

THE CHILD'S SPONTANEOUS AND NON-SPONTANEOUS CONCEPTS OF GOD AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION[#]

Ahmad Khizar Zuberi
Karachi, Pakistan

Piaget has distinguished between two types of children's tendency of concept formation: Spontaneous and non-spontaneous. Spontaneous concepts formation represents a child's original reflections, which are decisively not influenced by adults. Non-spontaneous concepts are internalized from family, school, and conversation, which a child attends to. Piaget has discussed a child's spontaneous concepts of animism and artificialism, which may lead him to believe that everything has been created for a purpose and is governed by moral laws. The writer suggests that such notions represent a child's spontaneous concepts of God. At another point, Piaget mentions that a child considers God to be a man who lives in clouds or sky, and is not different from other men. The writer proposes that a child learns this non-spontaneous concept through verbal and non-verbal communication with the adults. Both of these concepts are important for designing curriculum and developing instructional strategies for religious education in schools. At the end, the author has also discussed some recommendations for future research work.

Piaget in his book on a child's concept of world, has also briefly referred to a child's concept of God (1929). This description of God is incidental. He mentioned God at two points. Once discussing the young (4-5 years) child's natural and spontaneous tendencies, he mentioned (by implication) that there are some concepts which resemble concepts of God, yet they are independent of religious instructions and they are decisively not influenced by adults. He cited several reasons to prove that they are based on the child's original reflections on nature i.e., they are spontaneous concepts. At another point, he has discussed examples of some older children (7-8 years) who regard God as an ordinary person but with only one difference, he lives in the clouds or the sky. Piaget, however, was not particularly interested in such concepts. As mentioned earlier, his description of

[#] Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ahmad Khizar Zuberi, B 73/1, Block -4A, Sahafi Colony Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Karachi 75300, Pakistan.

God is just incidental, and although discussed at two points in his book, apparently Piaget did not grasp the full significance of his observations.

The writer believes that Piaget's first description on the child's spontaneous concept formation of God, is important in its own right and deserves careful study. The second concept which shows that a child regards God as if he is a man, is the non-spontaneous concept. The writer believes that a child acquires from adults the non-spontaneous concepts; while interacting with him, the child picks up the word "God" from the adult's vocabulary at an early age, but generates abstract or metaphysical meaning of God in the adult's sense of the word at a later time by trial and error (say at 12-13 years of age). Although Piaget has confined his work on a child's tendency to develop spontaneous concepts, both concepts of God are very important and have useful implications for religious education. Following paragraphs present some reflections on these two concepts of God.

Spontaneous Concept

Piaget (1929) has defined spontaneous concept as the concept representing a child's own original reflections. As mentioned before they are decisively not influenced by adults. Piaget further believes that there are two types of spontaneous concepts namely "animism" and "artificialism". Piaget claims that such tendencies are natural, universal, and independent of cultural background, home environment, and instructions, including religious instructions. These two spontaneous concepts are very important for the present research paper.

Animism is the tendency on the part of the young child to regard objects as living and conscious and endowed with a will to follow moral principles (Piaget, 1929). Artificialism, on the other hand, is the tendency on the part of the child to conceive of all objects as 'artifacts', as such being 'made' for a purpose. The purpose for which things are made may be physical as well as logico-moral. Piaget believes that a child's 'why' appearance (3-5 years of age) coincides exactly with the need to seek purpose in everything. According to Piaget, a child believes that nature is changed for a purpose, as if chance and mechanical necessity do not exist, as if each being tended by reason of internal and vocational necessity, function to a fixed goal. For example, a child has real interest in the sun, moon, and stars. According to Piaget (1929), a child's questions point to the

nature of the solution, which he is inclined to favour. It is only necessary to glance through a list of questions put by children of 3-4 years of age to find examples like this: One child (2 years 5 months) asks, 'Who has made the sun?' Another (3½ years) asks, 'What makes the sun shine?' Still another child (5 years) asks, 'Why is there a moon?' At 5 years of age, another child asks, 'Who is it who makes the stars twinkle?' The very form of these questions, according to Piaget, is 'artificialist'. It implies the conviction that these objects have been made by a maker and have a purpose. There is another tendency, which is important in this connection. According to Piaget (1929), the child up to 7-8 years has a spontaneous notion of law, which is simultaneously moral and physical. There does not exist for the child a single purely mechanical law of nature. Piaget eloquently explains the child's point of view as follows:

"The child believes that a cloud moves swiftly when the wind is blowing this is not because of a necessary connection between the movement of wind and that of the cloud, it is also because the cloud must hurry to bring rain or night, etc. If the moon shines only at night and sun only by day, it is subject like all living bodies to rules bending upon their will. If boats remain afloat on water, while a stone sinks to the bottom, this does not happen merely for relating to their weight, it is because things have to be so by in nature's order. In short, the child's universe is governed with moral laws: Physical regulatory is not dissociated from moral obligations and social rules. The child believes that intentions do not matter, just as if we trip independently of any carelessness, we fall on the ground by virtue of gravity; tampering with truth even unwillingly will be called lie and will bring punishment, and if the fault remains unnoticed, things themselves will take charge of punishing us."

From the above account, we may draw three conclusions. First, the young child believes that everything has been made, second they have a purpose, and third, they are governed by moral laws. Another words, a child believes that there is a maker who has made everything for purpose, and not in vain and he exercises moral authority. Here the resemblance to the religious teaching about God is obvious. However, Piaget does not believe that a child's spontaneous tendencies as mentioned above have anything to do with religion and they are not at all related to religious instructions. He is strongly against any such view. He gives three arguments to support his point of view. First, he claims that majority of children only bring in God

against their will and not until they can find something else to bring forward. According to him, religious instructions imparted to children between ages of 4 and 7 years of age, appear something foreign to the child's natural thoughts, and lack both subtlety and intricacies of concepts that make no appeal to the Divine activity. Second, he argues that even if we admit that a child's "artificialism" is an extension of theological "artificialism" imposed by education, it remains to be explained why if a child explains everything according to religion, his concepts of religion remain so vague and still more, why this explanation obeys laws instead of differing from child to child. He claims that a child's 'real religion' at any rate during first years is definitely anything but over-elaborate religion with which he is piled up. In order to emphasize its importance, it may be summarized that "animism" and "artificialism" are the young child's own original reflections which are not influenced by the adult. Every child has such tendencies and as a result of this a child believes (as mentioned before) that everything has been created, is governed by moral laws, and serves a purpose. Contrary to Piaget, the writer believes that such assertions imply that a child has natural faith in God. It may be added that as a child grows and matures he forgets his natural beliefs.

It may be pointed out that James (1892) published an autobiography of a deaf-mute, D'Estrella, who described in detail his curious ideas about cosmology. Moreover, he described that during his childhood he also developed a primitive concept of God through his own reflections. Piaget (1929) used D'Estrella's cosmology to support his thesis regarding the child's animism, artificialism, and notions about meteorology, which he considered to be a child's spontaneous concepts as opposed to the child's knowledge of the world acquired from adults. Bovet (1928) used D'Estrella's reconstruction of the concept of God to support his thesis on the development of a child's natural religious sentiments as opposed to the knowledge of formal religion that he learns from adults. Elkind (1976) pointed out a child's cognitive need for God which satisfies the universal quest for the permanence of life in an otherwise transient world. Earlier on, Elkind (1964) had suggested using Piaget's method of clinical interview for the study of spontaneous religion as opposed to acquired formal religion. Kousoulas (1973) compared the development of a non-scientific concept of God and a scientific concept of rain, and concluded that there is a parallelism in the development of the two concepts. That is, as the child's scientific concept of the source of rain becomes more related to natural

phenomena, his non-scientific concept of God also becomes more abstract (Zuberi, 1986).

Here, it may be pointed out that Vygotsky (1962) studied development of both spontaneous and non-spontaneous concepts (he calls non-spontaneous concepts as scientific concepts). According to him, development of spontaneous concepts proceed upwards. That is, as regards spontaneous concepts, a child becomes conscious of these relatively late: The ability to define in words appears long after the spontaneous concepts are acquired. From this account, it may be concluded that the child's spontaneous concepts of "animism" and "artificialism" and along with it concepts of a Creator (God), represent the stage when a child has the concept (we may call it potential or preconcept) which he has generated yet he himself is not fully aware of it, he has no word for it, he cannot express it. This is not unique, it is the way normal spontaneous concepts develop.

Non-Spontaneous Concept

As explained before, Piaget (1929) has also discussed a different type of concept of God at another point in his book. According to him, an older child considers God as a man who lives in the clouds or in the sky, but with this exception he is not different from other men. 'He also works for his master', 'A man who works for wages', these are the types of definitions that Piaget noticed among the working class children of 7 or 8 years of age. Although Piaget did not label it, the writer suggests that such remarks represent non-spontaneous concepts of God. Vygotsky (1962) noted that in contrast to spontaneous concepts, non-spontaneous concepts/scientific concepts proceed downwards i.e., the meaning of words are not fixed, the meanings change as the child grows. From this account, it may be concluded that non-spontaneous concepts mean to child that 'God' is a man. It may be added that he later learns the metaphysical meaning of God. There is another study which may throw some light on the point.

In 1968, the present author tried to study a child's spontaneous concepts of God in a pilot project. First, attempt was made to elicit the child's spontaneous responses for meteorological elements such as rain and clouds. Ten children of various age groups were interviewed for this purpose. There was no difficulty in eliciting spontaneous responses on the subject of clouds and rain. However, when an attempt was made to elicit spontaneous responses about God, it was unsuccessful. All responses seemed to be decisively influenced by

adults. In fact, such responses did not meet Piagetian criteria for spontaneous concepts (1929). At this point, it was decided to study concepts of God without making a distinction between spontaneous and non-spontaneous concepts. This led to the Zuberi's thesis on a child's concepts of God (1986). The analysis of the child's responses in this thesis show that a child's concept of God is decisively influenced by adults, so it is non-spontaneous. From this study, the writer concluded that as far as the child's concept of God is concerned, it seems that this concept emerged with verbal and non-verbal communication with adults. A child may not learn verbal definitions, yet may pick-up word 'God' from adults' vocabulary. In describing God, adults' everyday vocabulary is loaded with anthropomorphic terms which suggests to a child that God is a man. It may be noted that a child seems to pick the word 'God' from adults' vocabulary at an early age, yet he/she does not pick up the adults' meaning in abstract or metaphysical sense at the same time. They seem to proceed to learn the meaning by the process of trial and error. As Pring (1976) noted, a child's faltering attempts to understand and convey meaning may be linked to slow testing hypothesis: Frequent failures requiring readjustments and reformulations. The writer failed to obtain spontaneous concept of God from the interviews mentioned above because spontaneous concept of God is not associated with the term God or any other term. This concept is implied in the child's thinking, but it is beyond his awareness. This concept is associated with his notions of "animism" and "artificialism" (as has been mentioned) and so it may be studied by eliciting a child's responses regarding them.

From the above account, we may draw two conclusions: First, young child has a spontaneous concept of God and as he grows and matures he forgets all his spontaneous concepts of God. The older child has a non-spontaneous concept of God and he/she learns the term God from the interpersonal communication of adults and retain the use of the term "God" for a long time, but the meanings of God change during childhood; he considers God to be a man and attains mature meaning of God in metaphysical sense at a later time.

However, in another study it was found that the original thinking of a Pakistani Muslim adolescent's concepts of God was related to only one point (Zuberi, 1988), whether or not God is alive. Pakistani adolescents are of a view that God can not eat, drink, and sleep, hence, He can not be alive. But they argue that God also creates and commands, so as such He must be alive. In Pakistani adolescents' opinion there ought to be another term to express this state. Some

children's and adolescents' original thinking seems to reflect on the adult's statements of Divine attributes. Such concepts may be called secondary spontaneous concepts. These may vary among different individuals, and cultures and are not universal. Unfortunately such concepts have not been fully explored.

Religious Education

It is now clear, as discussed above, that a young child seems to spontaneously believe that everything has been created for a purpose and follows moral laws. This tendency matches the teaching of the Holy *Quran*. A few verses from the *Quran* as translated by Ali, (1985) noted as follows to explain this point:

(He is) the One who has made the earth as carpet for you and has the sky built above you, and sent water pour down from the sky above you and brought forth fruit by means of it as sustenance for you.

(*Quran*, II, 22)

Somewhere else, *Quran* says,

In the creation of Heavens and Earth, the alternation between night and day, the ships which plow the sea with something to benefit mankind, and any water God sends down from the sky with which to revive the earth following its death, and to scatter every kind of animal throughout it, and directing the winds and clouds which are driven along between the sky and earth, are (all) signs for folks who use their reason.

(II, 164)

At another point, *Quran* says,

Have they not watched the birds flapping (their wings) in rows above them? What holds them except the Mercy giving?

(LXVII, 19)

These examples cover three basic points which we have discussed repeatedly i.e., everything has been made (created) by a maker (Creator) i.e., God, has a purpose, and follows moral laws. A young child, therefore, has notions for such profound matters. In view of this, advantage should be taken of this situation for the young child's religious education, and care should be taken that religious instructions should match a child's own spontaneous concepts.

Here, it may be pointed out, that as far as a preschooler is concerned, he has a short attention span, and he does not need a long lesson. He may be asked rhetorically, “Who has made the sun?” or “Who holds the bird up above in the sky?” or “Who has made the earth as a carpet and the sky as a roof over the head?” and let him wonder. The child’s spontaneous concepts may not be one or none affair. The concept may grow gradually in width, depth, and clarity like all spontaneous concepts e.g., self, object, time, space, and number. Thought precedes language as regards spontaneous concepts, acquisition of language is secondary matter. The parents may help a child to associate the spontaneous concepts of God with the Islamic concepts – the Maker, the Shaper, the Designer, and the Master of the child himself and the universe (see also, Zuberi, 1997). When a child’s natural tendencies of “animism” and “artificialism” have been analyzed, it may be used for the teaching of the natural religion, natural science, fine arts, enjoying literature, making film strip, etc. One may use one’s imagination, in how many ways the Divine message may be delivered to the child’s own God, to the child’s own spontaneous concept of God. The Divine message may be delivered like this?

It can not be over emphasized that the above suggestion is based on intelligent guess. It may be verified under concrete experimental conditions (for their short term and long term results) to develop curriculum and instructions for the child.

Now we may consider the second aspect i.e., how a child’s non-spontaneous or acquired concepts may be used for religious education. It should be kept in view that these are the concepts which a child learns from the family, community, and school. A curriculum is primarily based on such concepts. Such concepts are deliberately taught. Their importance is, therefore, obvious. Here it may briefly be mentioned that to teach the child about God, first it may be decided that what is the aim i.e., what the child should be able to understand of God? What are the attributes of God, mentioned in the Holy *Quran*, which the child should learn and understand? Second, what the child himself understands of God i.e., what is his concept of God from his own perspective. Third, to develop instructional strategies to lead a child from the base i.e., what a child considers of God to the target i.e., what the child ought to consider of God. It is obvious that such curriculum design and instructional strategies should match the child’s capabilities. In view of academic importance as well as its applications for religious education, we may make some recommendations for further research. Now we may turn to that.

Recommendations for Further Research

It is necessary to conduct further research on spontaneous as well as non-spontaneous (or acquired) concepts of God for teaching. We have noted the questions that child asks about nature (like the sun and moon, etc.), which have genuine spontaneity and that they may deeply be related to the Quranic teachings. So a study may be designed to investigate what the questions are that a child asks from his parents and teachers, etc. This information may be collected from them, the questions may be categorized to discover general trend of a child's thinking particularly about God. These questions may also show what kind of answers a child is inclined to favour. Such questions may also be asked to child himself to see what he says explicitly as answers.

It may be added that Piaget has used semi-clinical interview technique to elicit spontaneous responses from children in Switzerland. Such investigations have been made in various countries usually in the West. Such investigations have also been made in Pakistan but on a limited scale. There is great scope for further studies here. Deliberate attempts should be made to explore a child's spontaneous concepts particularly those which may be related to God. Such concepts may be used for religious education.

A word of caution is necessary here. There should not be an impression that a child's spontaneous concepts are necessarily correct and they are necessarily related to the Quranic teachings. This view is not correct. Spontaneous concepts represent a child's own original reflections and they are not decisively influenced by the adults, but whatever a child thinks himself on his own is not always correct and true, he may be right or wrong. The examples of correct spontaneous concepts are those which we noted, i.e., everything has been made by a maker for a purpose and not in vain and follows moral laws. When concepts match the Islamic teaching they may be used for curriculum and instruction design. An example of wrong concept is as follows: Piaget has noted that the child believes that clouds are made out of smoke. When a child sees smoke issuing from a chimney, it is 'obvious' to him that the smoke gathers in the sky and forms clouds. To him, seeing is believing. He is deceived by appearance and can not discriminate between illusion and reality. The explanation seems far fetched to him that water evaporates from ocean, wind carries as vapours to long distances which gather as clouds and when the vapours forming clouds condense, it pours down on earth as rain. The child may learn to verbalize this lesson, but still may not accept it in his heart. He may even distort his lessons according to his spontaneous tendencies. The child's spontaneous concepts as we have

already noted may be right or wrong. In view of such limitations, one should not over-value spontaneous concepts. However, it should be recognized that when a lesson matches a child's spontaneous concepts, the child learns it readily and accepts it in his heart of hearts. It is, therefore, advisable to take advantage of this situation in designing curriculum and developing instructional strategies.

It has been pointed out that a child learns most of his lessons from his family, community, and school. The school's religious curriculum is designed mainly if not wholly on the basis of non-spontaneous concepts. What he is taught about God is based on non-spontaneous concepts, so importance of such concepts for religious education is self-evident. We have noted that a child makes mistakes when learning concept of God e.g., a child may consider God to be a man. It must be emphasized that it is not the only mistake which the child makes, it is just one example. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate the information that a child receives from the formal and informal sources in a given culture. Further, how a child processes this information and what cognitive strategies, he employs to interpret this information, what are the mistakes he makes, and finally how he generates a mature metaphysical concept of God and attain concept of God in the Quranic sense of terms. This information may be used to design curriculum and develop instructional strategies for teaching in schools.

Conclusion

We can draw several conclusions from the above account:

First, it appears from the study of literature that a child has innate tendency to develop a spontaneous concept of God. Spontaneous responses may be elicited by investigation of the child's natural tendencies of "animism" and "artificiliasm". It may be tested and if confirmed (i.e., could not be falsified by empirical evidences), the instructional methods and curriculum may be designed accordingly.

Second, the child has a non-spontaneous concept of God which he learns by socialization. He may make some mistakes initially and he may learn to generate a mature concept in Quranic sense of terms (*elaah* and *rubb*). He learns these terms by trial and error. The suitable instructional strategies may be developed based on concrete experimental conditions.

Third, it may be noted that in addition to two concepts of God as described above, a child also reflects on a adults' statements and

generates some other concepts. These concepts may be called secondary spontaneous concepts. They are not universal and may vary among different individuals and different cultures. The data may also be collected for all these three types of concepts to design curriculum and instruction.

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