In this chapter we start our exploration of popular religious beliefs, which we define as expressions of characteristic emphases on certain core Christian beliefs. The first set of beliefs we examine are those about God, which are indisputably core beliefs in Christian tradition. God is the first object of faith mentioned in the traditional creed dating back to the early church, and theologians have been interpreting beliefs about God ever since. Not surprisingly, therefore, theological literature about popular religiosity assigns these beliefs a prominent place and theologians try to answer questions like the following: what image of God does popular religiosity emphasise? Empirical figures show that high level popular religious parishioners are also assiduous church-goers; nevertheless in both theological and ecclesial circles often it is asked: do popular religious people have different beliefs about God than those formulated in official Catholic teaching? We try to encapsulate all these questions in the empirical-theological question that guides us in this chapter: what beliefs about God are found in high and low level popular religious participation and what is the social location of these beliefs?

To formulate what answers we expect to this question we first look at some traditional Catholic teachings about God (3.1). Next we show how popular religiosity is sometimes depicted in the literature as professing non-traditional beliefs about God, but when it is interpreted as a phenomenon within the Catholic Church we anticipate that it will specifically endorse traditional beliefs about God (3.2). To determine to what extent these interpretations are empirically confirmed we outline the conceptualisation of traditional and non-traditional beliefs about God. We define traditional beliefs as centring on an iconic, personal and immanent-transcendent image of God, and non-traditional beliefs as lacking these characteristics. This enables us to compile a theoretical list of traditional and non-traditional beliefs about God for empirical investigation and to formulate expectations concerning these beliefs in high and low level popular religious
participation (3.3). Finally we answer the empirical-theological question posed in this chapter and see if our expectations are confirmed by presenting our empirical findings about God images in high and low level popular religious participation (3.4).

3.1. Traditional Beliefs about God in the Teachings of the Catholic Church

We start by examining some Catholic teachings about God. Our research context, we said, is Italian Catholicism; hence we consider traditional beliefs to be those of the Christian tradition as transmitted by the Catholic Church. We do not analyse all Catholic teachings about God in detail, but merely highlight a few key characteristics of the beliefs propounded by the Catholic Church. This reveals that traditional Catholic teachings about God reflect a balance between transcendence and immanence, the first expressed by the idea of God as a perfect being and the second by the idea of God as a person, transmitted by the doctrines of the trinity and creation. A more detailed conceptualisation of beliefs about God for purposes of empirical exploration follows later in the chapter (cf. 3.3).

Let us first examine some key concepts of God expressed in Catholic teaching, more specifically those referring to his transcendence (cf. Davies 1994, 50ff). The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) teaches that God is eternal, infinite (immensus) and unchangeable, incomprehensible, almighty, ineffable and simple (cf. Denzinger & Schönmetzer 1967, 800). This God concept can be considered classical and traditional: the Council uses terms deriving from the works of Augustine of Hippo and the medieval scholasticism of Anselm of Canterbury, which will be later developed by Thomas Aquinas. We call this theological tradition classical theism (cf. Markus 2004, 88ff).¹ The first three attributes (eternal, infinite and unchangeable) imply that God is beyond space and time and, following Anselm, that he is immutable and a-temporal (cf. Prosl., ch. 19). God’s incomprehensibility and ineffability convey the idea that he surpasses human comprehension. These two attributes impose limits on what we can say about him:

¹ We distinguish between classical theism and the theism developed in the 18th century in reaction to the Enlightenment’s agnosticism and atheism (cf. Dalferth 1994).