The study of religion has a double focus: religious thought and religious practice, as well as their relation. Part of the study of religious thought, therefore, must attend to the psychology of thought processes. It may at first appear to anyone familiar with the types of analyses which engage the attention of developmental psychologists that the elementary operations to which they refer are far removed from the types of complex and elaborate theories capable of describing the mental life of adult religious participants. However, as we will show, current studies in developmental psychology imply that there is a closer link between the types of basic operations which place a child in a designated developmentally distinct stage, and the particular form of detailed religious thought than has been previously supposed.¹ Further, this research may suggest that the analysis of religious thought should not be evaluated as distinct from everyday conceptions but as part of the larger framework of human thought processes.

One facet of developmental psychology is to study children as an end in itself. That is, the aim of many theorists who study children is to understand children. But, there is greater significance to the findings of developmental psychology.

A developmental perspective is essential to the analysis of human cognition, because understanding the built-in architecture of the human mind, the constraints on learning, and how knowledge changes progressively over time can provide subtle clues to its final representational format in the adult mind. (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 26)

The study of children is therefore a theoretical tool used to understand the workings of the human mind in general. Currently, through the reworking

¹ Our approach for this review was to survey psychology journals for relevant articles. Specifically, we surveyed the theme of children's magical beliefs in Developmental Psychology and the British Journal of Developmental Psychology While recognizing, of course, the incredible wealth of data in this area, and the impossibility of examining all of it, we hope to demonstrate that materials from experimental psychology will prove of some interest for scholars of religion.
of two aspects of Piagetian theory, magical thinking in children has become a productive area of investigation for the more inclusive strategy of understanding the design of the human mind as a whole.

Two related observations of Piaget have been determined to be inaccurate. First, Piaget proposed the notion that “young children are severely limited in their understanding of causal relations in the world” (Rosengren – Kalish – Hickling – Gelman 1994: 69). Second, according to Piaget a child’s theory of mind develops relatively late, and consequently children do not distinguish clearly between the mental and the physical. It was assumed that children are confused about the distinction between activities such as thinking or dreaming and externalized actions such as speaking or acting (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 118). Magical thinking in children, therefore, was seen as distinct from adult representations and as a product of children’s inaccuracies in assessing themselves and their environment. But increasingly it has become evident that even infants interpret their world according to causal principles with which they explain and predict the world around them (Baillargeon – Hanko – Summers 1990; for a summary of these concepts, see Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 65-89). Further, children are far more competent at discerning the difference between fantasy and reality than Piaget thought (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 125-138). Hence, it appears to be the case that children’s magical thinking is not so different from adult thinking. There is a continuity between the two.

In the Piagetian view, an infant’s mind is unprepared for confrontation with chaotic perceptual input. According to this view there are no innately tuned attention biases which guide discrimination and assessment of the physical world. Rather, “reasoning about physical properties, depends on the progressive development of the logic of concrete operations” (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 65-6). This interpretation, however, has been incrementally revised. Developmental psychologists now know that infants are equipped with mental processes which provide the infant with a limited yet organized system from the outset (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 12). This not only challenges the Piagetian view of mental processes but also theories of linguistic and social determinism and relativity.

Elizabeth Spelke identifies four principles which underlie an infant’s perceptual analysis of the motion of objects: boundlessness, cohesion, rigidity and no action at a distance (cited in Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 67). By the age of six months, a child exhibits sensitivity to the fact that objects are constrained by gravity. These principles guide infants’ perceptual analyses allowing them to infer on the basis of perceptual input (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 72). New information is learned due to the child’s interaction with the physical and socio-cultural environment, but is always constrained by earlier principles (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 82). So, while the brain is not preconstructed with