CONCEPTS OF GOD: THE SALIENCE OF GENDER AND AGE

WILLIAM K. KAY
University of Wales, Bangor
LIZ RAY
New Life Church, Redford

Abstract
This article presents an analysis of drawings made by a sample of 135 children aged between 4 and 11 in a Church of England primary school with a view to exploring the relative importance of age and gender in the formation of children’s concepts of God. The article concludes that there is evidence that gender, which has been overlooked in previous studies relevant to religious education, ought to be given more priority in future.

1.1. Introduction

It is reasonable to argue that the concept of God, often translated into the child’s ‘image of God’, is central to religious development. Several lines of research, most of them broadly Piagetian or Freudian, have resulted in variant explanations of how this image is formed. Freudian research is inclined to stress sex differences because of the supposed contrast between the way boys and girls relate to their parents. Piagetian research is inclined to overlook sexual differences because the growth of knowledge within the human mind is thought to follow principles that transcend sex and culture.

1.2. Scope and terminology of research

The research described in this paper was undertaken to explore the image of God held by primary school pupils. The analysis was designed to discover how pupils picture God and also to test the comparative power of age and gender in determining this picture. In short, this research addresses the questions:

- What do research traditions reveal about children’s image of God?
- How do children of primary school age think about God?
- Is age or gender more salient in determining how children consider images of God?
• Are the findings of this research consistent with social changes in British society?

In this context the term ‘image’ refers to a mental picture or mental concept. An image, like a concept, can be concrete or abstract, symbolic or realistic, simple or complex. For this reason a child’s picture reveals important aspects of his or her thought-world, and it does so in a way that is not dependent on verbal skills. Methodologically this is important when research investigates very young children. By making use of pictures rather than words, research can address children in the whole primary school age range.

1.3. Cognitive theories

Piaget’s voluminous studies of mental growth have had an impact beyond the field of psychology. His stage-developmental model of intellectual development identified three main universal stages that unfold between infancy and adolescence. ‘Pre-operational’ thought in the earliest phases of schooling gives way to ‘concrete operational’ thinking around the age of seven. ‘Formal operational’ thinking follows in the early secondary years. This developmental pathway is primarily driven by maturation. Although environmental influences, including social environmental influences, facilitate passage through the stages, they do no more than contribute to an inevitable direction. This is a journey that begins with disconnected observation, travels through classification and manipulation on the basis of physical characteristics and ends with the systematic manipulation of abstractions, some of which are represented symbolically. The theory presumes that male and female mental development follows the same pathway and is therefore structurally identical; girls and boys both pass through the same three stages (cf. Donaldson 1978).

The British tradition of religious education in maintained schools has been influenced by child psychology since the 1930s as instanced in the work of Yeaxlee (1939) and Lee (1965). After 1964, the Piagetian version of child psychology came to the fore because Goldman’s influential work could be described as an application of Piaget’s theory of mental development to children’s understanding of key elements of the bible but, even if Goldman’s work had not been as important as it was at that time, religious education would probably have been transformed anyway because the whole of primary education became imbued with child-centred Piagetian thought after the publication of the Plowden Report in 1967.

Goldman carried out clinical interviews with children aged from six to