

Images of God among Young Children: Religious Learning in an Irreligious Context

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INTRODUCTION

The research deals with children and their concept of God and relationship towards God. Most of the children are coming from an atheistic background. Existing theories of faith development are based on research done in a religious environment. It is still debatable, if the outcome of that research is based on development or socialisation. My research contributes to clarify that matter and will consequently lead to a new critical approach in religious education.

The concept of God is seen as a kind of ellipse with two focal points: the cognitive aspect and the emotional aspect. The ellipse is woven with the complete biography. The cognitive aspect may hinder or support the emotional aspect, which is of special importance for the development of a personal relation towards God. Though you can't separate the cognitive and the emotional aspect of the concept of God in reality, from analytical interest you can focus special attention alternating on one or the other focal point by using special research instruments to find out, how both aspects are interacting in interrelation with biographic facts and influences by teaching and social conditions. The special objective is to get more knowledge about the interacting process of the two focal points in the religious development.

SPECIFICS OF THIS RESEARCH:

The specifics of this research – done in an irreligious context – in some keywords:

- longitudinal study (4–6 yrs.) with 55 children (half in a private school, half in government school)
- combining scientific research with pastoral care
- controlled input of religious instructions and its effects
- heuristic design (progressive development and adjustment of tools and objectives)
- focussing on visual designs which illustrates patterns of thinking and feeling

ASSUMPTIONS

Basic assumptions of my approach to religious trajectories of children growing up in an irreligious context:

- the cognitive aspect and the emotional aspect (relationship) of the concept of God are interacting. The (cognitive) concept of God may hinder or support the relationship towards God.
- that children coming from an atheistic or agnostic background may have a (cognitive) concept of God, but mostly no personal relation,
- if they have a concept of God, it may be based on traditional clichés, which support the atheistic or agnostic setting of their families. (God, the almighty father reigning over the clouds, interfering in a metaphysical way for the benefit of those, who believe in him)
- linked to this concept of a metaphysical almighty father is a bible concept, which interprets the text as historical facts,
- linked as well is a concept of church, which suggests a fundamental and aggressive position (crusades and autodafés)

CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

I understand the course of education as a process of becoming a subject towards which religious education can contribute. I am convinced that a positive and open relationship to God is strengthening the child's ability to cope with development tasks. Consequently I have to structure the religious education in a way that allows the child to clarify its concept of God so that it does not hinder but support and pave the way towards a development of a relationship to God.

Characteristics of a religious education which serves as continuous challenge to reflect and broaden one's own concept of God:

- opening up and establishing an access to inner pictures and perceptions,
- transferring inner pictures and perceptions into a creative process, setting impulses for symbolization,
- offering continuous links between living environment, social situation and religious tradition,
- accompanying the process of religious education by making the religious historical perspective transparent,
- establishing an elemental hermeneutical approach towards religious scriptures (especially creation, miracles, resurrection, prayer and theodizee),
- including protecting forms of religious practise,
- introducing symbols for a non personal concept of God, which are included in rituals.

The realization is done through multiple forms of imaginations, scenic improvisation and creative design. The results of the educational instructions are recorded by protocols, visualisations and any written documents used during the lectures. Especially important are regular personal dialogues between one child and the teacher, which are recorded and transcribed. During the period of the research (4–6 years) the dialogue – partner remains the same.

OBJECTIVES OF THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Several objectives in different fields are combined in this research project:

a) to follow the individual religious education, relating to the social, biographical and teaching context, then analyze it by including research- conditioned impulses. *Describing* individual religious education should result in a higher perception (awareness) of heterogeneous learning groups of today by RE teachers. The broad theological thinking of children can be made visible and could be used as a resource for church and theology.

b) The results of single case studies shall be analyzed with respect to cluster formation of certain influential factors like gender, family constellation etc. The findings shall answer open questions, e.g., are congruent concepts of God based on development or socialisation? How does the interdependency of a (cognitive) concept of God and a relation towards God interact with children coming from an orthodox religious background and with children from an atheistic background? What is the influence on a God concept when there are changes in family situations?

c) To test research instruments for children through which, in protected forms, knowledge of the individual perception and construction of meaning can be found.

d) Research on didactical effects: Using protocols of lessons and children's documents (artefacts, drawings, transcriptions of dialogues) to demonstrate the influence of the controlled theological input on the development of the infantile (cognitive) concept of God and the infantile relation towards God. The analysis of these interdependences shall be used to draw didactical consequences. It shall have an effect on curriculum development and on the methodological design of didactical arrangements.

INSTRUMENTS OF COLLECTING DATA

During the period of the pilot study well-known instruments of collecting data concerning the construction of meaning of young children were proved, new instruments were developed with regard to different approaches to the main subject. Faith (cognitive concept of God and relation towards God) and reality

of life are inseparably linked. Therefore the research project alternately approaches the construction of the concept of God once directly from faith and once indirectly through the reality of life.

*The instruments mainly work with visual designs
produced by the children. Why?*

- ideas and feelings can be expressed in pictures long before they can be expressed conceptually (in words);
- inconsistent, even contradictory elements can be expressed simultaneously in pictures;
- visual designs could be seen as symbolic code, under which a message is protected. The child decides how much of the content should be known by its dialogue – partner;
- the artefacts structure the personal dialogue at present and later on. They will increase attention and concentration. The given interpretation (by the child) may differ after some time. This again may provide additional findings.

In addition to the visual designs children are asked to place plasticine figures or dolls in a certain distance to their artefacts or to symbols of God, indicating their personal attitude and distance to God.

The direct access to the concept of God always follows the same procedure, whereas the access through reality of life and to concept of the self uses different visual designs. In the direct access the children create a visual artefact, which they then interpret. Different kinds of natural materials and reusable waste are provided. The children are invited to use these materials to create a metaphor for God. The children work silently. The interpretation of their artefacts is kept totally secret. Normally the children are very keen to disclose their secret to the researcher but not to their classmates. The positioning of the plasticine figures in a certain distance to their artefact, indicating their personal distance to God, is done during the dialogue.

*The direct access to God occurs via
metaphors and material collages. Why metaphors?*

Children are intentionally not brought into a position, where they are forced to make direct statements about the essence of God. Using metaphors opens a manifold access to the transcendent God.

Each creative metaphor expresses only a tiny fragment of God. God in itself is infinite and cannot be described as a whole. The children will find out about this in their own way, entering in a dialogue with biblical stories. It encourages them to explore new aspects of God and – creating new metaphors – they experience that their concept of God – while changing – is alive.

Why material collages instead of drawings?

Obviously, iconographic patterns (from children's bibles etc) are stored and can be reproduced, but they will not form an authentic reflection of religious thinking and feeling of children. With material collages (natural materials and reusable waste) there is a trend towards »experimenting« – a challenge to new thinking.

Why individual talks? Why dialogues instead of interviews?

In an atheistic context the subject God is considered to be taboo. Doing the interpretation of the visualisations in a dialogue, one can risk openness. The dialogues (following Carl Rogers, see Langer, 2000) combine scientific research with pastoral care. It is done so for two reasons:

a) ethical reason:

A research project, which considers religious education as one possibility towards establishing the self as subject may not counteract its own objectives by exploiting children as research objects. To guide and accompany children during this process requires a professional who is prepared to answer the questions and demands honestly and to provide help for the insecure self. Questions and distress occurring in a conversation must be taken into consideration – even more so, because in a non-denominational context there is no dialogue partner for religious issues.

b) research-methodical reason:

Dialogues about the concept of God with its both focal points are dealing with complex spiritual events, which are kept secret. To share the inner experience with somebody else requires a trustworthy and equal relationship. The willingness of the child to share fantasies, feelings and secret thoughts needs to correspond with the willingness of the adult to take them serious. The child needs assistance in understanding its own world. Supported by understanding resonance of the adult the child manages to express and sort its ideas and feelings, which may become more elaborate during the process.

Overview on the instruments of data collection:

1. repeated material collages of metaphors to God
2. repeated drawings of the family as animals
3. repeated drawings/ picture collages of the reality of their living world
4. drawings on the past and future way of life
5. repeated collages of crisis situations
6. drawing of oneself as a tree
7. repeated drawings of an imagined trip to the cavern of the heart
8. designing a folding figure, which shows the perception of the self by others (outside) and the perception by itself (inside)

9. positioning identification figures to concepts of God
10. varied text- and picture documents from lessons
11. questionnaires on understanding and practice of praying (repeated)
12. Bonding test
13. Questionnaire on support by parents
- 14–17) questionnaires on measuring self-esteem, generalized expectation of self-effectiveness, anxiety, and central signs of the self-concept.

EVALUATION

All dialogues are recorded and transcribed. For data processing short forms of transcriptions with a high rate of original sound are prepared. An interdisciplinary research team (theology, religious education, pastoral psychology, educational psychology, art therapy) meets regularly and discusses the data. The outcome of the team sessions and the results of the psychological tests are going to be combined and interpreted for the religious biographies (case studies). Later aspects of apparent clusters will be investigated. The data-collection will be finished at the end of 2004.

REPRESENTATION OF FINDINGS (EMERGING CLUSTERS):

The collecting of data is not finished until now. But the provisional results already show emerging clusters, which might be of interest for religious education:

1) Children coming from an agnostic environment often are showing a longing for transcendence: A boy of ten years creates a fitness-studio as a metaphor for God: He says: »People who visit this studio get to know themselves and have a chance to train their abilities. I would like to stand in front of this mirror, because I don't know, who I am, but I want to know. Unfortunately I don't believe in God«.

2) Children are able to present deep theological understanding through their sculptures before they can reflect on any transcendental issue. This child with special needs coming from an agnostic environment produced a sculpture four weeks after he had joined religious education. It represents God as an energy machine for the world. Two years later he constructs a scene, where a car has crashed into a wall. He explains that the driver is not dead. He manages to get out and to continue with his life. That was God's doing. By this he expresses precisely his own situation concerning his coming professional career and at the same time his trust in God.

3) Religious motivated children are prone to construct metaphysical systems out of remembered religious fragments and fantasies, which may be bizarre but are a highly emotional support system. In an agnostic atheistic environment any discussion of God is considered to be taboo. That is why children isolate

their metaphysical systems of thinking, which then act in future as barriers and stumbling blocs for any liberating religious experience.

4) Often children construct a living area for God. It may be a flat (girls), an island (boys and girls) or a space station (boys). God is considered to be vulnerable. The children invent mechanism to allow God to be close (e.g. pressing a button the space station becomes so small that it can be inhaled). Girls have the tendency to use more natural material than reusable waste creating artefacts, boys mostly prefer technical materials. The artefacts of girls express more often beauty and harmony than the artefacts of boys.

5) God is depicted as moral institution, which knows and remembers everything. Modern technical devices (e.g. radar-dishes, monitors, PC's) are used to express these abilities. Some children invent laundry machines for human thoughts and emotions: God is cleansing, but human beings may not open up to it.

6) God is considered to be custodian of the creation. God is more vulnerable and helpless than furious and powerful. Natural disasters appear to be punishment for ecological mismanagement. Some children think that it was a mistake to create man.

7) Experiences of guilt are often initiating an inner process: The concept of God is radically modified. For a girl of 7 years God had little connection with her personal self. After the experience of guilt she started at the age of 8 years to consider God as part of every human being, even the most evil. God lives in everyone and is not destroyable. In that sense God is almighty, but the power of God can only unfold if the human being accepts its existence and its guidance.

8) Just one case out of fifty (male, 9 years.) stated that he tried to make a deal with God. He came from a family, in which a few remnants of Christian tradition were still alive.

9) The concept of God and the concept of the bible of children having an aggressive – atheistic background are often similar to the concepts of children who were brought up in a fundamental Christian context.

10) Children raised in Christian families that lack a warm-hearted atmosphere often have aggressive elements in their concepts of God.

11) Children who grew up in a Christian environment often see God as an acquired concept without any deep – rooted experience. These children state in a rather stereotyped way that God offers them protection and help but they are unable to give any examples. Some of them don't connect any aspect of personal life with God or link God with specific terms only (such as church, Christmas).

12) Children with an explicit Christian socialisation (in its plain form) are prone to breakdowns of their faith by their literal understanding of the bible and their fixation on the »almighty father« who stands for protection and help as he

is able to fulfil wishes. After a transitional period in which they creatively try to understand why God has denied help or support in certain situations their doubts about the existence of God turn into atheism because of disappointment.

13) Unprejudiced children without any aggressive atheistic or fundamental Christian indoctrination are open to understand God as non-personal transcendence. They are able to perceive the presence of God within the creation and through the effect it has on their personal life. They more readily understand the symbolic meaning of biblical texts.

14) It seems as if a relation to God starts by a core subject of high existential relevance. Often you can observe this core subjects in a child's concept of God years before the child develops a relation to God. When the child discovers the religious dimension of its core subject as a personal resource it starts to develop a relation to God.

15) If a child doesn't see a link between its life and God one can assume that either it hasn't developed a relation to God or its relation to God is damaged. The reason could be that the child could not any longer perceive its concept of God as a solution for its personal situation and as a consequence gives up the relation. The child needs to change its concept of God.

16) Children who have access to a non anthropomorphic transcendent concept of God use their relation to God as a resource in difficult life circumstances and when coping with development tasks.

17) Religious experience happens in an agnostic environment but it is treated as taboo. Children who discover the religious dimension for themselves are forced to keep it secret. To communicate religious experiences would turn them into outcasts in their peer group.

18) For children praying is not necessarily linked to an anthropomorphic image of God. It is practised even by atheistic children.

19) Boys of ten years are already conscious of the impact of male and female images of God for the concept of the self and the personal perception of the world. In their view males are rejecting female images of God while they accept that women may have a female image of God. Children coming from a fundamental background reject any female image of God.

20) There is clear evidence that religious socialisation is the main course of the development of anthropomorphism in the concept of God.

21) Most children interpret the same artefact after some time differently, dependent on their present situation and concept of God. The one and same artefact is standing for various interpretations. This phenomenon contradicts the assumption (Rizzuto) that it is possible to reliably deduct a childhood concept of God from the memory of an adult.

22) Changes in the constellation of the family may have extreme but not predictable consequences for the concept of God. The complex interaction between the cognitive and the emotional aspects of the concept of God and biographies is especially apparent with children of separated families.

23) The courses of religious development of children coming from an atheistic or agnostic background are various and disparate. A development in stages like those of Oser/Gmünder or Fowler can't be seen until now and seems at least to be questionable.

EXAMPLE OF THE RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF ONE CHILD

Bodo is one of the youngest, biggest and strongest boys of his class. His parents are divorced. He lives with his mother and her new partner. Bodo loves TV and soaps dealing with extraterrestrials. His grandparents introduced him slightly with Christian beliefs. He is interested in ancient Greek Gods. He is a gifted child but his achievements at school are not adequate. Bodo has behavioural problems and is not reliable concerning homework. He loves technical things. His drawings are clumsy and strained. Professional psychologists indicate that the child has a great suppressed aggressive potential. In grade 1+2 Bodo doesn't use any colours. His drawings of persons are showing incomplete or no faces. They look tortured or aggressive. The hands are rudimentarily depicted and often bound.

Grade 1, 6-7 yrs:

Bodo is drawing preferably monsters and TV animated characters.

Many Gods do exist for him, very important is Zeus. The biblical God is shown as a monster truck, who is involved in a permanent fight with the evil (Hades). God tries to eliminate the evil out of the heads of the humans. God speaks with different voices to the people (through an organ, other people, his own heart). God is initiating an action, p. e. reconciliation with a friend, but the human being is responsible for the realisation.

Bodo likes to play with his Gameboy and Nitendo. He has a guinea pig, but he especially loves rats, because they are living underground and are impertinently infuriating humans. God is absent in his life. He doesn't pray.

Grade 2, 7-8 yrs:

Bodo is imaging himself in the centre of the picture as a very dangerous animal with two heads and six limbs which may be nice, if nobody annoys him.

He still believes in polytheism. The biblical God is considered to be a mayor of a town in heaven, constantly underway between universe and earth. The space ship, in which God travels can be transformed to such a tiny size, that people could inhale it. God is trying to remove the evil from thinking and fee-

ling and to replace it with positive values. Positive replacements could be creative ideas to plan buildings and marketplaces. With the help of the spaceship God is collecting souls of the dead for the town in heaven and is sending them back to earth to be reborn as better beings.

Grade 3, 8–9 yrs:

Bodo loves to build and play with weapons. He is a skater and fascinated by graffiti sprayers. He is doing Judo. While his present life seems to be without any human relation – his picture of his living world doesn't show any human being – his longing is ruled by the desire of having a family with two children, where the members have time for one another.

His first coloured drawing is showing Jona in the stomach of the fish. The fish has extremely dangerous teeth and is looking full of hate at the world and at Jona, who is crouching inside like a needy wanting baby. The picture images the boy in his loneliness.

Bodo is successful in doing Judo. He is conscious of his inadequate achievements at school and troubled by night mares. He fears that his dreams could come true and he could turn into a killer. He is not convinced that he believes in God. He believes that every human being has an enormous inner power, which he can use (to the better or the worse). God is not a human being but a power, which appears in different configurations. Somehow this power has to do with his life. Bodo is showing that with three blue dots. He is looking forward to the birth of a brother or sister.

There is still polytheism existing. There is a space station with transmitters and receivers high above the clouds. God is directing the humans by giving them advice. It is up to them to make use of it. Praying is a way, by which a religious person can connect with God and ask for help. Bodo is conscious of his aggressive drive to be violent against animals. He could torture them but convinces himself not to turn to cruelty. God is assisting the humans to do the right things. Sometimes Bodo believes in God only a little. But God is attracting non-believers who are in need of religion. He is treating them like a therapist, so that they have a chance to change and give their life to a turn to the better. The same applies for Bodo. Bodo knows black holes of desperation. In such situation he is sometimes praying.

Grade 4, 9–10 yrs:

The trees Bodo is painting are mirroring an aggressive outside of himself and a inner side, which needs protection. His little sister is born and drawn as a huge beautiful coloured butterfly dominating the whole family. Father and stepfather are shown as one figure of a dragon with two heads. Bodo is a mixture of a snake, billy goat, dragon and sheep close to his mother, who is a mixture

between a snake, eagles eye and mushroom. Mother and son are linked through God as nature. God is shown as a red ribbon (sun) in the butterfly baby. In Bodos cave of the heart God is destroying all evil thoughts and deeds of the day. Now Bodo may sleep well.

Bodo created again a space ship out of reusable waste. In the middle there is a huge magnet out of which a red column is rising. Together they are an image of the power of love which attracts and changes man to the better (a silver bar on the column). The column stands for the attracting love of God, which could materialize in his mother, the baby or the girl he loves. Bodo feels that he is part of such a transforming process.

Presented with different images of God Bodo selects a Matrioschka and puts the tiniest doll as image of God in the middle.

Bodo has changed a lot to the better in his behaviour and more often is able to use his potentials.

CONCLUSION

It seems to be popular to complain because of the present lack of Christian socialisation by the family. Is an explicit Christian socialisation (in its plain form how it usually happens in families) more a chance or a risk for religious trajectories? Observing children growing up in an irreligious context over a long time one gets some doubts that every child (growing up in the western – at least previous Christian – context) is entering school with a private God in its mind, as Rizzuto assumed. But the lack of Christian socialisation by the family should not be appraised as pure deficiency but also as a chance for religious education at school to initiate from the beginning transcendent concepts of God which can become unfolded with the cognitive and mental development. The provisional results of the current research seem to demonstrate at least that religious education in an irreligious context has good chances.

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