated folk into “the great secular adventure” of social and moral progress (Mead 1923:246).

Throughout his career Mead retained his understanding of democracy as a universal society founded on a mystical and ecclesial core (1934:288). His concept of the self was replete with references to the religious attitude, whose development began and ended with the recognition of the neighbor as a moral and social equal (1934:296). The individual would experience a mystical exaltation in the recognition of the neighbor as a social equal — a “me” just like him- or herself — and, as such, an equal member of a universal society (1934:274). This moral and psychological fusion of the “I” and the “me” was requisite to the completion of the self as a functioning member of society.

Mead understood the religious attitude to be, first, the experience of neighborliness — the
mystical recognition the individual experiences in the recognition of the other as a social equal. In the development of the self this is the fusion of the “I” and the “me.” This experience is universal, just as the self and its self-consciousness are essentially identical, expressed equally in all persons everywhere. The exalted experience of universality is a nonrational moment. It results from no logical calculation and exists for no exterior purpose other than the natural drive to complete itself — in the individual, by the development of the self; in society, by fulfillment of the Social Contract as Mead understood it (Mead1934:286)

The social-mystical function of the religious attitude is to extend the completion of the moral self to the formation of the universal society, permeated by a kind of team spirit and, of the group, to universal religion and religions (1934:302). The ideal democratic society, once fully achieved, would be sustained by the practical performance of the Golden Rule.

The commerce of completely formed selves as neighbors, each doing unto the other as he or she would have done in return, would naturally extend democratic society beyond local borders to the ends of the earth — a truly “catholic” vision. While historically the universal society was expressed only intermittently — Mead cites early religious communities and the French Revolution as types (1934:286) — its eventual fulfillment was inherent in reason itself. Here Mead’s eschatological optimism was typical of intellectuals of the Progressive movement at the turn of the last century (Shalin 1988).

The end toward which society was steadily evolving was the construction of a truly democratic society expressed in the tone of a religious attitude (Mead 1934:288 ff.).

…[T]he religious attitude involves this relation of the social stimulus to the world at large, the carrying-over of the social attitude to the larger world. I think that that is the definite field within which the religious experience appears (Mead 1934:275).
When Mead mentions God by name, it is as the personification of an identified social group which too frequently divides His loyalties between competing groups when the universality of the democratic ideal falls short. Mead mentions the God of the Germans versus the God of the Allies during the First World War (Mead 1934:314). From the perspective of society, God is always the same, namely, the God who is on “our” side (Mead 1934:248).

From the moment when the neighbor is encountered as a “me,” a direct counterpart to the “I,” the functional character of religion asserts itself. The natural completion of the religious attitude is the formation of the religious community, which is the ideal expression of all communities. The religious attitude expresses the initial recognition of the universality of the neighbor — pictured by Mead as a moment of religious exaltation — which, in turn, gives rise to the formation of religious groups. It is within the life of groups as functioning communities, with their practical considerations and inevitable conflicts, that religion takes on its parochial character over against other religions, each distinguished by its own propaganda and territory.

In a footnote, editor Charles Morris notes incredulously that Mead makes no connection between the concept of a personal God and his conception of the generalized other (Mead 1934:xxxiv, n. 24). His comment implies that such a connection could be inferred, and hence reconstructed, from Mead’s theory of the self.

God as an expression Mead’s generalized other would not be the same “Other” as in other conceptions of social psychology (Chatham-Carpenter 2006), theology (Otto 1968), or, as will be shown, in the present research. Mead’s generalized other, like Durkheim’s sacred society, reflects society as a whole, idealized or projected, or perhaps internalized in the objectivated “me” or in me’s “double” coming back to him/her in his/her own talk in the unorganized field of
inner experience (Mead 1912:405).

This generalized other is, among other things, the voice of the society of which the child is a part. As the child comes to mature selfhood, the generalized other is identified with the collective in which the social “me” was born. The exception is the child in pure play “as distinct from the game” (1934:158), which is replicated in the religious pageantry of primitive peoples.

The homeless believer’s inner conversation with God highlights the social ambivalence of his or her place in society. He/she is between organized societies, if not between organized selves. While the child engaged in pure play comes short of the game with its organizing structure of “rules,” the generalized other is fixed. Upon this mature structure the self depends for its existence.

The homeless believer functions in a society whose restructuring is not yet realized. The belief in and communion with God is an expression of fulfilling the completion of the self in relation to the completion of society. This is the “hypothetical” moral society of the great prophets (1934:387).

Summary

The highlights from the above theorists trace the gradual evolution of religion in society from a readily identifiable expression of collective identity to an elusive and ambivalent tendency within the recesses of the individual consciousness. With the function of religion in modern society rendered secondary at most and superfluous at least, theorists confidently reduce its recurrent expression to some other dimension of experience (Davie 2007). Others warn against this tendency (Berger 2001).

Durkheim, the name most associated with the functionalist definition of religion,
effectively identifies a people’s god with their society as a unit. In pre-modern or “primitive” societies, the function of the people’s god was, literally, to hold them together, to form them as a people. Collins, observing late modern societies, identifies “society itself” as the substance of the divine, made real in the passing encounters of individuals who identify, more or less, with that society. Like modern society, Collins’ deity is contingent, and the circumstances of that contingency are as uncertain as is the future of modernity. In both Durkheim’s mechanistic and Collins’ organic construction of society, in the case of homeless believers the question remains, what sort of collective are we talking about? What is the function of belief within such a construction? In particular, how is the God of that society, or the society as God, represented, projected, or otherwise made part of collective experience?

Both Berger and Luckmann, writing individually and together, find that the secularizing forces of modernity, the reality of the transcendent within consciousness, individual and collective, remains inalienable. Within the modern dispensation of transcendence as they conceive it, the homeless believer, like all individuals, encounters and seeks to transcend the same pre-constructed space, converting it into a sacred cosmos, plausibility structure, or world. Apart from past or present relations with religious institutions, each has private access to God as he or she understands God. Each believer is thoroughly modern in this sense.

Mead’s social psychology places the transcendent at the beginning and the end of psychological development, of both the individual self and the society of perfected selves. His conception of society begins with the phenomenological “I,” the preformed self with no referent but naturally inclined to a personalized other. This “I” is objectivated by the “me,” an inner self with whom the “I” converses, which itself reflects an abstracted image of society as “generalized other.” As selves become neighbors and societies progress to include all societies, humanity as a
whole will resemble a universal religious community (Mead 1934:328). At the present moment, the progress of society toward its ultimate fulfillment is uncertain, if not doubtful. With Mead, the previous question, “Which society?” becomes focused as “Which generalized other?” Perhaps no individual more clearly captures the ambiguity of the present moment than the individual experiencing homelessness who professes to have a relationship with a personal God, who is an Other like no other.

In the midst of a dominant culture obsessed with its own deconstruction, individuals experiencing homelessness continue to construct a relationship with God. The emphasis on social construction shifts the sociological conception of God away from homelessness as a social problem. God is no longer primarily a dimension of a therapeutic intervention, or, alternatively, the personification of an opiate reserved to those alienated from the means of production. The concept of a plausibility structure levels the concept of “opiate,” regardless of its current familiarity among critics.

Application

The theorists examined in the present chapter raise theoretical questions that are incorporated into the interview stage of the project. They are analytical questions regarding the social construction of the beliefs recorded in semi-structured interviews. The basic analytical question that has emerged from the theorists in this chapter is, what is the society out of which participants’ personal beliefs, as stated, are constructed? What structure or structures emerges from the narrative material? The conceptions emerging from the present research develop these questions, in agreement with some, but not all, of the theoretical conceptions outlined above.

Unlike the theoretical questions posed in the present section, those in the interviews
proceed from the first research question, which can be stated as a personal request: “Please tell me about the God you believe in.” This question prompted follow-up questions which gave rise to a series of narratives. Based on this narrative material a set of hypotheses emerged based on a theory grounded in the analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2014).

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Epistemological Position

The purpose of the present research is to explain social-psychological behaviors (Glaser 1978:102) of a group of individuals in an area in which very little systematic research has been conducted (Nathaniel 2020). A systematic explanation of unexplored social behavior calls for a theory empirically grounded in a set of data (Glaser 1978; Urquhart and Fernandez 2013; Walsh et al 2015). As I will show in this chapter, a grounded theory approach is appropriate for this research (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Grounded theory (GT) is the name given for both a research process and the end result of that process (Bryant 2002; Holton and Walsh 2017). On the one hand, GT is “the systematic generation of theory from systematic research” (GTI 2014). On the other, it is “a conceptual explanation of human process that a sample of people have in common” (Nathaniel 2021:2).

I began my research assuming that a theory of the construction of beliefs in God would result from a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer 1969). With Durkheim (1974) and Mead, I view the individual as a conscious being and, as such, a social being who cannot be conceptualized apart from other social beings (Mead 1910; 2002). With Mead (1925) and Blumer (1969), I assume that meanings of events and ideas are constructed in group interactions and can be analyzed with careful observation. Such early assumptions had to be reassessed in
analyzing meanings constructed by individuals that were common but not shared.

The epistemological shift was a change in emphasis and not in a fundamental philosophy of knowledge. I sought now to analyze patterns of behavior observable in isolation from a population as a unit rather than meanings revealed in their shared interactions (Glaser 1978:109). The leap, such as it was, was not in ontological assumptions about the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966) but in my understanding of the common concern processed by believers based on a conception of God and their relationship with him (Glaser 1978; GTI 2014).

The methodology proposed for the initial research questions was a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014). Based on my earliest findings in the interview and memoing data, I saw that the appropriate methodology for answering my questions was that of classic grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Holton and Walsh 2017). This methodological shift accounts not only for a preferred method of analysis but also for a change in perspective in my epistemological assumptions in qualitative research.

**Grounded Theory: Analytical Framework and Method**

A standard outline of the background, theory, and application of GT has emerged in the literature since the appearance of GT in the mid 1960’s. In this section I present highlights of that outline in order to present the rationale for the use of GT in the present research.

*The Emergence of Grounded Theory Research*

Always keep in mind that GT [grounded theory] methodology is itself a GT that emerged from doing research… (Glaser and Holton 2007:66)

According to Pérez and Vallières, “GT was developed as a set of procedures to collect and
analyze data in a systematic and cyclical fashion in order to allow concepts to emerge and
generate theories grounded in data” (Pérez and Vallières 2019:5). Put simply, GT is an inductive
method (Hernandez 2009). It begins with data and by an iterative process of coding, sorting, and
writing generates theory to explain a substantive area of interest (Bowen 2006; Breckenridge
2014; Kellogg and Vander Linden 2021). By contrast, most conventional scientific research is
deductive. It begins with a complete theoretical system, typically in the form of stated
propositions (Strauss 1987; Denzin 2007, Walsh et al 2015), proceeds to form hypotheses and
conclusions based on a defined data source (Kahn 2014:224). Theorists continue to argue the
merits of one approach over against the other (Denzin 2007).

Scholars are unanimous in identifying the origin of GT with the publication of The
Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (hereafter Discovery), a
monograph by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). The authors introduced
this text as an attempt “to close the gap between theory and research” (Glaser and Strauss
1967:vii) by challenging a false dichotomy regarding the purpose of social research:

For many sociologists... there exists a conflict concerning primacy of purpose, reflecting
the opposition between a desire to generate theory and a trained need to verify it. Since
verification has primacy on the current sociological scene, the desire to generate theory
often becomes secondary, if not lost, in specific researches. (Glaser and Strauss 1967:2).

According to Glaser and Tarozzi (2007) Glaser and Strauss wrote Discovery in response to
the surprising popularity of an earlier work, Awareness of Dying (1965a; henceforth Awareness).
In the latter they proposed a theory to explain the changing interactions between terminal
patients, their families, and healthcare professionals in a hospital setting as patients approached
death. In Discovery (1967) they expand the appendix of the earlier text into a full exposition of
its methodology (Glaser and Tarozzi 2007). A few years later they developed the substantive
theory presented in *Awareness* into a formal theory in *Status Passage* (Glaser and Strauss 1971).

In each of these works Glaser and Strauss challenge a second false dichotomy in social research, that of qualitative *versus* quantitative data (Glaser and Strauss 1967:17, 234). Based on the qualitative procedures documented in *Awareness*, the authors present *Discovery* primarily as a study in qualitative methods. Nonetheless they claim that “each form of data is useful for both generation and verification of theory.” Further, in some cases “both forms of data are necessary” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:17,18; italics in the original of both quotations are here omitted). Once again, the selection of data depends of the emphasis by the researcher on either verification or generation of theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967:17).

*Discovery* legitimized qualitative research “at a time (1960s) when qualitative researchers were seeking to establish credibility in the face of dominant quantitative research” (Walsh et al 2015). Immediately following *Discovery*, qualitative GT studies proliferated (Urquhart et al 2010) until GT was the most widely cited form of qualitative research (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). Ironically, GT as a general methodology embracing all forms of data, a recurrent theme in *Discovery*, was all but forgotten (Glaser 2005; Walsh et al 2015). Glaser and Strauss had unwittingly placed themselves “at the forefront of a qualitative revolution” (Hallberg 2009; Charmaz 2014).

Having begun as a methodology for sociological research (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978), by virtue of its popularity GT was quickly adapted for use in a wide variety of fields. A partial list would include nursing, midwifery (DiCocco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006), community medicine, information systems research (Gasson 2009), mental health, business, education, marketing, management, and relational development (Bryant and Charmaz 2007).
Convergence and Divergence

With the rising popularity of GT in the past half century a number of GT maxims have become standard: “Theory emerges from the data” (Bryant 2002) and, what Bryant and Charmaz (2007:44) call Glaser’s constant refrain, “All is data” (Glaser 1998). Quoted by practitioners and critics alike, these “mantras” (Bryant 2002) reinforce a simple point. The less one knows in advance about a subject of interest, the less likely one is to force prior “grand” or “pet” theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967:46; Bryant and Charmaz 2008:157) on a data sample, thus deriving theory not as it emerges from analysis but from personal or professional preconceptions.

The versatility of GT as a qualitative method and the ambiguity or “flexibility” of a novel terminology inevitably broadened the distinctive emphases of Glaser and Strauss’ original conception. This led to divergent understandings of its underlying theory and disagreements regarding procedures. Within twenty years of Discovery, the new methodology “split” (Kahn 2014) into “a family of methods” (Babchuk 2011), each with its own distinctive methodology (Kenny and Fourie 2014). Co-founders Glaser and Strauss would be identified with classic or “Glaserian” and Straussian or “evolved” GT respectively. Shortly afterwards one of their early students, Cathy Charmaz, would develop her own constructivist approach (Walsh 2014; Rieger 2018). While some critics describe the split as a “divorce” or “schism” (Babchuk 2011; Kenny and Fourie 2015), most present the divergent approaches as a matter for careful scrutiny and choice (Bryant 2002; Kenny and Fourie 2015).

One of the hazards of choosing between the several GT approaches is discerning between methodological nuances (Gynneld 2011; Evans 2013) and potentially “blurring” the distinct emphasis of each (Kenny and Fourie 2015). Nathaniel (2020) and Charmetsky (2020) stress the importance of naming the approach one is using at the outset of the research. O’Connor et al
(2018) and Nathaniel (2020) urge researchers to cite only the literature appropriate to that approach.

**The Classic Turn**

In spite of Bryant’s concluding statement that GT has no orthodoxy, the arguments on both sides seem to be proprietary arguments: which, or whose, preferred method is the “real” GT? Glaser, who did ascribe orthodoxy to his original method (Walsh et al 2015), argued that attempts to “remodel” the original theory have in fact changed it to a broad category of qualitative data analysis (QDA). Charmaz and Bryant, on the other hand, see Glaserian theory as the acknowledged original but now long outdated and without due consideration to a half century’s advances in social research (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). While I will not presume to referee this debate, I will explain why I shifted my approach from a constructivist to a classic GT methodology.

In her glossary Charmaz concludes her definition of constructivist grounded theory as follows: “Constructivist grounded theorists aim for abstract understanding of studied life and view their analyses as located in time, place, and the situation of inquiry” (Charmaz 2014:335). Charmaz’s stress on time, place, and situation is stated in explicit contrast with Glaser’s claim for the importance of conceptualization in GT. By contrast, Glaser stresses the central place of transcendence in theoretical abstraction: “The most important property of conceptualization for GT is that it is abstract of time, place, and people” (Glaser 2002:25).

The present sociology of God began with observing respondents attempting to link their language of belief with their present circumstances. My assumption was that the language of God would indicate shared meanings arising from interactions between members of this group. I
discovered almost immediately that there was no “group.” Two respondents identified as partnered or engaged and thus grouped with each other. Another said he was engaged or about to be engaged, and that, once he was no longer homeless, he would marry his fiancé. At the moment he was alone on the street while she was not. Most respondents gave reasons for keeping their distance from their peers. They had acquaintances, shared common spaces for eating and sleeping, but, as one man put it, having close personal relationships with people on the street was a “no-no.”

What was observable in the present time and place was a process whereby individuals discovered, rediscovered, affirmed, or reaffirmed their understanding of God. Past conceptualizations were inserted into present circumstances. In spite of the lack of shared meanings derived from present interactions, there was clearly a common pattern of behaviors and a common “main concern” calling for solution (Glaser and Holton 2002:15). The social process in which this took place could be reconstructed from the interview data. The historical context for these conceptualizations could, theoretically, be reconstructed, but such reconstructions were not history in any meaningful sense. As abstract conceptualizations of an observed process, they were hypotheses for explaining a history.

A constructivist approach, particularly from an interactionist perspective, would attempt to reconstruct “their” experience in a specific moment of time and in a unique social space giving careful consideration to the researcher’s construction of the construction (Charmaz 2014). While such an approach was certainly possible, it did not seem suitable for answering the questions from which the present research originated. It would, in effect, be forcing a constructivist epistemology on the data (Glaser 1998).

By contrast, the classic approach of abstracting from time and place generates a theory
explaining the common behaviors of the aggregate group. It captures the uniqueness of this population in comparison with others participating in a similar process of believing in God. The differences between them would be explained by comparing the variant properties in each category (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). In spite of Charmaz’s warnings about Glaser’s “objectivist assumptions” (Charmaz 1996; 2008) the classic method stressed that all research was a “perception of a perception” (Glaser and Holton 2007:57).

The question of a matrix out of which concepts of faith were formed was one of several preconceptions that did not survive my earliest observations in the field. As it turned out there was no shared “matrix” out of which flowed conceptions of God unique to persons experiencing homelessness. The social matrix, such as it was, defaulted to the more or less conventional religious socialization of individuals now experiencing homelessness, or else to a later conversion experience much like those reported by their domiciled counterparts. As the research would establish, the nuanced properties of their beliefs were incidents on the street or in prison when prior beliefs were affirmed and, in effect, ritualized.
CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH STRATEGY

In specifying the method for a given research, the CGT analyst must decide how to present CGT as a research strategy. Writers typically include in their statement some combination of procedural steps with the underlying theory of CGT. For example, Holton and Walsh identify three pillars of CGT: exploration-emergence, constant comparative analysis, and theoretical sampling (Holton and Walsh 2017:43). Nathaniel lists six immutable elements: discovery, conceptualization, participant perspective, theorizing, parsimony, and theory development (Nathaniel 2021:3). Christiansen (2008:5) lists two hallmarks of CGT: finding the core variable or category and suspending one’s preconceptions while trusting in the emergence of concepts from data.

In his *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978) Glaser gives what would appear to be the definitive summary of the CGT research process in ten chapters listed as sequential steps. These place the theoretical intent of the major themes of CGT methodology in the context of an ordered process. Most of the steps are not strictly sequential but are rather concurrent or iterative, “cycling back and forth through successive engagements in data collection and analysis” (Holton 2007:269). A written account of CGT as a research strategy tends to combine the author’s recitation of standard concepts and procedures with a summary of their present operationalization (Garrity 2013; Nathaniel 2020; Cashwell 2021). Strategy, therefore, looks both forward and back without a clear boundary between methods and findings (Glaser and Holton 2007). The present research strategy is no exception.

In order to avoid the confusion so common among GT practitioners, particularly novices (Evans 2013), I have chosen CGT as a research strategy in a now standard series of steps and
elucidation of basic concepts claimed by its proponents (Nathaniel 2020:4). In this way I hope to present the theory set forth in subsequent chapters as keeping with the underlying methodology of CGT. As recommended by CGT analysts, I rely on the distinctive terminology or “jargon” (Simmons 2011) of classic Glaserian GT.

**Data Collection and Theoretical Sampling**

Data collection in GT research begins with identifying a substantive area of interest and collecting initial data from sources representative of that area. In qualitative research, data would likely include interviews with a few persons representing a given social unit (Glaser and Strauss 1964; 1965b; 1967), such as, in the present case, persons experiencing homelessness. As the interview process gets underway and initial codes begin to suggest categories, the recruitment of subsequent respondents becomes more selective. In CGT this is called theoretical sampling (Glaser 1978; Holton and Walsh 2017).

According to Holton and Walsh (2017:213), theoretical sampling is “the process through which empirical data are selected and collected while guided by the emerging theory.” The purpose is to avoid imposing a preconceived population profile or “face sheet variables” (Glaser 1978:60) on the interview sample, thus presuming an underlying theory by which that unit has been already identified. In the present study theoretical sampling consisted of two groups of interview respondents, described here as primary and secondary.

*Primary Interview Sample: Homeless Believers (HB’s)*

The primary group consisted of the HB’s who constituted the substantive area of the research. My initial objective was to recruit persons of diverse age, gender, and racial/ethnic
groups. The purpose was not to achieve a statistical sample generalizable to a wider population but to achieve as near a representation of the local clientele as possible (Christiansen 2008). I was granted access to facilities at a drop-in center for persons experiencing homelessness in downtown Orlando, FL, where I was able to recruit participants one by one and conduct face-to-face interviews in an available office. The center is located on the grounds of a non-profit homeless service agency and is run by a downtown church.\(^7\)

While the recruitment strategy could be considered a convenience or “snow-ball” strategy, a description of how participants were actually approached supplies valuable context to the research process. I approached clients as they waited to enter the building or milled around in the parking lot, or else inside where they sat or stood in lines for a meal, coffee, or available social services. Interviews took place in a vacant office made available to accommodate privacy and to enable mandated safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. As required throughout the facility, clients and personnel wore surgical or cloth masks either owned by individuals or provided by the center. Hand sanitizers were also available throughout the various meeting spaces in the building.

In and around the drop-in center clients generally kept to themselves. Inside the facility most sat at large round tables with a capacity for eight but usually seating two, and sometimes up to five individuals. Seated clients stared at a TV in front of the room next to the kitchen, a book or magazine, or blankly at nothing in particular. Outside clients sat or lay on picnic table benches. Some stood in line for showers provided by a local ministry outreach in a converted recreational vehicle. In both settings, while clients exchanged greetings with acquaintances in passing, extended face-to-face interactions between two or more individuals were the exception and not the rule.
The criteria for recruitment of interview participants were positive responses to two questions, “Do you believe in God?” and, “Are you homeless?” The first question was asked face to face as I mingled with clients. The second was asked as part of a short demographic survey at the beginning of the interview process. The original target number for interviewees was thirty. The final number was fourteen based on a saturation of conceptual categories emerging from the interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Of the fourteen, thirteen responded “yes” to the first question and one was ambivalent, later answering in the affirmative. (See Malcolm, SOG-9, and nicknames and brief demographic descriptions of all HB respondents in Appendix G.) I did not receive any “no” responses to the first question, while many said “yes” or were ambivalent but declined to be interviewed for unstated reasons.

The semi-structured interview schedule was composed in two drafts. The first was compiled as a brainstorming tool more than a year before the interviews began. The final interview schedule included 25 questions listing the areas of interest in the interview. A few questions were asked as “spill” questions (Nathaniel 2020:5) to open conversation with respondents, such as “What is God like?” Most were answered indirectly as the interview process unfolded. The interview schedule for HB’s can be found in Appendix C.

The demographic survey was designed to gather basic background information, including age, gender, education, race/ethnicity; religious background and affiliation (if any); present religious practice and/or affiliation (if any); if homeless, for how long; present employment status and sources of income (if any); and marital status. (For results see Appendixes E through G below.) The survey was originally intended as a written questionnaire with questions calling for yes/no, numeric, and two or three word written responses. Given the special health restrictions for human subject research required by the IRB and by the facility, I incorporated the
survey into the interview as an introduction to avoid the need to sterilize pens, clipboards, and other implements. Because of the informal atmosphere of the interviews, individual survey questions often spilled over into extended narrative responses without returning to the formal survey. As a result, not all survey questions were completed by some participants.

Secondary Interview Sample: Pastors and Service Providers (PSP’s)

The second sample of interviewees consisted of three pastors and service providers (PSP’s) who worked full-time in servicing persons experiencing homelessness. These interviewees were white, male, and between 40 and 55 years old. While there was no target number of interviews, two or three interviews was suggested. These were conducted in select locations while public shelters and drop-in centers were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The purpose of including PSP’s in the data set was for comparison with the primary interviews with HB’s. The PSP’s were asked to comment on their perceptions of clients on matters of personal faith shared in personal conversations or observed in field settings. PSP’s were invited also to share their opinions about the place of faith in the lives of those who professed a belief in God.

Two of the PSP’s, though trained as Christian pastors, were funded by the city of Orlando to connect persons experiencing homelessness with available services and housing. I had met one several years earlier when he gave a presentation on homelessness at the church in downtown Orlando where I was employed as a priest. I met the second at the beginning of my research. He invited me to accompany him on one of his routine drives through the city where he met clients whom he had previously served.

Because they were employed by the city, they were not permitted to proselytize or inject
matters of faith in their services to clients. They walked or cycled through the streets and parks of the city approaching prospective clients, verifying their residential status, and then inviting them to register to receive social services, including available housing. They met with individuals in follow-up or walk-in interviews in a local office. I interviewed these two men together in a local luncheonette early in the HB interview process.

The third PSP was a former congregational minister who had set up a shelter for homeless persons in his church following Hurricane Andrew in 1992, then shortly after left parish ministry to pursue full-time work with persons trapped in homelessness. He now serves as CEO of a residential center for addicted persons most of live on the street. He also runs a weekly breakfast attended by homeless or nearly homeless persons in one of the downtown Orlando churches. While his work includes evangelistic teaching and retreats, his primary focus is on preparing motivated individuals of any faith, or of no faith, to achieve self-sufficiency and to exit homelessness. I interviewed him at the recovery center where he worked.

Theoretical Coding and Memoing

Theoretical coding is the name given for both the final stage in the CGT research process and its goal (Holton and Walsh 2017:213): to develop hypothetical relationships between conceptual categories that explain what is going on in the data (Glaser 1978; Christiansen 2008). Glaser describes the process in two major steps. The first is substantive coding, which includes both open and selective coding collected from the population of interest (Glaser 1978:56 ff.). The second major step is simply called theoretical coding (Glaser 1978:72 ff.). Glaser stresses that the two types of coding occur simultaneously (Glaser 1978:56).
**Substantive Coding: Open and Selective Coding**

Substantive coding is the process that culminates in the discovery of a core category or variable (Glaser 1978; Holton and Walsh 2017). It begins with open coding of “anything and everything” that might be relevant to a potential category (Glaser 1978:56; GTI 2014). Once a core category has emerged, the analyst codes selectively for additional categories and their properties that explain the variations in the core category (Glaser 1978:61).

As coding becomes more selective, codes are separated into categories and their properties. Glaser and Strauss distinguish these two as follows:

> A category stands by itself as a conceptual element of the theory. A property, in turn, is a conceptual aspect of a category (Glaser and Strauss 1967:36; 1971:189).

In SOG “God provides” emerged early as a frequent label among substantive codes relating to the God concept as it emerged from the interview data. It soon emerged as the dominant concept relating to twenty-seven other “God” labels as supporting properties. (See Figure 2 on page 63, and Appendix H.) As substantive coding transitioned to theoretical coding, the major category for the first research question — the what question — had emerged, and the substantive code “God Provides” was labeled “The God Who Provides” (TGWP).

**Theoretical Codes and Basic Social Processes**

According to Glaser, “theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser 1978:72). Through substantive coding the rudiments of a substantive theory of believing had emerged. What remained was for the substantive categories and their variant properties to be modeled as hypotheses (Glaser 1978; Holton and Walsh 2017). This occurred through theoretical coding.
Theoretical codes describe the world in terms of conceptual patterns (Christiansen 2008; Holton and Walsh 2017) and can be modeled through the use of coding families (Glaser 1978:74 ff.). Coding families are alternative models conceptual patterns.

Theoretical Memoing

As theoretical coding gives rise to theory, “the analyst will notice that the concepts abstracted from the substantive situation will tend to be current labels in use for the actual processes and behaviors that are to be explained, while the concepts constructed by the analyst will tend to be the explanations” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:107). Such explanations are developed into theory in theoretical memos, or memoing, a process that begins concurrently with the collection of data (Glaser 1978:83 ff.).

The compiling, editing and reediting of memos is the process through which discerning categories with their properties and the relations between them occurred. Having become familiar with memoing as part of an earlier research project, it was natural for me to include theoretical memoing in every stage of the present analysis. The final write-up of SOG was derived primarily from the “piles of ideas” sorted from 300-plus written documents of varying length and 75-plus diagrams and drawings (Glaser 1992:111). Theoretical memoing clearly was a discrete element in the research process and served a crucial function in developing a theory of believing.

Methods Conclusion

The shift of focus from Homeless Believers as a unique substantive unit to processes and behaviors whereby individuals reinforced their beliefs was an emergent breakthrough in early
analysis. It affirmed the appropriateness of CGT for generating plausible hypotheses based on concepts emerging from the analysis. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, my personal curiosity about what HB’s believed presupposed a theoretical relation of concepts unique to that group. Such a relation did not fit the data.

The concept of a process of believing gave meaning to early conceptualizations of the socialization of the individual and its reinforcement in a subsequent moment of crisis when the believer’s faith came into play. The theory that emerged was organized around a series of stages (Glaser 1978:76) in a logical, if not always chronological, sequence that resolved the crisis and subsequently repeated itself. The findings for this study resulted in a substantive theory, not of beliefs, but of believing. In the present case the ones believing were persons experiencing homelessness. The what of their believing was the God Who Provides, presented as abstract categories and properties of the core category Believing In the God Who Provides.
CHAPTER SIX: A GROUNDED THEORY OF BELIEVING

Answering the Questions

RQ1: What do persons experiencing homelessness who profess belief in a personal God believe about the God in whom they profess to believe?

RQ2: What is the social matrix out of which HBs’ beliefs in God are constructed and reinforced?

The goal of theoretical coding in all its phases, including the use of analytical memos, is the discovery of a core category and its relation to other categories and their properties (or elements, aspects, dimensions, etc.; Glaser 1978:93). Substantive codes are attached to a wide diversity of thematic elements observed in a unit of interest. As stated, the unit of interest in the present study is persons experiencing homelessness who profess to believe in God. Ultimately substantive codes are selected based on recurrent patterns observed in the data until the main problem or concern of participants under observation is identified, along with their resolution of the problem as they see it. Theoretical codes are the labels attached to the categories and properties which define the emergent theory grounded in the data (Glaser 1978:55).

In the course of the research my initial question regarding statements of beliefs by persons experiencing homelessness became a question about a social-psychological process in which believers expressed and reinforced their beliefs. What emerged were two major conceptual categories: one of beliefs and the other of believing. An early choice had to be made as to which of these two was the core category and which was the “near core” (Glaser 1978:93).

The first major category, “The God Who Provides” (TGWP), consists of two subcategories; the first with two properties, and the second with two properties sharing six sub-properties. The second major category, “Believing in the God Who Provides” (BGWP), is the
core category (alternatively “core variable;” Glaser 1978:107,8; Christiansen 2008:5). As a basic social process (BSP) the properties of the core category consist of five sequential stages.

The terms “category” and “property” are common in sociological research and with definitions appropriate to their given methodological usage. Below I repeat Glaser’s and Strauss’s definition as it appears first in *Discovery* and is repeated in later works.

“A category stands by itself as a conceptual element of the theory. A property… is a conceptual aspect of a category” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:36; 1971:189).

The distinction between these two is made clear below where the properties of the major SOG categories derive their theoretical relevance from the categories of which they are a part, whereas the reverse is not necessarily the case.

**First Research Question: The Concept of God**

*The God Who Provides*

The first research question — the *what* question — is “The God Who Provides” (TGWP). As a subcategory of the core category TGWP explains what believers are believing in BGWP as a social psychological process. TGWP is not the core category because it is not necessary to explain the variations in participants’ thoughts or behaviors as they process through BGWP.

HB’s believe in a God who takes care of them. He provides. Within the process of believing, HB’s perceive God’s provision repeatedly in their day to day experience, though not predictably and not necessarily often. Furthermore, the experience of God’s ongoing provision has the function of ritual. It strengthens individual believers in their believing, reminding them who they are as social beings in a social relationship.

In the case of Homeless Believers, even if society is not God as Durkheim (2008) and
Collins (1992) insist, nevertheless God is social. A relationship with God, however conceived in detail, is modeled after relations with other persons. The awareness that one is conceiving of God is a ritual reminder that one is a social being. This holds true even if at a given moment the individual can claim no human interpersonal relations of any value or significance.

God provides for believers in many ways. He speaks to them through events of daily life where his provision appears explicitly purposed for them. He shields them in hazardous circumstances but sometimes permits such conditions to persist for their eventual benefit. In all cases he reminds believers, sometimes at their cost, of his abiding presence with them, even when they have ignored him for a long time and continue to ignore him most of the time.

HB’s understand negative outcomes in their lives as results of God’s correction, or as consequences of their ignoring or disobeying God. While they believe God is just in his judgments, they reject the concept of a judgmental God. God is reasonable in his rejection of behaviors and attitudes which HB’s themselves recognize as dishonest, devilish, indecent, and ungodly. They know he has their best interests at heart even when they do not, and this is his ultimate provision.

Like their domiciled peers, most homeless believers come to believe in God in their domain of origin. Others learn about him in early adulthood from someone they meet, usually by happenstance, or else through special, often miraculous, circumstance. Some experience a distinctly religious conversion that affects a change in their perspective if not always their behavior. From that moment on the God who provides is at the center of their world. Whether they proceed confidently from an awareness of God’s presence with them or return to it later in a moment of panic, it is the same God.

There is no evidence here that HBs’ homeless status or circumstances frame a concept of
God unique to them as a substantive unit or group. The only differences between the God of persons experiencing homelessness and that of others may be the variances in their behaviors and responses as they cycle through the stages of the core category. In the challenging situations of daily life, many of them extreme, HB’s recognize the character of the God who provides in the manner of his providing. The recollection of this God providing a resolution to this crisis is incorporated in a prior social history of this believer and is integrated in a more or less transformed present.

In SOG the TGWP category is distinguished from the core category, “Believing in the God who Provides” (BGWP), which, as will be explained, is a basic social-psychological process (BSPP) of believing this what. While the concept of God with its diverse properties is indicated throughout the BGWP process, the descriptive properties of TGWP do not determine whether or not the process is completed or “processes out” (Glaser 1978:97).

The What of Believing

TGWP as a major category can be defined according to two of eighteen theoretical coding families (Glaser 1978:74 ff.), which typically overlap with one “spawning” another (Glaser 1978:73). The first is the process family (Glaser 1978:74). The process model in the present case indicates a pivot between the two sub-categories of TGWP. The second is the type family (Glaser 1978:75), which indicates relationships between all the conceptual properties of the God concept (Nathaniel 2021:6).

The TGWP category consists of two subcategories, coded “God as Other” and “God as Social.” At the conceptual level the subcategories represent the “process family.” (Note: process family is not the same as Basic Social Process, a property of the core category; see Section 2
below). The process is coded “Personalization.”

“Personalization” is the reflexive pivoting between the two beings portrayed in TGWP subcategories. As shown repeatedly in the interview data, the belief in a personal, and thus a social, God proceeds from a psychological disorientation labeled “otherness.” It represents the intuited, and usually unconscious, recognition of limits to one’s human capacity to resolve the crises that occur in normal day to day life. The response to this disorientation precipitates a pivot from the encounter with an unspecified Other to the recognition of a Person of unlimited capacity and good will, with whom the individual now relates as with any person — as a social being.

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**Figure 1: The God Who Provides (TGWP) categories and properties**
Rectangle shapes signify categories; oval shapes signify properties

“The God Who Provides,” or TGWP, is the concept of God that emerged from the interview data and comprises the first of two major categories in a grounded theory of believing.
TGWP comprises the beliefs — the *what* — in response to the first research question.

TGWP, its categories and properties, emerged from twenty-eight substantive codes beginning with the word “God.” In developing a concept of God, these codes were used to record and analyze responses to such questions as, “What is God like?” “What does God do for you?” and “How would you describe your relationship with God?” The final list of “God” substantive codes (see Figure 2 below) was collected during several iterative readings of interview transcripts and memos and does not correspond directly to theoretical codes labeled with similar names (see Figure 1 above). Several other questions, more general and more open, gave rise to descriptions or characterizations reflecting a coherent conception of God on the part of respondents. While these conceptions were mostly formed in early childhood, they were illustrated by accounts of God’s recent provisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substantive Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GOD ANSWERS PRAYER</td>
<td>GOD HAS-A-PURPOSE, GENERAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD AS HIGHER POWER</td>
<td>GOD IS GOOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD AS OTHER</td>
<td>GOD IS IN US, NOT THE CHURCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD AS GENDERED</td>
<td>GOD IS LOVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD AS UNKNOWABLE</td>
<td>GOD IS REAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD AS SPIRIT</td>
<td>GOD KNOWS ALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD CAN DO ANYTHING</td>
<td>GOD LET ME DOWN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD CHRISTIAN</td>
<td>GOD OF HUMAN VALUES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD CONCEPT</td>
<td>GOD PROVIDES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD DOES THINGS FOR A REASON</td>
<td>GOD SPEAKS THROUGH CIRCUMSTANCES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD AS FATHER</td>
<td>GOD SPEAKS THROUGH CONSCIENCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD FORGIVES</td>
<td>GOD SPEAKS THROUGH HIS WORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD HAS-A-PURPOSE, FOR ME</td>
<td>GOD TESTS US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOD'S NEGATIVE PROVISION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Concept of God Substantive Codes**

*God As Other*

The property “Other” marks the beginning stage of a psychological process that ends in personalizing the Other as God. The experience of this “Other” begins with the “brick wall” experience of encountering “otherness” and transitions toward personalizing God as personal
and, thus, as social. As a psychological experience the “Other” is the abrupt awareness of absolute incomprehension in the face of challenging circumstances. This experience precipitates a process, usually short, that propels the believer to personalize the Other as God, who is a person much the way the believer is a person.

In the present research the concepts “Other” and “otherness” are used interchangeably. Both refer to a phenomenon of experience and not to theological or metaphysical speculations. The concepts are consistently indicated in the interview data and in selective coding emerged as distinct sub-categories of TGWP as a major category.

Otherness is that which the individual in concrete situations perceives as an abrupt end of his/her natural capacities. Many clichés illustrate this experience. It is that which in the human mind does not compute; a thought process hitting a brick wall; the “tilt” light that stops the action on a mishandled gaming table. It is accompanied by the recognition by the individual that s/he has reached an absolute limit. It is more like nothing than anything in particular. It draws a blank that glares back at the perceiver.

It is this awareness, whether fully conscious or only intuited, that precipitates a psychological process whereby the individual personalizes the Other in his/her own image. This image is revealed in a plan crafted by a knowledgeable expert to suit the unique needs of the individual. It inversely reflects that individual’s personality and capabilities and magnifies them to compensate for his/her limitations and imperfections, not in quiet reflection, but in real time. Eventually this Other is identified with the more familiar concept, God.

Unlike traditional theological expositions, God as “Other” does not entail the systematic exposition of a theory of God according to an authoritative tradition (see James 2009; Otto 1923). In SOG God’s “otherness” refers strictly to the psychological and intellectual capacity of
the individual believer. The individual’s initial perception of otherness is not necessarily related to, or projected upon, an external source or object, including that of God. What the individual is experiencing is a reflection of his or her own incapacity and need. Like an image reflected in glass, the image of the individual believer is distorted and magnified. Ultimately the distorted image is projected upon a supernatural being and subsequently incorporated into the individual’s social history. The reflected image compensates for the believer’s personal limitations through resolving them. Thus, the non-rationality of the Other, and of God, is also resolved.

The Experience of Otherness

What are the properties of this “Other” that is subsequently personalized as God? What is it other than? “Other” is a negative property. It has no meaning apart from what it is not. As a sub-category of TGWP, “Other” is not rational, not personal, and not natural. Such descriptions are among the divine attributes commonly defined by theologians across the ages. The data here are not derived from an authoritative record, text, or tradition, all of which, incidentally, derive from familiar methods prescribed by professional guilds.

For the purposes of clarity I have renamed the familiar labels (rational, personal, natural) as conceptual properties of the category “Other.” These properties are “Non-rational,” “Unknowable,” and “Ungendered.” These labels are not “up to date” names for the divine attributes in a theological system. They are concepts emerging from the personal narratives of believers, in the present case, persons experiencing homelessness. As conceptual properties they are not objects that are “really there,” (Charmaz 1996) but constructs abstracted by the researcher (Glaser 2002; 2007). As properties they overlap and are often interchangeable as different ways of modeling the same conception.
The “Other,” eventually personalized as “The God Who Provides,” is other than rational or irrational. This Other is non-rational. The believer encounters this property of “otherness” in circumstances of crisis, where he or she is confronted with the reminder that his or her personal resources — material, psychological, and intellectual — are manifestly unequal to the challenge at hand. They are insufficient either to resolve the present crisis or predict an outcome. The individual in one sense has come to the end of him/herself and knows it.

Upon reflection, or in response to questioning, the believer acknowledges that God cannot be known or understood like other phenomena of experience, nor can he be known without considerable thought. Malcolm spoke derisively of a young “born again” man he had met on the street who spoke too easily about God, as if could be understood in a pat formulas adapted for preaching. [HB-12:612]

Responses indicate that the believer has previously conceptualized God, whether consciously or intuitively, according to some prior of “otherness.” I asked Stan to describe God as he understood him. At first he tossed out a term he remembered from his Catholic upbringing. “Omnipotent,” he said, then corrected himself. “I don't know if I said that right. Omnipotent. And you really can't describe him, to be quite honest with you, in words, I mean” (HB-14: 24). This may have been the first time Stan had been asked to describe God in his own words, but it showed he had previously given the concept of God some thought. It took him no time to see the problem behind describing God in other than pat phrases recalled from childhood. He had encountered otherness before.

I asked Rob to describe God. He answered as follows.

Ooh, that's kind of hard. Just like the guy a while ago [the pastor at the drop-in center
leading today’s Bible study] said God is a being. Well I don't know what God is. I know what God is when I see him, I get to the pearly gates right there, but I can't wait. If I die today hopefully I'm going to see God the Father Almighty, you know (HB-5:189).

When challenged to give a systematic account of God, Ron realizes, perhaps for the first time, that God is beyond describing. He backtracks, recalling what he does understand: that God is a kind of being. In order to solve the puzzle Ron returns to what is familiar. He personalizes God and places him in relationship with himself. He calls God his father and later on as his “daddy,” unapproachable and incomprehensible except in his capacity as a father providing for his children. He understands the absolute dichotomy between whatever God is in him-her-itself and whatever he is taken to be in holy writ and human discourse. His concept of God as “daddy” is a direct reflection of his personal need for security and contentment. Based on Rob’s statements, the supposed dichotomy between a God who is inconceivable and a God who provides is a false one. It is the dichotomy that is contradictory. Experiencing the psychological resolution of this dichotomy makes the God who provides believable and his provisions further evidence of his abiding presence.

The believer’s rationality is transformed by the nonrationality of believing. Reactions and behaviors are affected. In particular, psychological responses to circumstances are changed, whether by much or by little. What was just seen as a dead end “naturally” gives way to alternatives whether or not those alternatives are apparent. The connection with past history and society at large is re-contextualized. Whether or not the world of experience is perceived as kinder or more manageable, it is a different place. It is perceived as larger with hidden possibilities and infinite resources.

God’s non-rationality is perceived by the believer, reminding him/her of the limits of his/her capabilities in daily functioning, thus precipitating a momentary crisis which is
intellectually and psychologically resolved by personalizing God. Hence the believer comprehends God as a social being.

*Ungendered*

This property of Otherness is demonstrated in responses by believers to the question of God’s gender, which in the present research was identified as both, neither, or else was not identified at all. The concept of God’s gender had no relevance in the process of believing other than to illustrate the otherness of God.

When I asked Debbie about God’s gender, she gave what at first sounded like a confused answer.

I will say that he's female. He is a he-she, and he does work with, he and she, humanitarianism (HB-1:48)

Note the use of the masculine pronoun “he,” for the conventional reference to God, coupled with an ungendered predicate. Debbie’s ability to make this association, even if for the first time, shows an intuitive familiarity with a concept of God. She has thought about “him” before, even if she has never spoken about it.

At second glance her response reflects the natural ambiguity of the concept of God. Her subsequent comment relating gender to ethical implications of a concept of God illustrates her indifference to gender and her inclination to use the masculine pronoun for convenience. Persons experiencing homelessness have no interest in developing a postmodern theory of an androgynous God. The preference for the masculine pronoun “he” was not an ideological assertion but a term that connected respondents with the language of the God they grew up with.

The richness of their responses to the question of God’s gender was in the sophistication of
their theological deductions. These were not rote responses meant to impress the interviewer or to obfuscate a “straight” answer. They were evidences of thought processes to which they were accustomed and, in some cases, demonstrated in real time.

*Interviewer:* How do you describe God? I mean, a man a woman? Is it a person? Is it neither?

*Larry:* You can't, you can't describe God. … When you describe God, you put them in a box.

*Interviewer:* So when do you talk about God what do you call him?

*Larry:* Everything.

*Interviewer:* Okay, like, give me an example?

*Larry:* Um, like, when I ain't got nothing, I can walk down the street, and I'm hungry. “Can I can I can I get some help? I need something to eat.” Within an hour or two, I usually got a full battery. People that walked up on me and say, "Here, sir." So it's got to be something other than me, and bigger….

Here Larry’s explanation demonstrates logical deductions from a conventional concept of God to one that is beyond his rational capacity, and to such an extent that he will not name it. His that God is personal emerges from his discernment of a purpose corresponding to his need. The God who cannot be limited by human conceptualization, and thus “put in a box,” nonetheless knows his needs beforehand and has coordinated the resolution of those needs with other persons as instruments for meeting the need. Note the direct connection between the God who is unknowable-ungendered and the God who provides.

**God As Social**

There is nothing about the concept of God that is not social. Both the believer’s conception of God and the atheist’s conception of no-God are meaningless apart from the social conventions, language, and history that bring them forth. The fact that I am recalling the God described in the Bible implies social influences beyond number. So also do my recollections sixty years ago of my grandmother praying out loud for my parents’ safety as they drove off to
dinner at a local restaurant. The concept of a personal God with rational designs is a social construction of a social being. God is understood as the initiator of personal relationships with all persons, and especially with the believer, who is in a position to reciprocate. Such a relationship is inconceivable apart from a history of social experience.

In the case of persons experiencing homelessness, God is a social being even when the believer says she is estranged from her family, or he does not feel safe cultivating friendships with other people on the street. Even there they will recall the influences of early life that instilled the conception of a world in which God played a role, if not in their own lives, then in the lives of others who continue to influence them in the present.

*God Speaks-Acts*

“God Speaks” and “God Acts” are distinct aspects of the category “God As Social” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:36; 1971:189). In reference to experience, they are usually interchangeable. God never performs an intervention on behalf of a believer in which the believer, in turn, does not discern a message. Such messages are articulated as prescriptions for solutions to concrete problems and further evidence of a purposeful design on the believer’s behalf.

As properties of “God As Social” both “God Speaks” and “God Acts” suggest a sequence of interventions separated by time (Glaser 1978:74). The sequence is a logical one. The events in which God is understood as speaking or acting may occur simultaneously, or one may follow the other. The indicator that God is the one speaking and acting is the manifest design crafted for the individual in response to his/her unique circumstances. God’s actions, in turn, get the believer’s attention. He/she will expect the message to follow.

When this sequence has been internalized, the believer will anticipate God’s further
intervention by recalling that God is a God who provides. He/she will be without food or money and will expect that either or both will be provided momentarily, whether by a private citizen passing or by the believer finding money on the ground. The message is ultimately the same: the God who provides is now providing.

**God Speaks and Acts: Properties**

*Personal Reflections*

“Personal Reflections” includes recollections of past incidents in which the respondent is aware of a pattern taking shape in his/her life which s/he now attributes to God’s deliberate design and direction. S/he may have been aware of this at the time or now for the first time in response to SOG interview questions.

Sherri is a twenty-eight year old white working class woman. While she grew up in a Baptist household, she does not presently identify with any denomination. In her words, “I know I'm a believer, but I feel like God is God. You know what I mean?” (HB-12:97). When her parents first split up, her father was awarded custody. Sherri was not allowed to see her mother. Years later at age sixteen another judge awarded custody to her mother. This stood out in her mind when I asked her to reflect on what had God done for her over the years to convince her that he was real.

He's done a lot of, like, if it wasn't for God, the judge wouldn't have allowed me to go to my mother say again, it wasn't for God, I wouldn't have been able to go to my mother when I was sixteen, you know what I mean? Because my father had custody. That judge could have just released me right back to the situation I grew up in (HB-12:225).

Sandy is a forty-five year old white working class woman from a predominantly Southern Baptist town in North Carolina. She grew up thinking that believing in God was just something
people did in her little town, much like putting on their “Sunday best” to go to church. On later reflection she realized that God had been shaping her life from the beginning and regrets she had not dug more deeply into the faith she was taught in Sunday School.

And now, I wish I knew then what I know now, because my love of God would probably be greater than it is now. …Over time, your love grows stronger and stronger. And for the past fifteen years, I've really known it was God. But before that, I just think if I had if I had really really felt that throughout my whole entire life, I would probably be a different person (HB-4:197).

Billy reflected on his experience as a drug addict for most of his adult life. It is now clear that God had always had a plan for him and kept him alive for that reason.

Billy: I shot dope for 30 years and I've been off dope for almost 20 years. Heroin, cocaine, all kinds of things.

Interviewer: So how did God help you with that?

Billy: I should have been dead, you know, I mean, I was shooting like to two-three-hundred dollars’ worth of dope a day. You know, I lost my family, my home, children, and now we're best friends and getting along. God, you know, he's guided my path through some perilous time. And I haven't lost my mind (HB-6:207-211).

Billy is now much better informed about his beliefs than he was as a young man, even if his lifestyle has not altogether changed. He continues to see a purpose for his life taking shape. He does not need to know what the plan is to be convinced that God is leading and protecting him.

I've never told you that I was a saint. I just tell [other people] the way I feel and what helped me. It doesn't mean I still don't do stupid stuff. That's what I tell now. But I do stupid stuff with God in mind. It must be a reason I'm here talking to you, talking this. God doesn't do arbitrary things. He's always, he has a purpose, you know. His word doesn't comes back void, he can't tell a lie so, evidently, I'm here, right here in Orlando or wherever, I'd be at on purpose (HB-6:221).

Other People.

“Other People” as a property of “God Speaks-Acts” includes all the individuals whom the respondent names who influenced his/her belief in a God who provides. Such persons include
family members whose moral example, practical wisdom, or religious commitment impressed
the individual. They also include prophetic encounters with random persons on the street.

Larry is a fifty year-old African American man from a middle class background who self-
identifies as a Baptist. His adult Christian faith was influenced in early childhood by the example
of his great-grandmother, a Jehovah’s Witness. Looking back he now knows God was providing
for him through her, even though he did not know it at the time.

*Larry:* They diagnosed her with breast cancer. Told her she got six months to live. But
her faith in God she lived thirteen more years after this. And her faith, she said my faith is
what leads me, my great-grandma.

*Interviewer:* Were you a believer at the time?

*Larry:* No, I wasn’t (HB-2:316, 321).

Faith here does not refer to religious affiliation, however faithful Larry’s great-grandmother may
have been as a church member. It refers rather to her heroic example as God led her through
immense suffering for thirteen years. This “leading” was God’s special provision. The message
Larry took from it was, God provides.

Malcolm is forty-six year old man with a master’s degree who has been homeless for
twenty years. While he grew up in an African-American household, he rejects socio-ethnic
identity by race and identifies himself as African-Egyptian. Malcolm grew up with both his
parents at home. He spoke admiringly of his father, an AME (African Methodist Episcopal)
pastor and civil rights leader, and of the coterie of intellectuals, theologians, and activists who
regularly visited their home. Malcolm was impressed by their diversity of perspectives and their
intellectual integrity in a relentless search for truth. Malcolm did not identify with any
established denomination, including his father’s AME, and he was hesitant to speak about
personal faith. When I pressed him on whether he believed in God, he said, “Of course I do”
(HB-9:346). He preferred to speak of his life as a journey in search of wisdom. Today he “sits” with Buddha, Ghandi, and Mother Teresa in order to grow from their example. Malcolm has little patience with those who claim a deep personal faith in God based on religious clichés. According to Malcolm, God does things for reasons small minded people, religious or otherwise, cannot recognize. Even though Malcolm’s journey is far from complete, he is satisfied with the wisdom and discernment God provides along the way.

God frequently speaks through random individuals encountered by believers on the street. Their messages might at first seem unimpressive, obnoxious, or perplexing. At some point, whether at the present moment or upon later reflection, the believer becomes convinced that the message, affirming or convicting, was “meant for me” at a crucial moment in her/his life.

Eddie, a fifty-six year-old self-described Hebrew-Israelite man with a college degree, is still haunted by Roger, an old Catholic priest he met on the streets of Los Angeles thirty-five years ago. Roger told him he would never experience joy until he gave up his present lifestyle of drugs and alcohol and gave his heart wholeheartedly to the Lord (HB-8:262). He has since heard this same message from street preachers in one place or another, but, as he put it, “the ground wasn’t ready” (HB-8:342). Then the weekend before our interview Eddie walked past a street evangelist a few blocks from the drop-in center. The preacher asked Eddie if he knew what it meant to serve God. At that moment Roger’s words from long ago “just clicked”.

I never even listened to these people [street preachers], until I got a premonition. There was something in me. I wasn't drawn to them. I was drawn to what was being said, but that [latest encounter with a street preacher] led me to hear what it meant, you know. And that was just to do [God’s] commandments. Every one of his commandments, you know, his commandments are in the Old Testament (HB-8:332).

It wasn’t so much the evangelist as the moment that influenced Eddie’s change of
direction. Eddie said he has still not learned to follow God’s commandments to the satisfaction of his conscience, but he knew that for years God had been pursuing him, even taking care of him. In his ongoing provision extended back a lifetime, God had always had a message for him and was now still talking.

Sandy makes the same point about God finally breaking through in “random” encounters with street preachers.

_Sandy_: You hear the word of God more on the street than you do anywhere else.

_Interviewer_: From who?

_Sandy_: Random people. God’s little messengers, that's what I call them (HB-4: 332-339).

As in all cases, God speaks and acts through other persons insofar as the believer perceives that God is doing the talking. As often as not, God intervenes through individuals with no personal connection with the person to whom the message is directed. “Getting the message” may involve someone like Eddie or Sandy attaching a special meaning to the preacher’s words or actions, or simply acknowledging that God was getting their attention at that moment and that the message would come later. In both cases God is providing for the believer according to his or her needs.

_Conscience._

“Conscience” as a property of “God Speaks-Acts” is that inner voice which the individual attributes to the God who speaks and acts in human affairs. As with other properties of “God Speaks-Acts,” the message received by the believer, as well as the circumstance in which the message is transmitted, is God’s unique provision for that individual.

Damian is a thirty-six year old white working class man with a ninth grade education who has been homeless since he became an adult. While he raised Catholic, he never practiced the
faith and cites no personal religious influences from his early life. Damian has been in and out of correctional facilities, and had recently been released from jail when I spoke with him. He began considering himself a Christian after an earlier incarceration some years earlier. Having spent many years in confinement, Damian learned to relate to God apart from conversation or instruction. He makes a direct connection between God and the private voice of conscience.

I’m a Christian, but I don't believe God is in the church. I believe God is in us, okay, and it's up to us to, to, to decide in God's image or to say, of what's wrong and right (HB-7:152).

The voice of conscience may be expressed as part of a personal value system more or less consistent with denominational teaching, even if the connection is unclear. Debbie, a forty-five year old white working class woman from a small West Virginia mining town, attributes the inner voice of “humanitarianism” to her Bible-believing Baptist upbringing. She describes an incident from the mid-sixties era of segregation in which this voice moved her to break with conventional behaviors between the races.

I grew up in the sixties. I remember the days we had the black water, the black fountain to drink water you had the water fountain, you get on the bus at six years old, and here it says, black woman dressed in white, and because she's doing housekeeping for one of the wealthy people, and she was tired and exhausted and ready to faint so I'm a little girl I got up I says, ma'am. You take my seat and it was nothing but absolutely disaster. And my aunt Mamie says you can't do that. So I would say that I started out with humanitarianism for people when I was a very young age (HB-1:310).

Whether Debbie is telling a true story or incorporating the Rosa Parks legend into her own, she clearly understands the connection between personal conscience informed by example and personal moral action.

An individual may recall an incident where s/he decided against a certain behavior based on his/her understanding of God’s will, standards, or commandments. Larry is a fifty year old
African American man with an eleventh grade education, self-identifying as middle class. He has been homeless for thirteen years. He relates an incident where he was prevented by his conscience from committing adultery based on a recent study of the Old Testament, where adultery was named as a violation of God’s commandments.

I was married. And I was planning on taking this other woman out and sleeping with her. And I read about it, what happened, about adultery. And instead I didn't do it (HB-2:394).

Even when the believer neglects or refuses to heed the voice of conscience, s/he will believe God is the one speaking through it. S/he may acknowledge bad habits or deliberate wrongdoing as justifying God’s refusal to hear prayers or to provide for present needs. Damian said he prayed once everyday, but that this was “not enough” (HB-7:280). Stan admitted that he regularly lies and steals and feels bad about it but will probably do it again. In both cases God’s provision was keeping the voice of conscience alive, even as a message of criticism or condemnation.

Stan began lying to medical caregivers in clinics in order to access services after he became homeless. When I asked him if he felt he needed to do this in order to survive, he paused.

Stan: It's actually, I don't know if this is the right word is gratuitous. 
Interviewer: You just do it. 
Stan: Yeah, I mean, it really doesn't make any sense. And it's not right. And actually, you know just talking to you about it now, I don't want to do it anymore (HB-14:105-109).

I asked him how he knew God disapproved of him doing things like this. He said, “I feel guilty” (HB-14:126).

Prayer.

“Prayer” as a property of “God Speaks-Acts” takes various forms among HB’s, all of
which involve a conscious communication with God coupled with the expectation that God will reciprocate in some way. This expectation, born out of experience, is God’s provision. It usually takes the form of a personal request to God for the fulfillment of an urgent need. HB’s frequently make such requests, fully aware that God, in his turn, may or may not grant them. Those with past experience of God answering their prayers understand that God does or does not respond for a reason, always for their benefit, and not always in the way or at the time they expect. Either way, in their prayerful awareness of God’s presence HB’s know that God is providing for them.

When I asked him how God answered his prayers, Rob replied hesitantly, “in different ways,” and then gave a dramatic example. He spoke of praying to God for money one night, because he was waiting for his monthly social security check and at the moment he was broke. The next morning he recounts finding a one hundred dollar bill on the ground in front of an ATM machine. His reaction was to thank God, who clearly was responding to Rob’s prayer the night before (HB-5:271).

For Larry, God answering prayer was a familiar experience. He described a pattern where God answered his prayers quickly in response to specific requests and as part of a greater purpose.

Um. like, when I ain't got nothing, I can walk down the street, and I'm hungry. [He prays,] “Can I can I can get some help? I need something to eat.” Within an hour or two, I usually got a full battery. People that walked up on me and say, “Here, sir.” So it's got to be something other than me, and bigger, (HB-2:121)

As for Rob, the more important provision for Larry was God’s reassurance that he would come through for him sooner or later. God was now part of Larry’s personal “history” (HB-2:184).

Some HB’s describe prayer as an attitude or an ongoing awareness of God’s presence or silently “talking to God” throughout the day. Sandy distinguished this type of prayer from
articulated requests to God. She even had her own name for it.

But ongoing conversation with God? Every day, all day. Prayers are different. That's when you're really worshiping God. …But “conversating” with God is different than prayer for me. When I pray I really put my whole heart into it. But I sit here and “conversate” with God all day (HB-4:169; quotation marks added for emphasis).

Billy recalls a silent conversation he had with God as he mulled over recent events in his life. In recalling the incident he puts the intuited interaction into narrative form.

I'm talking to him like he's my father, you know like, man. Dang, God, what the hell are you doing, you know, that, that hurts! And he's telling me, dude, the way you did it, I mean, you asked me for advice. I give it to you and you don't take it my way and now you think everything's gonna be all roses, you know? It's not (HB-6:268).

Bible

”Bible” as a property of “God Speaks-Acts” is primarily a symbol, and as such stands apart from the text. Believers may recall the role played by the Bible in their homes as children or in society around them. They may recall the reverence with which it was regarded by a family member whose character and example influenced their development. Negatively, one may recall its misuse by a judgmental person years ago in a neighborhood Bible study. Positively and negatively, an individual might recall hearing a “negative” reminder of judgment to come at a critical moment when his/her life depended on a necessary change. In all cases, the Bible represents God speaking, and its influence on individuals and societies is observed whether the text is interpreted, misinterpreted, or ignored.

The Bible’s ultimate provision in the life of the believer is the ongoing awareness that God does and will speak and is, in fact, now speaking. Debbie frequently visits the Baptist church in downtown Orlando. She likes “the word that’s going down” there. She is especially comforted by the majestic Bible mounted in the entry way of the church, which she finds “very welcoming”
Whether the sermon of the day hits home or not, or whether anyone else is present to share the message is a separate matter. God is speaking nonetheless.

Sandy was brought up reading the Bible, but what stands out in her mind is the recollection of her mother reading the Bible every day. I mentioned earlier her comment about the word preached on the street. This comment was based on an incident the night before our interview, when she walked past a man on a street corner reading the Bible out loud to passersby. The fact that he was present with his Bible indicated that God was present. “Yeah, God’s everywhere,” she said (HB-4:344,349).

Some of the respondents show considerable familiarity with the biblical text, having read and reflected on it for many years. Rob has read the entire Bible several times and takes pleasure in attending sermons and Bible studies. He referred to the Apostles John and Paul as his favorite Bible authors. In the Book of Revelation he sees God’s plan for the world unfolding in precise detail. He alluded to Psalm 139 in passing conversation about his early life, “When I was in my mother’s womb he (God) knew exactly what I was going to do. He knows my language; he knows everything about me” (Hb-5:197). These references were not forced or contrived and fit naturally in our conversation.

When I asked Dave if he shared his faith with others, he said he did and cited the present interview as a case in point, quoting Matthew chapter 10 as part of his explanation:

Yes. And like the main reason I’m sitting here talking with you right now, Matthew 10, 31 and 32 said who so professed me before men I will profess before my Lord in heaven. Who should so deny me before men, I would deny him before my Father God in heaven. So when you come to me, asked me to do this here, this is something of God. So if I deny doing it I’m denying my father (HB-3:237-242).

The actual text is Matthew 10:32 and 33, not 31 and 32. Other than that minor error Dave’s
paraphrase is true to the original. His application of the text fit with our conversation, whether he meant it just as he said it or as an attempt to impress me. Either way he knows his Bible as a unique provision from God, whether to give him direction or something to talk about.

Some believers weave the biblical text into their reflections on their lives or on the world around them. While some may pay lip service to the text, others show considerable sophistication in their use of it. The following is a memo, quoted at length, which I wrote directly following my interview with Billy.

February 1, 2021
Billy struck me as a soft-spoken, mild mannered man from the first time I spoke with him. I’ve run into him since almost every time I have returned to the drop-in center. He always greets me by name and with apparently genuine enthusiasm and friendliness. I got the impression he likes having a neutral friend, one who is not looking to take advantage of him. His various theological reflections show evidence of a long period of thought and considerable training or background reading. Much of his thinking is standard evangelical orthodoxy, but it is incorporated into his thought processes and seems part of his personality, also typical of a classic evangelical.

Scriptural allusions roll off his tongue very naturally, only occasionally like rote, but generally as metaphors or parallel constructions that effectively contextualize a point he is making. His biblical references never seem forced, artificial, or based on a conditioned reaction, as in a cult. His positive reflections do not seek to chase away doubts but, quite the opposite, are coupled with examples from personal experience. Billy’s early life as a rebel and an addict seems incongruous based on the mild and reasoned manner of his reflections. He returned to the theme of God’s having a purpose for his life, of the consequences of free will being redirected in accordance with a higher purpose that is consistently revealed and reinforced over a lifetime of experience. His reference to predestination is well informed and suitably applied to the examples he cites from his personal life.

*Miracles.*

“Miracles” includes two types of incidents that the believer considers direct interventions by God on the believer’s behalf. The first is an incident or series of incidents that might appear mundane, unworthy of comment, and easily explained as coincidence. This same incidents
appear to the believer as “no accident” given their obvious relevance to the believer’s present situation and the overall design of his/her life now manifest.

The second type is what is commonly denoted by the term miracle: “a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Several of the respondents reported lifesaving or life-changing interventions that defy rational explanation. Whether their reports are hallucinations, exaggerations, fabrications, or literal reporting is not essential to “Miracles” as a property of “God Speaks-Acts.” As with the first “Miracles” type, the ultimate provision in this second type is the confirmation that God is with the believer, has a purpose for his/her life, and has provided and continues to provide for their welfare.

When I asked Luther if he had ever lived through an experience where he thought God was definitely involved, he told the story of his dramatic rescue from a hold up.

Well, for instance, when I got robbed, I was, I was in a park and I kind of overslept. And it was dark when I mean, when that incident happened. And a guy came up on me, woke me up. He had a gun on me, said give me all your belongings. Take whatever you need. Whatever you need, whatever you want just here it is. You know, my life is much, it's worth more than what you're taking from me, so he snatched it up and took off running. So, you know, that was an example, I could have been dead. He could have killed me. He could have shot. So, you know, you know, I thank God that it didn't happen. so that's, to me that's a great example. (HB-11:205).

Luther said he shares this story with others to let them know “God is in control.” I asked him if he ever doubted that. He said no.

Stan considers it a miracle that he lost his job then found another one in the place where he met his present fiancée. For Stan this was no mere coincidence but a clear demonstration that God had a plan for him and for the two of them.
I used to work for a company, and they did a, you know, I'm not gonna explain it, but they did a really awful thing to me. And it ruined my life, for a while, but somehow in it I ended up with [another] company..., but anyways, um, you know, I met my, my fiancée there… And, you know, I fell in love with her immediately. And she's, you know affected my life, you know; for like sixteen years now. We, I think we have been in love each other for a long time so, that, that, I think that was a miracle because I got to meet her (HB-14:352).

One night in his prayers Rob told God that he needed money. The next morning, he walked past an ATM machine and saw a one hundred dollar bill lying on the sidewalk.

Now I'm looking right here because God put that there for me. I mean I prayed that night about it. There's a hundred dollar bill laying down on the ground right here. And I looked at my good, thank you Lord, you know because I felt the Lord put that right there for me, you know because I prayed that I need some money, sir. And he took care of me, took care of me, but that's my daddy right there. I can't wait to see him (HB-5:271).

Sherri has been in and out of jail since she became a young adult. While she never welcomes going to jail, she has come to realize that God sometimes sends her to jail to save her from something worse.

Even, honestly, even when I go to jail, God saved me. Because when I go to jail, it might not mean for exactly what I need to be saved from… But it's always something going on that I need help with. And I end up in jail. And it helps me out. So he saves me by that too, you know what I mean, even though he don't want us to be in there. I always end up in there at the right time (HB-11:235; italics added for vocal emphasis).

In a miraculous intervention God communicates an unmistakable message to the believer: that he knows the individual — both the good and the bad, strengths and weaknesses — and is now acting on their behalf in spite of it all; that he has a plan for him/her accommodated to their unique circumstances; that the individual has an explicit purpose in life, whether known to that individual or not.

“Miracles” illustrates one of the ways God gets his message across and, even more, how the believer “gets” the message. In a miraculous intervention God both speaks and acts. God’s
actions on the believer’s behalf are confounding to reason. The believer is confronted with two crises, one of thought and one of action. S/he must resolve an urgent practical problem, possibly involving personal danger. S/he must also solve a psychological puzzle in order to return to a normal “Present” (see next section). That is the point: the believer is now paying attention or “listening.” The message that follows is understood as the purpose of the incident and is tied directly to a broader purpose.

Three accounts of the second type of miracles are reported below. The first is Rob’s account of surviving a catastrophic collision while riding his motorcycle.

I remember right now I was on a motorcycle. A truck hit me. Truck’s comin’ about 100, they said about 115 mile an hour and hit me on my motorcycle. And I died once in the ambulance, and they brought me back to life and they took me to Orlando Regional and I died on that table. I was on the table for about 18 hours, and I died right there, and they brought me back to life. God's got a reason for things. That's how I feel, you know, in my heart (HB-5:107).

Billy finds the same underlying reason for his survival of a drug overdose.

Well, I mean, I actually came out [of the overdose] on like a semi coma. And I was suddenly like wow, I'm still alive? I've been out for like twenty minutes. It wasn't me that kept me alive… It's not me. I realized that it was something greater than me. And the only thing I know better than me is God, Jesus Christ, like one, the Holy Spirit. …That's just not per chance. You know that happened for a reason. (HB-6:302)

Damian gives a dramatic account of a failed suicide attempt.

With as many times as I've had bad thoughts in my head about hurting myself, I've survived it all. I'm talking about, I've even hung myself on a tree for six hours, woke up at two o'clock in the morning during the dead of winter still alive. And I mean hung myself from a tree. I was hanging from a tree for six hours and couldn't get myself down after I came to, so I was up there for about another two, three hours. Couldn't get myself down, with the rope tied against my neck, choking, couldn't breathe, but woke up somehow six to eight hours later and was still alive. I mean that says something. (SOG-HB-7:220)

Eddie describes being steered back onto the highway after driving off the road into a
mountainside while passed out behind the wheel.

I was in Hawaii. I had been drinking with a shipmate of mine. And we were on Kamehameha Highway headed back to Pearl Harbor. And I went to sleep. And when I opened my eyes, I saw the mountain, the volcano. So I turned my wheel as hard as I could to the left... And we hit that mountain. I mean, I must have been doing 50-60 miles an hour. And when we hit the mountain, there was a light. It was [LONG PAUSE] the brightest light I've ever seen in my life. And then when the light went out, we were in the center of the highway, travelling at the same speed... That's when it started for me. The significant part of the incident is that, remember I told you that turn the wheel to the left. I never turned that wheel back to the right... That's when I knew... it wasn't me. Maybe it wasn't me at all. Maybe it was God (HB-8:236, 241).

“Miracles” illustrates a unique provision in the process of believing. It is God’s provision for the absolute boundary discerned in the Other. It reveals as possible that which was previously impossible. It signals a return to the universe of the rational, albeit still subject to the believer’s limited control. It also identifies divine intervention as a future resource for the believer. Even though the believer cannot manage or predict God’s miraculous provision, s/he now knows that “miracles happen.”

Second Research Question: Believing in the God Who Provides

Believing as a Basic Social-Psychological Process

A theoretical breakthrough in developing this sociology of God was the emergence of believing primarily as a basic social process (BSP; Glaser 1978:93) as distinct from a system of social-structural properties of homelessness (Glaser 1978:109). This distinction was crucial in identifying believing (BGWP), not beliefs (TGWP), as the SOG core category.

Glaser’s distinction between unit and process sociology is crucial to explicating the core category and its properties. I quote his explanation in detail.
Most sociology is focused on the rendition of a social structural unit. That is, no matter what the substantive issues, or concepts, or whether the study is description, verification or theory building, we read about properties of a unit: persons, groups, organizations, aggregates, statuses, nations, and so forth. In contrast... we [GT theorists] generate properties of process.... Most of unit sociology is delineated along lines which are not theoretically continuous, although they are treated as such (Glaser 1978:109,113; italics in original).

SOG seeks to identify the main problem faced by HB’s in persisting in their belief in God and to detail their accustomed means for solving that problem (Glaser and Holton 2007:59). Ironically, the “problem of homelessness” as defined by advocates and policy makers was not the main concern revealed in the data. Reinforcing the psychological stability of believing was the HB’s concern. BGWP outlines the pattern of behavior evident in this believing process and the ritual reinforcement achieved in completing its stages. BGWP is the completion a logical sequence of five stages. All of these stages are the properties of the BGWP as a single core category.

I identified BGWP as the second of two types of BSP, namely a basic social-psychological process (BSPP; Glaser 1978:102). The process consists of five successive stages through which HB’s “process out” (Glaser 1978:97) a ritual of believing. Those stages are listed in Figure 3 below. As the diagram indicates, the BSPP stages mark both a process and an end toward which that process proceeds.

Consistent with GT methodology, BGWP can be compared with other substantive units to compare their experiences processing through these same stages. A hypothetical case is presented at the conclusion of this chapter for comparison with the substantive theory outlined above. (See “Julia: A Comparative Study” at the conclusion of the present chapter).
Properties of Believing in the God Who Provides

According to Glaser, a process is a sequence of actions or events consisting of two or more temporal stages in which something happens or gets done (Glaser 1978:74,75). As conceptual properties of a pattern of behavior, the stages are defined by their relation to each other. The duration of individual properties in practice and any distinct markers separating one from the next do not relate directly to defining the behavioral problem and its resolution.

The five stages of Believing in the God Who Provide (BGWP) are illustrated in Figure 3 below followed by conceptual and descriptive explanations.

Figure 3: Believing in the God Who Provide

Present: Normal Socialization Begins/Resumes

“Present” is that unspecified duration of time in which an individual goes about his/her business without need to acknowledge the complexity of stimuli that make up natural and social environments (Mead 2002). It is the day-to-day routine where everything that matters remains
more or less the same. Whether the individual is content with or scornful of the monotony of the routine, s/he will likely appreciate the predictability and security of what has become a “comfort zone.” The world feels manageable. S/he believes s/he can resolve contingencies that might arise, having done so in the past with some regularity.

A distinction between “Present” as a stage in a temporal sequence and as an abstract property of social process is necessary for an understanding of socialization in this grounded theory of believing. I define “Present” substantively as the first of five sequential stages in a sequence that occurs over a duration of time (Glaser 1978:75). I define it conceptually as the precise moment when an actor’s social history comes into play in a given set of circumstances.

As a property of social process, “Present” embodies the socialization of an individual up to a given moment. It is a “snapshot” of who they are and where they are as they begin the process. In such moments no precise prediction can be made as to which social or environmental factors will determine the actor’s behavior in relation to other actors or in response to circumstances. Since no complete catalogue of social forces can be named, a limited number of variables are typically identified based on the researcher’s stated interests and purpose (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the case of persons experiencing homelessness, the research interests of “problem solvers” as outlined in Chapter Two typically limit the selection of variables for study.

The limited use of the demographic survey in the present study is a case in point. The following variables were included in the SOG questionnaire at the beginning of each interview: gender, age, race/ethnicity, social identity (ethnic group or nationality), class identity (working, middle, upper etc.), highest education completed, religious background, present religious preference, length of time homeless, income sources, employment status, and marital status. These properties were coded in the survey and then in more detail in substantive coding to
establish connections between demographic properties and behavior. Subsequent theoretical coding did not reveal patterns in the believing process based on these properties. Such a conclusion was consistent with Glaser’s observation that demographic or “face sheet” variables are typically assumed to be relevant regardless of the data, and yet rarely turn out to be necessary in explaining observed variations in behavior (Glaser 1978:60).

Rob, 68, white, male, middle class with a college degree, a lifelong believer, homeless since his divorce thirty years ago, describes the same process of believing as Sherry, 28, female, white, working class with a high school diploma, Baptist background, homeless for six months “this time.” Both could be compared with Oscar, 66, African American, male, working class with a ninth-grade education, mixed Christian background, homeless for twenty-three years. In these and other cases HB’s cycled through the same pattern of believing, confronting and overcoming challenges to their faith, and reintegrating a system of belief with their prior socialization into a new “Present.”

Larry captures this nuanced conception of “Present” in a passing comment. In response to a question, he referred to his need to remind himself of his “history” in order to stay focused on God in the present. When I asked him to explain what he meant by history, he said simply, “The history that you went through to get to where you are” (HB-2:164). Here Larry’s concept of history matches George Herbert Mead’s concept of the past as “a continual reconstruction as a chronicle to serve the purposes of present interpretation” (Mead 2002:74). Socialization is a reconstruction of past events with a limited function of bringing present events into focus. Again, to borrow Larry’s concise expression, socialization is “the history you went through.” “Present” is “where you are.” Larry’s comment captures the SOG concept of socialization as “Present” in both its descriptive and abstract senses. (See Larry’s Case History below for further analysis of
his description of BGWP in all its stages.)

*Crisis: Normal Is Disrupted by Some Other*

“Crisis” is the second stage of BGWP in which the individual is confronted by a situation that disrupts the normal “Present” and must be resolved before normal functioning can resume. As with the “Present” property of believing, demographic variables are bracketed, since at the moment they cannot be shown to determine the patterns of behavior in the “Crisis” stage. Believers of all social and ethnic backgrounds transition from a “Present” to a “Crisis” stage, and thenceforth through the remaining stages of BGWP.

Based on the derivation of the term, “Crisis” contains an ambiguity which can be instructive but also confusing. The English word “crisis” derives from the ancient Greek κρίνειν, to decide, judge, be brought to a decision (Liddell-Scott). κρίσις is that judgment or decision. “Crisis” always carries the connotation of a turning point, a moment of decision, which gives rise to a new set of circumstances. In recent centuries it has acquired the connotation of imminent catastrophe, perhaps a moment of life or death. At the very least it connotes something bad happening unless special action is taken, the situation unexpectedly changes, or a miracle happens.

In SOG “Crisis” indicates an event as a critical moment but not necessarily as a misfortune or disaster. Outside observers may not see the urgency of circumstances as they are perceived by the participant. As a property of BGWP “Crisis” indicates an abrupt end to the “Present” stage, where the transition is unmistakable. It indicates a disruption to routine social functioning with varying degrees of urgency.

“Crisis” includes the disturbing reminder that reality never is what the individual thinks it
is. There is always something more. An individual is never in full control of his or her surroundings, never out of danger, never equipped with sufficient resources to meet all contingencies. The circumstances of the situation at hand indicate that a resolution to the circumstance, if there is one, must emerge from an unforeseeable source. In such circumstances individuals frequently give an account of a miraculous solution to the problem.

The importance of “Crisis” is the confrontation with the “otherness” of day to day existence — not as something external but as the perceived limit of the individual’s power within the natural order of the universe. It awakens the image of chaos from ancient mythology which, if not terrifying, is confounding to the human psyche. The perceived “Provision” that is constructed in the stages that follow permits a return to the moment-by-moment dialectic of “Present” socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1966), in which prior socialization is realigned to accommodate new experiences.

Provision: Disruption Is Resolved

“Provision” is the stage in which the believer recognizes that the event precipitating the “Crisis” stage, which a moment ago seemed insurmountable, has passed. The individual feels free to return to the normal day-to-day routine confident that s/he can manage relying once again on personal resources. The provisions themselves range from the simple recognition that God was behind the surprise meal given by a random motorist to a miraculous intervention in which an individual wakes up from a drunken sleep just as his car was headed off a cliff.

The prior “Crisis” stage may not be recognized until after the “Provision” stage is completed. An individual may see s/he had been stuck in a dilemma years ago which s/he was only dimly aware of at the time. Damian recalled a period after one of his several incarcerations
when life seemed to be going his way. He had established himself as a small business manager with responsibility for twenty employees. He was making good money, owned a new car, and was engaged to be married. He was also smoking crack as he had through most of his adult life. His world collapsed when his car was stolen while he was getting behind on his payments. He never went back to work. Only years later looking back from a new “Present” did he realize that what he thought was normal at the time was an extended “Crisis.”

I mean there was a lot that transpired in those six months, but over the course of those six months of falling further and further and further down that rabbit hole trying to recover something that wasn’t going to get recovered, I had thought I, for some reason in my head that if I recovered the car and go back to my job everything be the way it was. And that just wasn’t feasible. The whole entire time I wasn’t feasible, I was just lost in my own thought process. And it was through God’s will, and I say this loud and proud, it was through God’s will that I survived those six months alone and came out of that strong enough to know what I know now, that God would only put us through that which we can handle, whether good or bad. (HB-7:201)

If the “Provision” does not lead to some transformation of thought and identity, then it will be as if the “Crisis” stage never occurred. The individual will take the provision in stride, even if a moment ago s/he swore it was a miracle. Miracles are, in this view, random anomalies, unexplainable, but (necessarily) part of the natural order. It does not indicate a new relationship with a divine being. It does not point to hitherto unimagined resources for future crises. It most likely does not signal the need to make a dramatic change in lifestyle. The apparent interruption to the old normal was just a bump in the road.

For HB’s who have been through the BGWP stages on multiple occasions, the latest “Provision” is part of a familiar process, a new normal. Individuals will face difficulties that previously had left them feeling confused and powerless. Now they have an expectation that their Provider will make additional resources available to them. If not, they will understand that
he has his reasons. When the anticipated provision does come, subsequent stages of believing have the effect of reinforcing, or ritualizing, the HB’s faith.

*Epiphany: The Provider Is Named*

“Epiphany” is the pivot point in the BGWP process where the God of earlier socialization emerges from the Crisis-Provision sequence and makes a distinct “appearance” (ἐπιφάνεια). God is further socialized and thus named. During this stage the rational universe comes back into focus. This clarity of focus is precipitated by the signature design reflected in the believer’s moment of need during the earlier “Provision”.

The God with whom the believer connects is typically that of the dominant religious tradition in a given society since, previously recognized or not, this God had a name. In the present case, SOG interview participants mostly identified with the God of Christianity even if none identified as active members of a church. The one exception is Malcom, who, while acknowledging his upbringing in a Christian household, acknowledged all conveyors of divine wisdom equally as God’s representatives.

The “Epiphany” stage falls into two general types based on early or recent socialization. If the former, the believer falls back on the religious values of his/her early formation, even if now they make sense for the first time. If the latter, the believer cobbles together bits of interactions from recent events, which may seem disjointed and unrelated, into a meaningful whole.

The sudden “appearance” of a design in seemingly random events is illustrative of “epiphany” as it is understood in common usage — a light being switched on, an “aha!” or “eureka!” moment. Eddie described his miraculous deliverance on the road to Honolulu literally as “the brightest light I’ve ever seen in my life” (SOG-HB-8:415-417). Based upon apparent
intentionality of this intervention, Eddie quickly made the connection between this light, the accompanying miracle, and the God of his Baptist upbringing.

Among long time believers, the “Epiphany” stage is abbreviated, like a nodding of the head to acknowledge the God who regularly intervenes at the “Provision” stage. These frequent nods are now private interaction rituals (IR’s; Collins 1992:53 ff.; Chatham-Carpenter 2006:) between the believer and God. As such they are expressions of the finished work of “Ritualization.”

An example of an IR as a reflex action is the act of giving thanks. Billy describes a time when he stopped wondering how God kept coming through for him with things he needed and almost came to expect it.

It happens, it's happened several times, but what I'm saying is, after, after a few times you stop trying to figure it out and start saying “thank you,” instead of “Why?” I say, “So that really was you talking to me. ‘I’ll never leave you or forsake you, and far as you needing something to eat or this this and this, I got you, but you have to believe’” (HB-6:348).

Sandy gives a similar account of receiving a miraculous provision and spontaneously acknowledging God through giving thanks.

Remember the story I told you about the man that pulled up in front of us [her and her fiancé] with the $100 bill? We were both in a very foul mood and just... And as soon as that happened we were, we both started praying and thanking God, and it just, it's not always good things that happen that bring you around either. Bad things happen too. Like when I told you that my friend's daughter, well, my friend's sister died? That, that made us stop and thank God that we were still here. Both of us (HB-4:159).

For Oscar, thanking God has become a habit. When I asked him what sorts of things God did for him, he said quickly, “He wakes me up every morning... He put, got clothes on me. I woke up in my right mind.” I asked him if that wasn’t just good luck.
That ain't no luck, it ain't no luck, it's God. That's what I think, you know, you know… First thing when you wake up, thank God for waking you up, you know? And then get on your way… (HB-13:143,153).

**Anamnesis: The Individual Is Resocialized**

“Anamnesis” is the stage in which the believer incorporates the most recent Crisis-Provision-Epiphany sequence into his/her prior religious socialization. This is the final stage of the BGWP as a process, the completion of which signals the imminent return to a new “Present.” As the final stage it indicates the fulfillment of Believing as process with its resulting work of Ritualization.

While the function of “Anamnesis” as a conceptual property is logically concise, its description as a psychological behavior over a duration of time remains elusive. As a series of events and behaviors in a temporal sequence “Anamnesis” is not always expressed in discrete words or actions. Just as receiving a gift (“Provision”) is distinct from acknowledging the giver (“Epiphany”), so also are the giving and acknowledging are distinct from reincorporating both into social and religious identity (“Anamnesis”).

*Anamnesis* refers to a process of becoming that is always shrouded from a direct cause-effect sequence. The term is taken directly from the Greek αναμνήσις, literally “remembrance” or “recollection,” and has always carried the connotation of making the past active in the present (Huber 1991:434). The term appears and reappears in Plato’s philosophy of knowledge, where truth is a reflection of eternal Forms implanted in the soul before birth and only apprehended by a rigorous dialectic of recollection (Gully 1954; Scott 1987). The term is perhaps better known for its use in Catholic sacramental theology, where the localization of a “real presence” of God is declared in fact, even if its “confection” defies rational explanation (Glenn n.d.; Catholic Church 2000, Part 2; also see Ramsey 2017:81).
The religious sense of *anamnesis* carries over into contemporary nonreligious contexts. Writing for Adlerian psychologists, Huber argues for the priority of becoming over being, of process over product, in contemporary practice. To illustrate his point he introduces the religious concept of *anamnesis*.

...when the contemporary Jew speaks of coming out of Egypt at the Seder dinner, he or she is referring to an event that, in a sense, is still taking place. Similarly, when the contemporary Christian takes communion “in remembrance of me” he or she is celebrating the present saving power of the Last Supper. In like manner, when the Australian Aborigine engages in ritual recall at the totem pole, he or she does so with the aim of tapping past myths in order to energize present creation. In this sense *anamnesis* implies recall and response (Huber 1991:434).

Today *anamnesis* is routinely used in medicine and psychiatry to identify the first stage in the healing process. On the one hand, *anamnesis* refers to routine information gathering to establish a patient’s social and medical history prior to reaching a diagnosis. In a more refined usage, *anamnesis* indicates a kind of dialectic between doctor and patient in establishing a lifelong case history leading up to the present.

...anamnesis proves to be a suitable site for patient’s socialization in medical encounters, and a highly collaborative activity due to the amount of interaction and negotiation between the doctor and the patient (Zucchermaglio et al 2016:471).

“Anamnesis” is the stage in which the individual makes the connection between recent and prior religious socialization. Henceforth day to day experiences are slightly enriched as this new socialization is ritualized through routine experiences, whether personal relationships are many or few, good or bad. The individual confirms his/her identification with social reality. Old and new values are reinforced in commonplace encounters.

“Anamnesis” is the conclusion of the BGWP process in which the believer’s previous reflections are incorporated into a new present. His/her social identity as a believer is solidified.
When s/he revisits past incidents in solitary reflection or repeats them in new experiences, the latest “Present” stage has emerged.

**Believing in the God Who Provides: Two Case Studies**

As a conclusion to the present chapter I present two case studies in which BGWP is illustrated in all its stages. In each case both the descriptive and conceptual dimensions of this core category are presented with commentary.

The first is taken from the transcript of the interview with Larry, already mentioned above but here elaborated in detail. The second case is taken from a memo recorded as SOG substantive coding was transitioning to theoretical coding. The memo was written as a comparative analysis with the SOG interview data. While it is written in a satirical style, the incident and characters portrayed are taken directly from recollections from my pastoral experience nearly forty years ago.

**Larry: A Case Study**

The following case study presents an incident recalled by Larry in response to an interview question about personal doubts since his conversion as a Christian. The incident includes scattered reflections of events, but the narrative as a whole is an abstract construction to illustrate a point.

In recalling his experiences, Larry describes a series of stages the typical believer goes through in exercising and reinforcing his/her beliefs. Larry’s begins with a summary account of how God intervenes in a difficult situation.

*Interviewer:* You mentioned that at one point you were saying you needed something to eat. You told God. An hour later something happened. And you think that God was
behind that?
_Larry_: Yeah. I know he was.
_Interviewer_: Okay. Have you ever doubted that God is there?
_Larry_: Sometimes, yeah. Yeah. But this the key to doubt that God is there. We have to remember the history that you go through when you begin to doubt.
_Interviewer_: The history? Okay…?
_Larry_: The history that you went through to get to where you are. Not just the good things. Ask a, ask a college graduate what they loved about college. They’re not going to tell you the late night study and they’re gonna say the parties or, or the football game or the year we won the title. They’re not gonna tell you the hard part. And that’s our problem. The hard part is never exposed (HB-2: 151-174).

Larry illustrates the BGWP process by working backwards, describing the transition from the final stage of the believing cycle to the beginning of the next. This is the transition from “Anamnesis” to the next “Present”— “the history that you went through to get to where you are.” This remembrance and the process it recalls is the problem BGWP sets out to solve — the problem of doubting the presence of the God who provides and the social disorientation that results from it.

Larry’s offhand definitions of the two stages, “Anamnesis” and “Present,” are unsurpassable in their simplicity. “Anamnesis” is “the history you went through,” and “Present” is, literally, “where you are.” Here is encapsulated BGWP both as action in process (Believing”) and action completed (“Ritualization”). Recalling the history, whether daily on the street or in moments of quiet reflection, reinforces the believer’s psychological stability in the world. S/he can return to relive the cycle confident in the recognition of his/her limited power to control his/her environment coupled with an anticipation of God’s ongoing provision.

Larry’s understanding of “Present” is consistent with the SOG generic concept of socialization without reference to “face sheet” label distinctions (Glaser 1978:60). Larry, an African American high school graduate, who self-identifies as middle class but has lived on the streets for thirteen years, compares his personal history with that of college graduates looking
back fondly on parties and football games. He makes no distinction between his social “Present” and theirs. Was he going out of his way to cite an example that would make sense to me, a white professional? Possibly but not likely, since that would contradict the point of his illustration. His meaning seems clear: for the purposes of comparison all people are equally “where they are” in a given moment.

Larry’s reference to college students relates directly to his portrayal of the “Crisis” stage in the BGWP process. “Crisis,” according to Larry, is “the hard part” which is rarely “exposed” and thus resolved. That problem is not unique to college students eager to forget the long nights cramming for exams. It’s “our” problem as social beings seeking to manage the chaos of daily life. We cling to our “Present,” our comfort zone, plagued by doubts.

Larry continues his narrative relating the Anamnesis-Present sequence to the “Epiphany” stage:

*Interviewer:* So you share the history with who?
*Larry:* With the entity that I’m praying to,
*Interviewer:* Okay, so you share it with God?
*Larry:* Yeah, or just to reassure myself that he will come through and when he’s taken a little bit longer time to fulfill what whatever it is that I need to hear. You know, so history will always always get you on focus with God.
*Interviewer:* You know where you are.
*Larry:* Yeah (HB-2:177-189).

Larry, now many years past his adult conversion, illustrates the “Epiphany” stage as an instantaneous connection of the Provider with God. Larry refers to God guardedly at first, or perhaps very aware of God’s otherness relative to human understanding. He calls God “the entity I’m praying to,” then relents at my question, “so [you mean] you share it with God?” and agrees to “God” as the proper name for that “entity.” This naming (“Epiphany”) has not so much to do with giving God a name as to acknowledging that this is the being with whom he interacts as a
believer.

Larry concludes his illustration reasserting the importance of the end result of the BGWP process: “to reassure myself that he will come through….” Obtaining this reassurance is the objective of believing: to “make present” his formative conviction of God’s provision and get himself “on focus” with God.

In response to my question, Larry illustrates the one stage he has not yet described, either conceptually or with concrete examples, the “Provision” stage.

*Interviewer:* Does God do anything else for you? [You said] he helps you find stuff when you need it.
*Larry:* He does everything for me.
*Interviewer:* Name a couple more things or examples.
*Larry:* Wow. Okay. Let's see here. They [the caregivers at the center] provide food and clothes for me, help with money. [God] gives me wisdom. Understanding (Hebrews 2:191-198).

Larry’s representative list of previous “Provisions” is instructive. As examples Larry does not recall a particular incident but rather generalizes from a long history. Food, clothing, money, even divine wisdom, are presented as types or symbols, and similar examples could be added. These symbols have become “street sacraments” that directly call to mind (“Anamnesis”) the Person of the Provider (“Epiphany”), the entity to whom Larry prays previously identified as Jesus. Larry’s focus is no longer on problems and their resolutions but on routine functioning in a world that makes sense and where challenges can be managed (“Present”).

Larry’s account of God’s provisions brings him to recall his life before and after his conversion. Here he cites specific examples from his personal history.

*Larry:* A lot of people say Christians are Christians because their life line up with the will of God. But how do you know what the will of God is? So you know, the wisdom and the history keep me focused on the wisdom.
Interviewer: You consider yourself Christian?
Larry: Yes.
Interviewer: Have you always believed?
Larry: No.
Interviewer: When did you start?
Larry: I was, I was in prison. And uh, I had to do like twelve years and I did something really bad and they said in two years I go up for parole. So I had to keep my head straight so I was introduced to religion in prison. It kept me safe and kept me out of harm's way.
Interviewer: Who introduced it to you?
Larry: One of my roommates. I was in an eight man cell.
Interviewer: Another one of the prisoners?
Larry: Yeah. Yeah.
Interviewer: Where did he get it?
Larry: From the pastor of the church.
Interviewer: He grew up with it or just...
Larry: No. Yeah, on the [unintelligible]. He was there before me.
Interviewer: So you figured if you were religious that would help your parole, but you started believing.
Larry: Yeah, yeah yeah. It was just a game at first (HB-2:203-241).

Throughout his adult life and now in his present environment (prison) Larry was accustomed to “gaming the system” as a means of managing the resources available to him in order to maintain his normal existence. Forming the right impression on those who held power over him was the obvious solution here. Here it probably would not work, but it was worth a try. At the very least religion would help Larry “keep his head straight,” and perhaps it would convince the parole board that he was ready for parole.

Larry continues: “But certain things started to happen. And I started believing in Jesus Christ (HB-2:241).”

Larry made a psychological connection between associating Jesus with God and the likelihood, however remote, of accessing resources beyond his normal control. His conversion was his “irrational” anticipation of a direct intervention by God (“Provision”) that was, if not miraculous, then certainly not to be expected. It was the classic “leap” described in detail by
Kierkegaard (1946). The “leap” somehow made more sense now that the Provider had a name (“Epiphany”).

Larry now recalls his miracle:

And the first couple of times I went up for parole, I didn't get it, but I still believed that I will get it. And I wouldn't do the full twelve years. And it was like three or four and a half years in and they gave it to me. And I knew it was nothing but God. But even though I had the requirements, it was it was certain stipulations that I needed that didn't line up. As long as they didn't I wasn't gonna get it but they gave it to me. (HB-2:158-241)

Against all odds Larry presented himself for parole without having met the necessary legal requirements. It was a gamble, literally taken on faith, but it worked. One can only speculate how or what Larry would have believed had he not gotten his parole.

The cycle (“Believing”) is now complete, and its religious function (“Ritualization”) apparent. The final “Anamnesis” recalls the history of that period of prior socialization which he describes as his conversion, and in such a way that the efficacy of the initial Crisis-Provision-Epiphany sequence is repeated. Subsequent events in which Larry would recall this process are now “street sacraments” — everyday events functioning as symbols that “make present” the ritual action of believing.

**Julia: A Comparative Study**

Julia, a harried housewife with limited time, money, energy, or support from significant others, seeks to take advantage of a sale on jackets for her children returning to school. Supply is limited and time is running out. Today with three of her four children in school, she has two free hours to shop “alone” with only her two-year-old son in tow. She pulls into a crowded parking lot at the nearby mall. Clearly other harried housewives have heard of this sale and are flocking to the store with the same motives and under the same pressures. The store closes in twenty minutes. Hoping for a miracle, she drives along the first row of parking spaces a few feet from the entrance to the store. To her astonishment, a car backs out of a space directly in front of the entrance just as she approaches. She is “saved” and immediately praises the Lord on whom she has prayerfully depended throughout her stressful days as a housewife and mother.
Her husband Bill is a self-styled intellectual working for an insurance agency, underpaid, under pressure to perform, and haunted by the conviction that he is not doing the work he was born to do. At present he is not a believer, though he has dabbled in various religions over the years depending on what “works” at the moment. While he is pleased with his wife’s persistence in getting bargains on kids’ clothing, he laughs at her knee-jerk attribution of today’s good luck to divine intervention. He thinks her naive and too anxious to please her overbearing mother, a Christian fundamentalist who frequently invades their home and badgers them about religion. He attributes Julia’s good fortune, not to the God “whose eye is on the sparrow” (and presumably on harried housewives), but to coincidence, an unemotional deduction derived from his cool, manly intellect.

For the purposes of comparison, the five stages of BGWP can be identified as Julia “processes through” BGWP. Julia’s “Present” is “where she was” socially at that moment. It includes her white upper-middle class background and the fact that she had married “down” and too young. She felt neglected and belittled by her equally unhappy husband, and she would later say she was abused by her mother’s interference in her early adult life. Having come from a family that spent summer vacations on Martha’s Vineyard, she was poorly prepared for living a working class lifestyle. While her religious beliefs might seem frivolous to an outsider, they were nonetheless sincere and “worked” to provide her a relatively secure social environment in which to function from day to day. While she may not have liked it, she knew who she was, where she was, and what to expect from her life. She knew also how to rely on God and felt confident that he would provide those necessities that eluded her capacity to provide both for herself and her family.

The “Crisis” stage emerged as she rushed to the mall under pressure to provide for her children while staying within her budget. She also craved the simple pleasure of being able to share a “victory” story with her friends at Bible study later that evening. Julia’s disillusionment with her inability to provide for her family’s needs, or to win her mother’s or her husband’s approval, was the impossibility that confronted her in this “Crisis.” The odds were against her,
but she went out anyway hoping for a miracle.

Because she was already a believer in a God who works miracles, the remaining three stages of the process run together quickly. The “Provision” was the sudden appearance of the parking space and the added ability to find a few bargains still on the racks inside. This intervention required no disorienting encounter with an “Other” but was quickly followed by the “Epiphany” stage, where she identified the provision with the Christian God in whom she believed. The “Anamnesis” of remembering placed the incident neatly within her religious identity as a mainline Episcopalian with a dash of her mother’s fundamentalist revivalism. She entered her renewed “Present” with her faith confirmed and a victory to proclaim. She even indulged herself recalling that at least one of her children would be going with her mother to Martha’s Vineyard this summer. She had been through this ritual before and would return to it again.
Verification and Generalizability

Grounded theory was born in the middle of an argument between sociologists as to which was the priority in research: either (a) the verification of an existing theory with the careful application of data and method, or (b) the generation of a new theory based on new data responding to a question that has never been asked. At the outset of any research the theorist must resolve that dilemma by making up his or her mind: which of these two objectives has priority for the present research (Glaser and Strauss 1967)?

That decision was made early in my attempt to answer the two research questions stated in the opening chapters of this paper. Because I could find no existing theory on what persons experiencing homelessness believed about God, I would have to come up with one of my own. Verification of the theory, such as it would be, would come from determining how well it was grounded in the data collected specifically to answer those questions (Glaser and Holton 2007).

Glaser and Strauss list four requirements for verifying the “modes of conceptualization for describing and explaining” in a grounded theory. These are (1) fit, where categories emerge from the data rather than from preconceived theories; (2) work, where, as data continues to be collected, the core category “works” to explain the behavior demonstrated by participants; (3) relevance, where the theory demonstrates its own relevance to the problems and processes emerging from the analysis and do not need to be “made relevant” by their similarity to existing theories; and (4) modifiability, a fourth criterion added by Glaser, where hypotheses underlying the theory are explored further, and the theory is adjusted, expanded, or rejected as appropriate (Glaser and Strauss 1967:3; Glaser 1978:3,4,5).
These four criteria are demonstrated in the exposition and examples in Chapter Six of this paper. As the data show, each of the categories and their several properties illustrate patterns of behavior observed in the data. The core category (BGWP) defines the problem which the participants set out to resolve and the stages by which they resolve it: the problem of believing in God and continuing to believe as they experience the vicissitudes of daily life. Furthermore, the believing process is shown to have both a social and religious function: that of reinforcing believers’ identity as social beings.

Based on the design for this project, the findings cannot necessarily be applied to the general population of persons experiencing homelessness. Fourteen participants, however mixed in terms of age, gender, race, and class, cannot predict how a significant proportion of homeless people will express a belief in God, or how they will interpret God’s presence in their lives differently from other demographic samples. Nor will it predict any difference between believing and not believing in the present substantive group or in others. Generalizability in a grounded theory study occurs when the hypothesis expressed in the theory is applied to a second and then a third group for comparison (Holton 2008; Walsh 2014). Does it explain the observed behaviors in those population units? Which ones, and what properties of their behavior, does it explain? What is missing that should be added, what should be changed, and what is just plain wrong (Glaser 1978)?

**Theoretical Background Revisited**

At the heart of Durkheim’s sociology of religion is the concept of church — a public setting in which a society gathers to celebrate its identity and in so doing reinforces that identity. Stark calls this “society worshipping itself” (Stark 2017). Among HB’s there is no church, even
for those who grew up in a church and occasionally attend today. For persons experiencing homelessness there is no collective rite to solidify a positive social identity.

Similarly, Collins’ conception of passing ritual gestures confirming a shared identity among today’s urbane society falls flat in interpreting the data in the present research. Among HB’s there is no shared community signaled in passing except the despair of no society. For HB’s rituals of social reinforcement are private, shared between the solitary individual and his or her God and whatever society he once represented. God himself is the missing society, the missing collective.

Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) concept of society as dialectic was helpful in developing the concept of “Present” in BGWP. While “Present” was portrayed as a “snapshot” of a lifelong personal history, as a process it was understood to be ongoing and productive. In particular, at the conclusion of the BGWP cycle the return to a normal “Present” could be described as a return to the dialectic of society where the present is constantly transformed and reinforced.

Luckmann’s concept of the invisible religion (1967) directly addresses the question, which society are we talking about in the social construction of religious beliefs by persons experiencing homelessness? Once again, the society that came into focus in SOG was no society. Hence Luckmann’s sketch of human consciousness as an inverted image of social reality is displayed almost in pure form among HB’s. His theory of religion lends credence to the hypothesis that the person experiencing homelessness is not simply an outlier in contemporary society. In a society that has no conscious awareness of “normal” the HB is an archetype for human nature in those interim periods when society cannot identify itself.

As in the cases above, Mead’s theory of the social self presupposes an intact society as its basis. The present research raises the question as to whether “society” can have a fixed definition
since, as is shown here, society itself is never fixed. Mead’s “eschatological optimism” proves itself to be a product of its time, having run aground in the present. Mead’s generalized other appears in the present analysis as a tantalizing apparition always eluding our grasp. His “I-me” naturally evolving into “I-in-you-and-you-in-me” has lost a natural footing. While Mead’s conceptions of the self and society will continue to inform research, researchers should must recalibrate their theoretical bases in relation to the diversity of present society.

Practical Application of SOG

SOG has potential in two practical areas. First, in the sociological literature on religion and on the concept of God in particular. SOG places religion, and particularly the concept of God, outside the conventional framework of “church religion” (Luckmann 1967). It challenges researchers to become more aware of their own bias against God as “more restrictive” compared with recent “more liberated” models of spirituality (Dyson et al 1997). It also challenges political authorities to permit discussions about God in public forums and institutions, particularly where its importance in constituents’ lives is well attested (Gravell 2013).

This paper raises the question, how do we as social scientists take God seriously without falling out of step with contemporary research? More pointedly, why would we not wish to? Has our methodological atheism been canonized (Berger 1974), and, if so, by what authoritative body? While belief in God has continued to drop in the last decade (Gallop 2022), it is likely that more people today believe in God than in churches, spirituality, or any of the sciences. How do we understand a concept of God apart from artifacts of a heritage which in our time seems to have vanished?

It is the concept of believing that is left out of most theorizing about God. The concept of a
process of believing as distinct from the what of believing needs to be developed. The what is always abstracted from some present social process. Does the theory hold for other believers in God in a social world far removed from the world of homelessness? Are there non-religious processes of believing that are illuminated by this theory of believing in God? If so, what are the properties of each? What do these theories have in common, and how are they different?

The second practical application of this research is in clinical settings among physicians, nurses, counselors, chaplains, social workers, and others. SOG encourages all readers to take persons experiencing homelessness seriously as part of the present social fabric and not as outliers. It presents their ideas and thought processes in a non-stereotypic way. Often it conveys a profound wisdom and perceptiveness on their part, both in religious speculations but also in a systematic understanding of the world. Their conceptions of a resource beyond their limited world and their confidence in the practical usefulness of these conceptions can be a source both of instruction and inspiration.

In a hospital setting, professional staff are urged to listen closely as HB’s describe their faith in God as a practical resource. The purported miracles God has performed in keeping them alive are only a single example. However, these may be couched in hyperbole, the accounts should be taken first at face value, and only afterwards, based on considerations of treatment, interpreted for their “truth” value. Such patients may be looking for an opportunity to have a “real” conversation where something can be shared besides the swarm of details gathered “for their own benefit.”

The present study contributes to a growing literature that takes persons experiencing homelessness seriously as persons and regards their personal accounts as the priority for research. With all the best intentions, the policy and literature surrounding homelessness has
nonetheless stigmatized persons experiencing homelessness, not as persons, but as part of a problem others presume to solve for them. Partly because the conversations represented here were about something else, they were open and friendly. Participants were aware that they were making positive contributions to a society of which they were a real part. I had the impression such conversations were rare.

A Sociology of Theological Language

The Social Bases of a Concept of God

The concept of God derived from experience has no implications for an understanding of God as God is in Godself. TGWP is not a reduction of traditional doctrine or an “updated” exposition to accommodate the presumed uniqueness of contemporary life. In SOG I have taken no stand on controversial issues confronting, and dividing, the churches. Neither did any of the individuals with whom I spoke, as evenly divided as they were on social and political matters facing all Americans.

The meaning of belonging to a religious tradition is to accept the concept of God with which that group identifies. When a Christian is baptized, the congregation rehearses the Apostles Creed, which contains that Church's articles of faith that have been handed down across generations. Most of those who recite the Creed, clergy and laity alike, could not explain the fine points of doctrine that are there proclaimed. In the context of the liturgy, the Creed has a distinct function: that of affirming the believer’s identification with an historic tradition and membership in a local community of faith. The articles of the Creed are received by the faithful as axioms whose veracity is not at issue for their community life. This explains why, when crucial points of doctrine are contested by established leaders, the integrity of the local fellowship can be
threatened. The people’s resistance to such changes is never “just about” words or theories. Such casual reproofs arise easily, perhaps too easily, from persons who have little stake in the day to day fellowship of believers.

Fixed theological dogmas have a special function within the ecclesiastical institutions in which they are established by recognized authority. Propositions stating these dogmas do not consist of labels to which concepts amenable to an Enlightenment philosophy or scientific method can be attached, even if the language remains the same. The God people describe in experience, with whom they claim some relationship, is not conceptually identical with the God of the historic creeds. One cannot infer from the former what the latter are “really saying” or what the doctors of the churches “really meant” to say. The logical constructions of personal faith and ecclesiastical dogma are as different as the data from which they are constructed. From an epistemological standpoint the dichotomy between the two is true, necessary, and absolute.

*Theologian as Sociologist*

Much of the language in SOG is the language of theology. God is often the subject or object of theological statements. For example, in this or that way God provides for believers or resolves this or that crisis situation; they realized God had a plan for them, etc. Interview participants did what theologians do: they talked about God and his relationship to them in a world where he is acknowledged as having a natural place. In all such cases the participants, and not the researcher, were the theologians.

While I was the only participant in the interview process who is professionally trained in theology and has preached and taught from a living tradition, I was not the theologian. The theological conceptions expressed are abstracted from the words and experiences of the
respondents.

While I may have been the most practiced in discoursing with religious believers, I am also the most practiced in discoursing with the irreligious, once religious, and anti-religious. Of all the participants in the SOG project, I was the most qualified and also the most unqualified. I knew what to listen for but not where to put it. I did not proceed from a theoretical “blank slate” but from one that was hopelessly cluttered. The clearing and subsequent reconstruction had to emerge from the theoretical analysis.

The “Street Theologians”

The declarative theological statements contained here are carefully placed in context as the reflections of individuals, in the present case, those experiencing homelessness — the “street theologians.” These theologians demonstrate varying degrees of personal clarity in their grasp of the concepts they use for God. Some of their conceptions are sophisticated, refined in the crucible of street life and pored over in private reflections. Others are articulated off-the-cuff but nevertheless indicate some prior intimation of God in daily life.

The HB’s reflections on the words and actions of God in his/her life are theological in a basic sense. They are words about God or “God talk.” While they may be ill-informed, naive, uncritical, and unsystematic, they are nonetheless sufficiently coherent to be meaningful to the individual believer. They form a social reality that makes sense enough to assist that individual in the interactions of day to day life.

Professionally trained theologians, whether trained for academic research or pastoral care, demonstrate a systematic and critical understanding of theological language. They are generally well educated and economically self-sufficient. They are to some degree professionally
accomplished. Their value within the structure of society is recognized and acknowledged by their peers in other professions. Significantly, they demonstrate a poise that enables them to critique the opinions and actions of others. As with all professionals, their expertise places them in a position of superiority relative to those outside their professional domain.

These two types of theologians may be seen on a continuum according to class. Amateur HB’s may be confident, dogmatic, and judgmental in their opinions, but their confidence is in the practicality of believing. Believing enables believers to make sense of the world as an ongoing social process. Nonetheless, they are amateurs and, in the case of HB’s, at the bottom of every social-hierarchical scale. They do not presume the authority of their affluent counterparts, particularly trained experts, nor would such authority serve any practical purpose. None of the HB’s with whom I spoke stated a wish to be a priest, pastor, or theologian.

These class distinctions are illustrated in comparing the reflections of HB’s with those of PSP’s. PSP-1 and PSP-2 questioned the beliefs of the HB’s based on the latter’s inability or unwillingness to act consistently with their professed beliefs, particularly after a recent conversion. Consistent action would entail turning away from destructive behaviors that prevented them from exiting homelessness — typically, substance abuse — and an unwillingness to follow through on solving their homelessness problem. As both PSP’s acknowledged, such a change in behaviors would entail turning from the values of the street to those of a settled middle-class.

Similarly, PSP-3, who runs a successful ministry preparing addicted men to exit homelessness, evaluates the professed beliefs of participants by their earnestness in returning to a healthy life. Of higher value to him than religious values was the determination to establish new habits and behaviors that would enable them to thrive in society and off the streets. Once again
normality presupposes a consistency of character commonplace in persons in higher socio-economic circumstances. At the same time, PSP-3’s acknowledged success is in solving the problem of homelessness. A significant number of his clients have exited homelessness, and a significant number of those have stayed out.

The data of the present research gives no ground for assessing the services provided by these professionals or to question their professional judgments. The data does indicate a parallel between the authority to make “true” or “worthwhile” theological statements and socio-economic status. By contrast, it is the confidence that comes with theological judgments, not their validity or “truth,” that explains the variation between street theologians and their professional counterparts.

*The Epistemological Divide and Theological Reductionism*

The hymn’s description of God as “light inaccessible” (Smith 1985) shows profound epistemological insight. If any god or gods exist, humans, believers and nonbelievers alike, have no empirical access to them. While ecclesiastical texts and traditions can be subject to logical and historical analysis, God is not subject to empirical observation.

The Enlightenment and its successors are inconsistent when they claim that God, if there is one, cannot be accessed by human knowledge; and then in the next breath declare their certainty that, since God cannot be known, they know that there is no God. The scriptures and creeds cannot be recast as templates, where new concepts are arbitrarily inserted in place of an archaic jargon, and where the resulting propositions can be interpreted by criteria foreign to the context in which the sacred texts were written.

Theological analysis is restricted to its own domain: the exposition of texts and traditions
legitimized by recognized ecclesiastical authority, whether professional or popular. When theologians attempt to pierce the epistemological veil, they confuse the God who lies behind it with the analogy or theoretical model accessible to their analytical powers. This is not so much a paradox as an absurdity, sometimes a presumption. Theological reduction always results in caricature of both the deity and the critic.

The epistemological divide can be illustrated theologically. St. Paul declares that people who deny the existence of God are without excuse since God’s invisible nature is manifest unmistakably in creation (Romans 1:20). Such declarations are fair game for the prophet and preacher, and, according to the doctrine of the churches, the Spirit may well make use of them. And yet neither prophet, priest, nor preacher can direct the Spirit, who bloweth only where He listeth (John 3:8).
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

_A Problem and Its Solution: The Case of Homeless Believers_

The literature on the problem of homelessness is vast and growing by the hour. While religion is frequently mentioned, and God not quite so frequently, in most cases they are studied as variables for facilitating the exit from homelessness. While this is entirely appropriate, it brings to light a remarkable irony. Exiting homelessness once and for all is not the main problem most homeless people deal with day by day. It is a problem of those with professional and moral commitments to resolving a systemic societal problem. Literature is amassed in pursuit of this problem but generally shared by fellow professionals. Ironically, none is likely to be read by homeless persons, nor is it written with them in mind. In a way, it is none of their business.

The present study was partly a response to the scarcity of research on homelessness in something other than negative terms. After all, “homeless” is a negative — that of not having a home, whereas most everyone else in society has one. Pretty much everyone has a physical space to call home — shelter and basic resources for survival. Those who do not should have one, even have a right to one, etc. These are frequent comments by normal (i.e., domiciled) persons both in discussions of policy and in private conversation. Something is wrong with society when a segment of its citizens are living on the street. Particularly in the last few years when television cameras regularly capture cities “overrun” by homeless encampments with social pathologies _en parade_, homelessness is perhaps more of a problem than ever. The contrast between the destitution of homelessness in the face of unprecedented plenty is more glaring than ever.

By contrast the present study presents homelessness in one of perhaps few positive aspects, not trying to be nice, but trying to state what _is_. In the special case of believing in a God who
provides, persons experiencing homelessness are just like everybody else. The circumstances of homelessness present an obvious contrast between their crises and those confronted by “normal” people, but just as the crises are more extreme, so are the provisions. In either case, those who believe in something greater than themselves and in possibilities other than those immediately at hand — in the present instance, believers in God — return to a routine in which they are more or less at home.

On the one hand, SOG is a sociological theory of believing in God. Here the case of homeless believers is just that: a single case. It is written in anticipation of comparisons with other cases: such as believing in God by affluent middle-class persons in well-established communities. Larry’s college students and Julia’s harried housewives are presented in the previous chapter as examples.

On the other hand, the theory could take a new turn examining different forms of believing, such as believing in good luck or personal resolve. How would the properties of these latter forms of believing resemble those of BGWP? Is believing in a God who provides in any way the same as believing in the probability of winning the lottery? What are the properties of people who play the lottery (their “Present”)? What is their “Crisis” stage, when direct access to resources appears out of reach, and the only “Provision” is the feverish anticipation of a miracle? To whom or what would they attribute their success were they to win, and how, if at all, would they be socially and psychologically reintegrated into normal — i.e., less feverish — daily life?

While this sounds like a parody, and it is, it is no more so than Glaser’s theory of the milkman devising schemes to win over his best customers (Glaser 1978:98). Similar social processes could be conceptualized by other names and applied as new hypotheses. One hypothesis might “work” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:3) and contribute to a formal theory of believing in general
In SOG homelessness was always front and center in the narratives underlying this study but, significantly, “the problem of homelessness” almost never came up. Here the special case of homeless believers illustrates a process wherein participants maintain a personal dignity perhaps as an aid to psychological survival. They retain a social identity, whether related to a distant past or to a recent turn of events. What these two resources have in common is the concept of God as a social being and believing as a process where believers renew their identity as social beings. The data here shows that homeless believers have a place in society, however much our middle-class biases entitle us to dismiss such a notion. Believing in the God Who Provides (BGWP), explains the process whereby believing reinforces social identity and so fulfills the socio-religious function of ritual. It also indicates the nature of the social reality in which ritualization takes place: in the present case, that of the life in an atomized, almost asocial, society.

A positive identity is a significant resource for persons experiencing homelessness, since the latter are typically identified negatively. First, they receive their identity from others and not from themselves. Second, they are identified in terms of what they are not and have not. “Homeless” is an obvious case in point. Others could be named: power-less (relative to whom?), outcast and ex-cluded (from what and by whom?), deprived of necessities for a normal life (would they agree on what is “necessary” and “normal”? ). The list could go on.

Believing day by day in a God who provides is perhaps one of few positive identities they are free to define on their own terms. For some, their present connection with God restores a past connection with a social circle otherwise lost. For others it provides a sense of social continuity which they never possessed to begin with. The connection is the social God who provides, among other things, a personal identity through a person-like relationship. This relationship can
be real or imagined. Either way, the fact of the imagining is real.

**Reflexive Conclusion**

*Four Years Ago*

The following memo was written early in the research process and includes some thoughts I had as I left a Sunday morning breakfast for people on the street. It summarizes for me a facet of equality that is ordinarily not considered. It had a great effect on me throughout the data collection and analysis for this project, and I will carry it with me long afterwards.

“I had been invited by a local homeless missioner to attend a weekly breakfast for persons experiencing homelessness sponsored by a downtown Orlando mainline church. I attended, technically, as a participant observer, but sat as a guest at one of the tables and was served breakfast along with the rest. I neither pretended to be “one of them” nor introduced myself as a local clergyman or graduate student. As I left the breakfast, I reflected on the differences between my social position and that of the other guests, whether they were currently homeless or at risk to become homeless. The differences seemed obvious: I was raised in affluent circumstances and was wealthy and powerful compared with everyone else. I have been a professional clergyman for forty years with clear commitments to religious institutions and ideologies. At the same time, many of those I had met had similar biographies in a recent past: raised in economically secure surroundings, perhaps in religious households, well educated, and some former professionals. Of course, many more had no such history of privilege. Nevertheless, they all shared the present circumstance as equals. None made the pretenses of superiority that are so common among peers in domiciled society. Recalling Schutz’s social phenomenology (1967), I saw these details as phenomena and thus, in a sense, as logically equivalent. Social
phenomena are individual data and, as such, equally related to all other data. Even the illusions I indulged about how this might level obvious social inequalities became phenomenological details to be noted and recorded. Whatever pangs of conscience or defensiveness I might feel were, again, data to be observed and analyzed. While this certainly does not negate social differences of position, it allows an analytical equality. Even the awareness of bias based on positional differences becomes one more empirical datum."

Four Weeks Ago

The past four years of research ended in the discovery of a theory. I understand theory to be a lens through which some aspect of the world is viewed. The several views, in turn, form hypotheses that are confirmed or adjusted by further research and also by daily living. This discovery brought things to mind which I had intuited but not fully grasped.

It had never occurred to me to think of beliefs and believing as fundamentally different realities. It had not occurred to me to think of faith as reinforced first by mundane interactions and only later by grand symbols, as in the Liturgy. Street rituals will always exist in some form, whether recognized or not. On the other hand, the great symbols of faith can be excommunicated from the society of believers. The daily rituals of believers persist and are reinforced with or without society as a reflective surface giving rise to a collective conscience.

This long process of discovery and its final end product have changed me both as a believer and as a religious professional. My personal understanding of God and what it means to believe have been not so much changed as confirmed with an added dimension. I come away thinking that I do not so much know more about persons experiencing homelessness as I do about all persons. I discovered that Homeless Believers, as I have named them, reveal more
about human nature and society in general than they do about a relatively small segment of society arbitrarily singled out for scrutiny.

My understanding of human equality and inequality has been changed. It is easy for me to declare that all are equal in the eyes of God. For me this theological conviction comes easily, almost as a cliché. For the people I interviewed this was no cliché but a fact of life. None of them said it was the “answer” to social equalities, and I don’t believe anyone thought it was. It was the sort of fact that had become a part of them.

For them this truth was hard earned. For others it remains a cliché, until it isn’t.
This non-scientific study might offer some perspective. Between 1900 and 1950 the word “homelessness” produced 778 hits on the Google Scholar search engine; from 1951-1980, 2,770; from 1981-2000, 52,900; and from 2001 through the present, 294,000.

A century ago Fox-Strangeways, writing in the British Charity Organization Quarterly, traced the public recognition of the homelessness problem to the Black Death (14th century) and metaphorically to the Garden of Eden (see Fox-Strangeways, M W. 1924. “The Homeless Man.” Charity Organisation Quarterly 8:140–47.)

Burt defines structural causes as “larger societal trends and challenges that affect broad segments of a population” (Burt 2003:1267).

Burt defines individual causes: “the conditions and circumstances that make particular people particularly vulnerable to homelessness” (Burt 2003:1268).

“The Continuum of Care (CoC) Program (24 CFR part 578) is designed to promote a community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness; to provide funding for efforts by nonprofit providers, states, and local governments to quickly rehouse homeless individuals, families, persons fleeing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking, and youth while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused by homelessness; to promote access to and effective utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families; and to optimize self-sufficiency among those experiencing homelessness.”

According to Durkheim Churches possess both a recognized priesthood and a routine ritual gathering for solidifying a social identity. He excludes magic cults from his inclusive definition since, while possessing beliefs and practices, magicians and their clients perform neither of the social functions of a Church (1995:39 ff.).

The church website describes the drop-in center services as follows: “We provide coffee and a devotional in the morning, case management services, some hygiene essentials and other supplies for potential job interviews, and a cool space to escape the heat during the day or rain during a storm.”

The number here is approximate, since memos continue to be written as the present draft is completed, and not all theoretical memos have been preserved.

Among the classics in this area is Dennis Hopper’s *Reckoning with Homelessness* (2003).
APPENDIX A: UCF IRB EXEMPTION PERMISSION
EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

June 3, 2020

Dear John L'Hommedieu:

On 6/3/2020, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>The Sociology of God: The Case of Homeless Believers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>John L'Hommedieu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00001450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant ID:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Reviewed:</td>
<td>• HRP-251 - Faculty Advisor Review w_AMD signature.docx, Category: Faculty Research Approval; • FOTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FINAL 030620.rtf, Category: Interview / Focus Questions; • FOTH PROTOCOL, Category: IRB Protocol; • FOTH SHORT SURVEY, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • IRB L_Hommedieu 1450 HRP-254 - Explanation of Research UPDATE2 06032020.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.
Due to current COVID-19 restrictions, in-person research is not permitted to begin until you receive further correspondence from the Office of Research stating that the restrictions have been lifted.

Sincerely,

Kamille Birkbeck
Designated Reviewer
APPENDIX B: UCF IRB CLOSURE LETTER
UCF IRB Closure Letter

Institutional Review Board
FWA0000351
IRB00001138
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

CLOSURE

June 1, 2022

Dear [John L’Hommedieu]

On 6/1/2022, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Continuing Review</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>The Sociology of God: The Case of Homeless Believers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>[John L’Hommedieu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>CR00001697</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND, IDE, or HDE:</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

The IRB acknowledges your request for closure of the protocol effective as of 6/1/2022. As part of this action:

- The protocol is permanently closed to enrollment.
- All subjects have completed all protocol-related interventions.
- Collection of private identifiable information is completed.
- Analysis of private identifiable information is completed.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu]. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

[Kamille C. Birkbeck]

Kamille Birkbeck
Designated Reviewer
APPENDIX C: HOMELESS BELIEVER (HB) INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Homeless Believer (HB) Interview Questions

HB INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe in God? (yes, no, sometimes, not sure)

2. How would you describe God?

3. Do you think of God as a person? If so, is God male, female, neither, both, or something else?

4. How would you describe your relationship with God?

5. Tell me about something that happened recently that made you aware that God was there.

6. Do you ever doubt that God exists?

7. What sorts of things does God do for you? What has he done for you lately?

8. Have you always believed in God?

9. Has your belief in God changed over the years? If so, how and why?

10. Do you talk to God? If so, how?

11. Does God talk to you? How can you tell it’s God who’s talking to you?

12. What was your family life like growing up?
13. What do you remember most about religion growing up?

14. Whose faith impressed you the most growing up, positively or negatively?

15. Did your family belong to a church? Did you attend church when you were growing up?

16. What church or denomination did your family attend or belong to?

17. Do you attend services now? If so, where and how often?

18. Do you feel accepted by people you meet in church?

19. What do you think of other religious people you’ve met?

20. Have your beliefs changed since you were growing up? How have they changed?

21. What happened that made you see God differently.

22. Have you ever been in a recovery group? How have your thoughts about God changed since then?

23. Do you ever share your faith with other people? Who?

24. Do you ever pray with other people or talk about spiritual things?

25. Do you hang out with anyone?
APPENDIX D: PASTORS-SERVICE PROVIDERS (PSP)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Pastors-Service Providers (PSP) Interview Questions

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE - PASTORS AND HOMELESS SERVICE PROVIDERS

SUMMARY — WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW?

1. How have you observed homeless believers who profess to believe in God. In what settings and circumstances?

2. What differences have you noticed — if any — between homeless believers and homeless non believers?

3. What comments or conversations stand out in your memory as saying something important about what they believe. And how their beliefs have affected them?

4. Have testimonies or comments by homeless believers ever affected your faith, or your understanding of God?

5. What other homeless service professionals do you recommend I speak with.
APPENDIX E: SURVEY RESULTS -- DEMOGRAPHICS
Survey Results – Demographics

Table 2: Survey Results – Demographics

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree or higher</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>% Employed</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>% With Income Source</strong></td>
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APPENDIX F: RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND AND CURRENT STATUS
### Table 3: Religious Background and Current Status

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<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<th>Current Religious Status</th>
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<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.21</td>
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APPENDIX G: RESPONDENT NAME BY DEMOGRAPHIC
Table 4: Name by Demographic

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<th>Name (pseudo)</th>
<th>SOG</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Class ID</th>
<th>Highest Education</th>
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<th>Religious ID</th>
<th>Present Religious ID</th>
<th>Homeless how long</th>
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Blanks indicate responses as unspecified in interview data
APPENDIX H: SUBSTANTIVE CODE LABELS BEGINNING “GOD”
Substantive code labels beginning “God”

Table 5: Substantive code labels beginning “God”

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<td>GOD UNKNOWABLE</td>
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<td>GOD GENDER(+)</td>
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<td>GOD DOES THINGS FOR A REASON</td>
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<td>GOD HAS-A-PURPOSE, GENERAL</td>
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<td>GOD AS OTHER</td>
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