

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MUSLIM CHILDREN'S CONCEPTS OF GOD

Ahmad Khizar Zuberi
Karachi, Pakistan

The study was aimed at developing a holistic account of Muslim children's concepts of God. The study was carried out on three Muslim children aged 6, 8 and 10 years living in the suburbs of Ontario, Canada. Detailed unstructured interviews with the help of pictures to elicit responses about Divine attributes and card sorting tasks to bring out the similarities and differences among the categories were the main techniques. The analysis of data shows that the concept of God is a non-spontaneous one which children develop from their encounters with adults' use of the term "God" by means of a variety of interpretive strategies including active search for a hypothesis, passive recall of previously understood information or simply parroting what adults say. No evidence was found to support a stage-theory of the acquisition of the concept of God.

Several researchers have tried to uncover the structure of the child's religious thinking by assuming that religious thinking is not different from non-religious thinking. Fowler (1974), Goldman (1962) and Nye, Keys and Carlson (1981) came to the conclusion that the child's concept of God develops in a stagewise sequence, generally, corresponding to Piaget's stages of cognitive development. The researches based on the Piagetian approach are open to criticism on several grounds. First, as normally understood, the concept of God is a non-empirical, that is, an abstract or metaphysical concept. In other words, the concept is not used to pick out concrete or observable persons, objects or events. As such the concept of God cannot arise directly from the child's encounters with the physical world. Accordingly, if the concept of God is to be thought of as arising from the child's experience, rather than as existing prior to it, then a more plausible explanation of the child's acquisition of the concept is provided by the notion that the concept of God is passed on to children by adults, mainly though not exclusively, through the medium of language.

Second, Piaget drew a sharp line between children's ideas of reality developed by their own mental process (spontaneous

concepts) and those that are decisively influenced by adults (acquired concepts). It is a spontaneous concept that serves as an index of cognitive development in Piaget's theory (Piaget, 1929, pp. 22, 28, 32). Because of the importance that Piaget gave to spontaneous concepts in his developmental studies, he felt it was imperative to find a way to distinguish the child's spontaneous concepts from non-spontaneous concepts. Spontaneous concepts were defined as the child's original reflections upon God (if possessed) and are not decisively influenced by adults. Non-spontaneous concepts are those that have been influenced by encounters with adults. Goldman (1962) and Nye et al. (1981) have not conclusively demonstrated that they have been able to elicit spontaneous concepts in children's responses. Further, the technique of standardized interviews does not seem suited to the purpose as it severely restricts exploring the child's notions.

Third, Vygotsky's (1962) findings about word and meaning suggested that the child interprets the meaning of God from adults' speech. Day (1975, p.175) has emphasized the role of children's interaction with a reference group as they try to interpret speech and gestures to decipher the affective and cognitive meaning of God. Researchers following the Piagetian line of investigation appear to have ignored this point, and emphasize the development of the concept of God in a concrete-abstract dimension. They claim that the child conceptualizes God as a concrete person and later considers Him as an abstract spirit. This is assumed to represent the child's cognitive development from the concrete to the formal operational stage. The writer believes that an alternative explanation is possible, if we take into account the child's acquisition of knowledge of God as a non-spontaneous concept.

A young child develops an anthropomorphic concept of God as adults use an anthropomorphic vocabulary to describe God, and generates an abstract meaning of God in adults' thinking at a later stage. This does not necessarily represent a different stage of cognitive development; the process may be more complicated in that two processes may be present here: first, the process of learning the concept of God as a non-spontaneous concept by decoding the meaning of the term "God" from adult vocabulary; and second, the cognitive

development of the child himself which may control abilities for decoding meaning.

Studies of the Child's Concepts of God

Various methods have been used to carry out research on the nature of the child's concept of God: symbolic and pictorial methods, pre-selected categories, quantitative methods and qualitative methods.

Studies Using Symbolic and Pictorial Methods

Several studies have used symbolic and pictorial methods to investigate the child's and adolescent's concept of God. Harms (1944) and Pitts (1976) examined the pictures of God drawn by children.

Both studies suggest stages of development of the concept of God corresponding to the Piagetian stages of cognitive development, even though the pictorial method was used deliberately by Harms to capture the non-intellectual and the non-rational part of the child's thinking (Harms, 1944, p. 116).

In Pitts's investigation, many of the younger children of six years of age and over handed in blank sheets of paper or scribbles, although they drew anthropomorphic pictures of people quite clearly. These children obviously had the artistic ability, but they were somewhat at a loss when asked to represent God (Pitts, 1976, pp. 20-21). On the other hand, in Harms's study (1944) many of the post-adolescents flatly refused to portray God and asked for permission to offer a wider and more adequate expression of their specific religious attitude.

In his pilot study, White (1970, p. 26) asked children to draw a picture of God and then interviewed children individually to discuss their concept of God as revealed in their drawings. He found that the sources of these drawings were invariably religious paintings seen either at home or school. These drawings, therefore, seemed to him to hinder rather than expose the child's own concept of God. Moreover, the meanings of symbols and the sources of drawings remain obscure without a verbal explanation from children. An

individual interview with each child is more likely to uncover the child's concept of God than pictorial methods.

Studies Using Pre-selected Categories

Bose (cited in White; 1970, p.16) was the first to study the child's concept of God using pre-selected categories. Prior to collection of any data, the "real" meaning of God was determined by several theologians and used as a criterion. Bose devised a questionnaire based upon references of God in popular texts. The children were required to define God. Theologians rated the responses against the predetermined criterion. It was found that there is a significant disagreement between the children's and theologians' definitions. The results also indicated 'little progress in children's conceptualization with age. Although some growth in knowledge occurred between the ages of eight and fourteen, no change occurred after that.

This line of investigation with some modifications was followed by MacLean (1930), Mathias (1943), Graebner (1960), Williams (1974) and Ahrendt (1975).

Importantly, these studies were based on standardized test methods where concepts of children were matched against the preselected categories, though researchers, like Mathias and Graebner took some of the children's own ideas into consideration in preparing the test. However, the main emphasis in all these tests was to evaluate children's concepts against theological criteria. In general, children's ideas do not match very well with the pre-selected standards. These studies do not throw much light on the child's concept of God and suggest that the method is very limited.

Studies Using Quantitative Methods

Some studies have used quantitative methods to determine the meaning a child ascribes to the word God. For example, Singer (1959) used the semantic differential technique to measure the meaning of God as well as some other concepts such as father, mother, president, etc. It was found that, regardless of religious background, God appeared to have the same direction and intensity when boys and girls were

compared. The direction and intensity changed with different religious affiliations (Singer, 1959, pp. 115-116).

Patino (1961) attempted to take the child's thinking itself as a starting point by tapping the attitude towards God through application of a Likert Scale (White, 1970, p. 20). Children's descriptions of God were used to construct a questionnaire that was designed to reveal responses on a "good" and "bad" dimension. Patino found there was no relationship between the child's knowledge and attitude towards God. The concept of God was not different for different sexes or different religious denominations.

Deconchy (1965) factor analyzed word associations to study the development of ideas about God in children. The associations of "God" were grouped into nineteen categories and along three dimensions: attributiveness, personalization and interiorizations. In general, the attributive associations (creator, goodness) were more frequent among the eight to ten years old, whereas personalization (master, father, etc.) predominated at ages eleven to fourteen. Among the oldest adolescents studied (fourteen to sixteen years), the most frequent associations were interiorizations (doubt, fear). These findings correspond roughly to the stage-wise developmental sequence of the concept of God in previous studies (Elkind, 1971, p. 673).

Although these studies are valuable for showing correlations of the concept of God with such variables as age, stage of development, sex and socio-economic or religious background, the studies fail to probe for the content of the child's concept. Instead, they provide only superficial information.

Studies Using Qualitative Method

There have been attempts to determine the meaning of God qualitatively. Euverard (1955) investigated the child's concept of God as related to authority figures. She interviewed children individually and encouraged them to talk about God more or less in their own terms—an obvious departure from the earlier techniques that used word-lists (White, 1970, p.19). It was found that when describing God in their own terms, children seldom used theologians' categories.

An important work of this kind is White's (1970) study. Using clinical interviews similar to Piaget's, White allowed children to make fully known what they perceived God to be. From their responses he constructed age-religion cells of the children's statements, identified the basic themes, and articulated the shared and unique aspects of the meanings of God held (White, 1970, pp. 144-145). White concluded that the classification of God concepts can be validly approached by using themes like temporality, corporality, spatiality and activity. In contrast to other studies mentioned earlier, this study did not show a stage-wise developmental sequence.

In these studies, the content of the child's own thought has been taken into consideration but still full justice has not been done to it. The full integrity of the child's concept was not maintained.

A recent study by Heller (1985) is a more detailed study of the child's thought than White's. He also uses a different methodology than that used by White. In trying to delineate the children's own concept of God, Heller avoided the direct mention of the name "God". Instead he asked each subject in his study to explain what it was that the child believed in most. Among others, the children mentioned Jesus, Baba, Ha Shem (Hebrew) and God. In this context, Heller was able to arrive at the child's own concept of God. Uninterrupted interviews were recorded with the aim of establishing what, according to the children, were the most important names and related notions. The techniques used were children's letters to their God, drawings of Him, doll play-acting and children's own original stories related to their own choice of "God". With the aim of establishing the nature and strength of the child's beliefs, Heller analyzed this data from the perspectives of God's physical presence, His mode of living, His sex and His involvement in people's everyday life, pleasures and pains. Heller then went on to note the similarities and differences among the children in the study according to their denomination, age, sex and personality.

Significant as this work is, considering that Heller has tried to take into account the child's own perspective, an aspect which has received little, if any, attention in the past, the study does not do justice to the child's own holistic account of the concept of God. With this in mind, the present study

attempts to redress this lack by pursuing the topic under discussion using a qualitative approach. An approach which, judging from the above overview, would seem more appropriate when dealing with children's concepts of God.

METHOD

Subjects

This study was conducted on three children, aged 6, 8 and 10 years. The subjects selected for the study were from an urban setting in Ontario. Their families, who had agreed to their children's interview, belonged to the Muslim community but were of diverse national origin: Pakistan, Egypt and Bangladesh. The interviewed children were either first generation Canadians or had been living in Canada from a very early age. All the children were fluent in both their native tongue and English.

Instrument and Procedure

Usually the interviews (conducted in English) were divided into two parts. In the first part the interviewer dedicated his time to establishing a rapport with the children. When the investigator felt that the child was sufficiently relaxed, the discussion was directed to the concepts of God. The second part of the interview was tape-recorded with the child's approval. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysis.

The Interview Protocol

The attributes which served as a frame of reference between the interviewer and the child during their discussions were selected from Graebner's (1960, p.19) list of Divine attributes. These were: creator, eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, just and real[#].

As the major objective during the interviews was to elicit the children's own ideas, the discussions were not confined to

[#] The attribute "real" was not in Graebner's list and was added by the researcher.

the above given attributes. Rather, these attributes were used merely to start the discussions. The children were then allowed to bring into the discussion any point they felt relevant. No restrictions were put on the children and they were encouraged to speak their mind.

In order to facilitate discussion during the interviews, a combination of three techniques was used. The first was the use of Graebner's (1960) list and drawings. In addition to his list of Divine attributes, Graebner also prepared a set of drawings portraying everyday situations. Combined with questions for discussing a selected Divine attribute, some of these drawings were used for the present interviews. The drawings of a dinosaur and of Santa Claus were added by the researcher[#].

The second technique was the posing of structural and contrast questions (Spradley, 1979). For example, when a child said "God is a spirit," he or she was asked to explain what was common between "God" and "spirit"—a structural question designed to elicit similarities between the two categories; and also to explain the differences between the two—a contrast question aimed at eliciting dissimilarities.

Card sorting was the third technique used during the interviews. Such words as God, man, spirit, soul, witch, ghost, Adam and angel, among others, were written on the cards. The cards were randomized and the child was asked to sort those which belonged together or to choose those cards which represented some special attribute of a given category. For example, a child would be asked to sort out living from non-living or real from non-real (imaginary) names and put them in different piles. Each child was given a more or less different set of cards.

In order to clarify some of the child's explanations, the researcher sometimes paraphrased the child's response or asked the subject to elaborate further. At other times,

[#] The dinosaur drawing was used to discuss "evolution" versus "divine creation" while the Santa Claus picture was used to discuss the concepts of "myth" and/or "reality".

suggestions and counter suggestions were made to test the strength of the child's convictions.

Questions were neither standardized nor were they asked in a fixed sequence. Instead they were deliberately mixed to maintain rapport with the child and to avoid an atmosphere of interrogation. For this reason as well the interviews were very loosely structured and spontaneity in framing responses to the child's discussion was preferred when encouraging the child to explain his or her ideas. Hence, although three techniques were employed for the collection of data, there were significant differences in details.

Analysis of Data

Several options were considered for analyzing data. One option was to present each child's concept of God according to pre-formed categories. Another option was to use child's own categories. Unfortunately each option has some shortcomings.

However, some categorization, though inadequate, is necessary to analyze and organize the data. Since it was obvious that no single method would achieve all the objectives deemed necessary for this study, it was decided to use two methods which may complement each other. The first method employed was to analyze each interview so as to be able to classify the data for each child. This resulted in a mixed set of categories, one representing the adult's categories, which had been used as a frame of reference, and another representing those categories which the child introduced during the interview. This was seen to serve only a limited purpose and did not represent the child's holistic view of God. To overcome this obstacle, it was decided to convert the interview records into monologues[#]. This second method, while preserving the integrity of the child's concepts and her ideas with all their confusion and contradictions, did away with the confusion present in the other method.

[#] Sometimes, minor phrases like "well", "alright", etc., were added; this was done without the use of brackets. For other connecting phrases brackets have been used.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of three children namely Bano (6 years old) Bibi (8 years) and Surya (10 years) is given below. This analysis forms the basis of discussion which follows after analysis.

Bano's underlying assumption is that God is a man. She explains that she calls God "He" as if He were a boy. After some hesitation she goes on to describe various parts of His body, including His neck, chest, knees, etc. She believes that God makes things (like clouds) out of raw material, by using His hands and talks to people (in their minds) by using His mouth. Furthermore, she argues that He can eat and does not need to sleep as He is powerful enough to keep Himself awake. He also has pockets out of which He takes out a pine tree, the moon and various other things which He has put here and there. According to her, God lives in the air or the sky and angels sit on His lap.

Bibi, on the other hand, openly states that she is not sure whether God is a person. She explains God's omnipresence and omniscience from the point of view of His not being an ordinary person. According to her, God is great and so He could do extraordinary things. Just as Bibi is not sure whether or not God is a person, in the same manner she is not sure if God has feet for locomotion or lungs for breathing.

Surya is not as hesitant as Bibi. On the contrary, she is positive that God is not a person. She agrees that some people think of God as a person but argues that they are wrong as, in fact, she has learnt during her Sunday school classes that God is not a person. She openly denies that God has a body, yet concedes that He may have eyes as He is able to see everything. Both Bibi and Surya distinguish God from man by referring to God's qualities of omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence.

Bano repeatedly calls God a spirit, a term which she seems to use as an umbrella for all God's attributes. For instance, she justifies her explanation that God is alive on the grounds that He is a big spirit, but seems very puzzled and

confused when asked to define her use of the term "spirit." The problem seems to lie specifically with the meaning of this term, for even when not referring to God, her confusion is still apparent and the closest definition she forwards is that "spirit" is something like a ghost.

Bibi does not consider God to be a spirit. Though hesitant about God as a person, she is positive that God is not a spirit as she identifies the word spirit with a dead man's soul. From this position she goes on to argue that since God is not dead, therefore, He cannot be a spirit. At the same time she also doubts whether a spirit actually exists. Surya concurs with this view, stating that God is not a spirit, or at least not exactly a spirit. She explains the difference between God and a spirit by stating that God is more powerful, more loving and more important than a spirit. She adds that God is the one who created us. Surya is inclined to consider "spirit" to be the existing part of a dead man but doubts that a spirit really exists.

Bano repeatedly refers to the fact that God cannot be seen. She explains God's invisibility by comparing Him to a spirit, an angel or a cloud but fails to explain why He is invisible. Bibi also believes that God is invisible and uses God's invisibility as a reason for the fact that His age cannot be estimated. Furthermore, she maintains that nobody is supposed to see God until the Day of Judgement. When asked Why God could not be seen here and now she could not answer, maintaining that she believes in what she was saying because she learnt it at the Arabic school. Even though it cannot be seen, Bibi implies that God does have shape. Surya maintains that nobody has seen God, but that Adam and Eve may have, since they were the first persons on earth, implying that although God is invisible, He might have shape.

Bano describes God's omnipresence in quite some detail, referring to Him as being all over the world, in the moon, sky, inside one's body and even in the brain. Although she does not adhere to such notions, she does explain God's ability to be omnipresent because of His huge size and/or His speed. Bibi maintains that God is present everywhere in the world but she has reservations about His presence in the moon, arguing that this has still to be explored. Bibi explains God's omnipresence in terms of His ability to go everywhere since He is not a

"normal" person. According to her, God can do extraordinary things and explains that while angels and humans can go everywhere because there are so many of them, God is everywhere despite the fact that there is only one of Him. Surya also refers to God's omnipresence in these terms, explaining that God is everywhere because He is not a person, and that He can do anything since He is God. Although she does not rule out the possibility that God is omnipresent because of His huge size, she seems to favour the view that God is present everywhere in the sense that He sees everyone wherever they are, and He loves and cares for everyone.

Bano repeatedly refers to God's omnipotence. Sometimes she does this by comparison: God is bigger, wider and stronger than an angel. At other times she does so by illustration: He can stop a car which is just about to run over a boy simply by using His finger; if a robber comes in, God will just "pow" and the robber is dead. Bano does not restrict God's powers merely to His physical attributes. She also describes God's exercising His powers in this world by "talking" to people in their mind so as to indirectly guide and control, for example, her father or a judge, and thus telling them what to do in a particular situation. When asked whether God had more power than a man with an atom bomb, Bano gives a very long answer but her meaning is not at all clear. She seems to get very confused through her description of both God and an atom bomb.

Bibi's expression of her faith in God's omnipotence seems to be based on her explanation that God is not an ordinary person and He can do anything. Though she defended God's omnipotence, she became rather puzzled when asked about God's ability to help in situations portrayed in the pictures presented to her. In fact, she opted not to answer any such questions saying, "I cannot answer it. Forget it".

Like Bibi, Surya also expressed her faith in God's omnipotence explaining that God could do anything because "He is so powerful". Her attention was drawn to the fact that even though God is so powerful, evil still exists. When asked how it was possible that the all-powerful God does not control misfortune, misery, disease, death and wars in the world, Surya acknowledged the problem but could not answer the question. Instead, she suggested that the question be put to her later, or that she may be asked another question that may help

her figure out an answer. Regarding God's age, Bano describes it in the highest figure she knew or could invent: God is old, but He does not grow any older, He was never as young as a baby. Although she admits that she does not know how God started, she states that He started a long time ago, even before McDonald's was built, and hence He could not visit there. Furthermore, she is positive that God will not die.

Bibi refused to estimate, or even to venture a guess regarding God's age saying that she did not even know what He looked like. According to her, probably no one knows His age or even whether He was a person. Surya also expressed her inability to estimate God's age, reasoning that nobody has seen Him. However, she believes that He is very, very old since He was the one who created the earth a million years ago. At one and the same time she states that God does not grow old and always stays the same. She expresses her total ignorance of how God originated, further stating that she is unable to decide even whether God is alive since no one has ever seen Him and hence no one knows. However, she seemed inclined to believe that God, soul and angel cannot be properly classified under the extreme categories of either alive or not alive. She hints at this situation in connection with the devil, saying that those who are either in heaven or in hell are in a state which is different from either being alive or not being alive. She argues that there ought to be a world other than "dead" or "alive" that expresses this state. As Surya identifies life or being alive with feeling or having feelings, she argues that since God loves everybody, He must have some feelings—and since He has feelings He must be a "bit" alive. It would seem as if both Surya and Bibi used their own (original?) logical reasoning in trying to answer the question of whether God was alive or not.

Several times Bano advanced detailed ideas about creation. It is clear from her account that God creates everything in the same manner as a craftsman manufactures artifacts. For example, she explains that God makes clouds out of cotton, rock and cloth, and that He created man out of mud of matching colours. Although Bibi had no explanation to offer about the origin of the dinosaurs, she does argue that their extinction was due to the cold temperatures. Although she agrees with Bano that man is made out of clay, she states that this does not happen here in this world but somewhere

else. She admits to the paradox that though man is made of clay there is no such substance in his body but refuses to negate her belief on the grounds that this is what she learnt at the Arabic school. Furthermore, though she has knowledge of Darwin's theory of organic evolution, she is not inclined to believe that man actually evolved from the apes on the basis that "We are not as bad as the apes".

Surya also forwards some explanations about the act of creation, suggesting that the earth was formed from gases and colours. She does not, however, offer any details about this formation, stating that nobody could because no one observed it. She seems to have some problems regarding the origin of man. According to her, Adam and Eve were created immediately after the formation of earth, thus contradicting both the view that dinosaurs existed prior to man's existence and also that man evolved from apes. She does not seem to be able to reconcile the religious and scientific arguments, stating explicitly that she would like to believe in both religion and science. She does, however, advance the notion that she would want scientists to conduct the necessary research in order to reconcile the two.

According to Bano, God exercises His powers and establishes justice in this world by using man as His intermediary. By talking to man in his mind, God directs His intermediary to act in a particular way in a given situation. The problems of misery and death in this world do not seem to bother Bano. Her major emphasis is, in fact, on the hereafter. She believes that if God makes a good man suffer and even die, it is because God wants to reward Him by turning him into an angel, while when a bad man suffers and dies it is because God wants to punish him by turning him into a devil.

Although Bibi is not sure whether or not God can carry out His justice on earth, even though she thinks He would like to, she is positive that God will dispense full justice to all on the Day of Judgement using a point merit system. While Surya agrees with Bibi's idea about God's justice in the hereafter, she argues that it is up to God to decide whether or not to dispense His justice right here and now. Though she is inclined to believe that God may punish a man in this world through the use of accidents, Surya finds it hard to distinguish between Divine punishment and a natural accident.

During the interviews, all the subjects were asked if they thought Santa Claus was real. Subsequently they were asked if God was real. At first Bano immediately said that Santa Claus was not real, but having second thoughts, she advanced the notion that may be he was. Although she said that God was definitely real, Bano did express contradictory opinions at certain junctures along the interview: there is no such thing as God; God used to live but He does not live now. Bibi, on the other hand, is positive that Santa Claus is not real and that God is. Surya considers Santa Claus to be a legend based on a good, kind man named Nicholas, and strongly defends God's reality on the basis that He is the creator of both the world and man. She argues that non-believers (in God's existence) should beware. Perhaps she is referring to their being punished on the Day of Judgement.

It is worth noting that the subjects participating in this study seem to be very uncertain about the attributes and existence of those things which are beyond their sense experience such as, soul, spirit, angel, witch, etc. What seems to happen is that these attributes change whenever children are questioned about them. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the card sorting tasks administered to the children. It comes as no surprise, therefore, when Bano makes confusing and sometimes contradictory remarks about God.

DISCUSSION

In order to interpret the child's concept of God, one must necessarily evaluate the nature of the data and determine whether Piaget's distinction between the child's spontaneous or non-spontaneous concepts or convictions can be sustained. Piaget (1929) has made a clear distinction between the child's original thoughts which are influenced, but not dictated by adults, and those concepts which are simply "swallowed whole." In other words, those concepts which are not reflected upon by the child and which are "absorbed" through the family or the school or adults' conversations overheard by the child (Piaget, 1929, p.28). According to Piaget's theory, there is a stage-wise sequential development in the former but not in the latter (Piaget, 1929, pp. 22, 28, 32).

Piaget confined his researches to spontaneous concepts. Vygotsky (1962) extended the study to non-spontaneous concepts. He noted that, although spontaneous and non-spontaneous concepts are related and constantly influence each other, they have different developmental paths. According to Vygotsky, the development of spontaneous concepts proceeds upwards while non-spontaneous concepts proceed downwards, that is, as regards spontaneous concepts, a child becomes conscious of them relatively late: the ability to define them in words, and to operate them at will, appears long after the spontaneous concept is acquired. On the other hand, the development of the non-spontaneous concept (Vygotsky refers to this as scientific concept) begins with its verbal definition and its use in non-spontaneous operations (Vygotsky, 1962, pp. 85-86, 108).

As far as the concept of God is concerned, it appears that a child does not generate this concept spontaneously from direct sense experience. It emerges as a result of verbal and non-verbal communication with adults. The child may not necessarily learn the verbal definition, yet may pick up the word "God" and its meaning from adults' vocabulary. Further, it may be noted that the meaning of any word such as "God" is not fixed forever. As Vygotsky points out, words are dynamic rather than static formulations (Vygotsky, 1962, p.124). The meaning of the word "God" which a child may learn from adults may change as the child grows. The sense of the meaning of the word may also change as the child uses the same word "God" in different contexts. These facts should be taken into account when interpreting the child's concept of God.

In this connection, it may also be noted that as children attain a concept of God in the adult's sense of the word, their thinking undergoes various phases of growth. For example, thinking in complexes, pre-concepts, potential concepts and then finally it may reach the point when it may be called a true concept (Vygotsky, 1962). However, the phases of growth may affect both the child's spontaneous as well as non-spontaneous concepts. But, as regards the non-spontaneous concept of God, there are numerous external factors such as the adult's vocabulary, that also shape its development. For instance, from the child's perspective, the cognitive and affective meaning of the parents' use or explanation of the term "God" is

incoherent, inconsistent and contradictory. For example, adults try to explain the abstract concept of God using metaphorical language in order to bring the meaning down to a level that the child can understand. However, as God is a unique concept, all such metaphors are not only inadequate but quite often misleading, especially to a child who has not as yet attained an abstract concept of God. This holds true even if adults were to be consistent and coherent. Unfortunately, adults in general are neither consistent nor coherent, especially between cognitive and affective meanings, thus giving the child two different, sometimes contrasting, messages. Furthermore, a child is often exposed to a variety of other sources of information which may also be inconsistent, making the meaning of God still more puzzling and even contradictory. In fact, children are actually bombarded with a lot of information about God from both formal and informal sources. A good part of this information includes much not intended for their ears, but ends up reaching them anyway. All this adds to the child's confusion. In addition to all these factors, it may be emphasized that in describing God, an adult's everyday vocabulary is loaded with misleading, anthropomorphic terms. A child has, therefore, no alternative but to process this bewildering array of information about God to generate an idiosyncratic meaning of god. A child's concept of God may, therefore, depend on the information being considered at a particular time and hence the child may seem to display different concepts in different situations. Further, the later concept may emerge from prior mastery of previous information.

It is important to note that the data for the present study of the child's concept of God were collected without making a distinction between spontaneous and non-spontaneous concepts. The analysis of the data, however, seems to show that these data represent mainly the child's non-spontaneous concepts. There appear to be some glimpses of the child's original reflections, even though such reflections are very limited. Further, these reflections are on adults' statements. They lack the generality and universality of Piaget's spontaneous and liberated concepts. Such reflection may, therefore, be called secondary spontaneous concepts. To illustrate both types of concepts (i.e., secondary spontaneous and non-spontaneous one), some examples from the present study of the child's concepts of God are discussed below.

Bano makes confusing and apparently contradictory statements about God. For example, at one point she qualifies the term spirit with "big" when referring to God; at another she states that God is real, but later says that God used to live and He does not live now. At yet another point she also stated that there was no such thing as God. This confusion suggests that she is repeating explicit information which she has heard, and understood or misunderstood, without any organization and reflection. However, some questions seem to make her reflect. For example, when asked to explain God's omnipresence, she tried to explain that either God could be so big as to be everywhere or that He could go everywhere in one second. Bibi's responses show a decisive adults' influence. For example, she believes that God made man out of clay, but admits that she cannot explain it. She also wonders if God has lungs to breathe and to be alive. This reasoning about God seems to be her own original thinking. Surya's responses clearly reflect her religious education. She has learnt at Sunday school that God is not a person. She, of course, uses her intelligence to respond to questions. Asked to explain God's omnipresence, she shows some tendency (though not well developed), to adopt the view that God is present everywhere in the sense that He knows and cares for everyone everywhere.

In the present study, most of the children's original thinking seems to be related to one topic—whether or not God is alive. According to Bano's thinking, to be "alive" means to be able to eat, sleep, walk, ride, and drive. She finds it difficult to explain that God is alive, though she maintains that God can eat. She evades the question of whether God is alive, finding recourse in such statements as God is alive, because He is a big spirit. However, questions like "What is a spirit?" and "Is a spirit alive?" are subjects of still more bewilderment to her. Bibi is not sure if God is alive, because she is not sure whether God has lungs or not. She is inclined to believe that God could be alive in different sense, but cannot explain that sense clearly. She is sure, however, that God will never die. Surya finds it hard to classify God, devil, angel and spirit as living or non-living. She feels that there ought to be another term to describe the condition of those who are in heaven or in hell.

In general, the children's concepts of God as revealed in this study appear to be decisively influenced by adults, hence they are "non-spontaneous." The examples of the child's

original reflections, which we have termed secondary spontaneous concepts, are very limited. Both these concepts as we have defined them are basically different from Piaget's spontaneous and liberated concepts which represent the child's original reflections; that is, those which are not decisively influenced by adults.

In this study Bano (6 years) have a more anthropomorphic concept of God. Bibi (8 years) seems to be in a transitional phase while Surya (10 years) appears to think on a more abstract level in that she does not think of God as man. This sequence, though apparently in keeping with the Piagetian theory of stage-wise cognitive development may, in fact, be a result of different mental processes.

It appears that the young children develop an anthropomorphic concept of God. They tend to think of God as a person, commonly as a man. However, it may be the external sources, such as an adult's vocabulary, that direct their thinking on these lines. It should also be pointed out that a young child may conceive of God as a man, and yet be puzzled or perplexed by what this commits him to. It may tax credulity to accept God as an invisible man, without a body, who knows everything and can do everything. It does not seem to be his natural thinking—his spontaneous concept. He seems to resist it. Furthermore, though older children, like Surya, may not conceive of God as a concrete, physical entity (i.e., as a man), this may not necessarily represent a stage-wise sequence of cognitive development. Formal education seems to have played an important part in the development of Surya's abstract concept of God. It is possible that, on account of various external factors such as vocabulary, a child may conceive of God first as being a concrete man and then as an abstract spirit. The present data suggest that the mental processes and developmental paths of spontaneous and non-spontaneous concepts (as defined above) are different. The parallelism between the two may be only superficial. Furthermore, the review of the data shows that children use several cognitive strategies to develop their concept of God and explain His attributes. The first strategy is an active search for a hypothesis as in the instance when Bano tries to explain God's omnipresence on the basis of His size or His speed. The second is that children passively recollect information in order to make a point. The third strategy is when children

appeal to adult's authority to substantiate a point of view. For example, Bibi argues that man is made out of clay because that is what adults told her; Surya argues that God is not a man on the basis of what she learnt at school. Although these strategies are not used in any systematic, organized way, they often lead to inconsistencies and sometimes even contradictions in children's explanations.

Quite clearly our understanding of how children acquire the concept of God can play a useful role in the development of the curriculum in schools. If the concept is understood to arise from the child's regular intellectual development, possibly according to a stage theory such as that of Piaget, then the religious curriculum might be guided in one direction. Yet, if a developmental theory is not viable, as it is argued in this study, then a different view of how the concept is acquired might steer the religious curriculum in another direction.

Though representing only a few examples of children's thinking about God, the present study has some important implications for religious education. The developmental path of the child's concept of God needs to be investigated with reference to the child's culture and cultural background. It seems that children pick up the word "God" from the adults' vocabulary at an early age, yet do not pick up the adults' meaning at the same time. They seem to proceed to generate this meaning by means of trial and error. As Pring (1976, p.14) noted, the child's faltering attempts to understand and convey meaning might be linked to slow testing hypothesis: frequent failure requiring frequent readjustment and reformulation. A curriculum which is designed to teach God to children ought to be clear about what children are to understand of God. Furthermore, the curriculum would need to articulate the instructional strategies for leading children to accomplish this objective.

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