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THE PRESCHOOL CHILD'S CONCEPT OF GOD

by

Linda Thompson Saxton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Child Development

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*Linda L. Saxton*  
Linda L. Saxton

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## INTRODUCTION

### Origin and nature of the problem

The setting is a cheerful nursery school room bustling with activity and lively three and four year old children. Sally, Tom, and Dick are building with blocks and are busily engaged in conversation regarding who is "boss" of the project.

"I'm the boss," states Sally emphatically.

"No, I'm the boss!" retorts Dick with just as much enthusiasm.

"Did you know that God is boss of the whole world?" questions Tom thoughtfully. So we see one more example of the tremendous task of reaching for and of gathering in facts and experiences in the environment in order to create some semblance of order in the overwhelming sphere known as the world of the preschooler.

But why study the learning of this particular concept, that of diety, at a time when many writers claim that the child is incapable of efficient abstract thinking? Is it not a waste of time to delve into the partially formed concepts or preconcepts which are often embellished with fantasy? Lawrence (1965) in his study of children's thinking about religion, through a recording of their questions, found that inquiries into the nature of diety were almost nonexistent from the ages of seven to twelve. Questions before the age of seven, however, were profuse and searching, indicating a relatively intense interest on the part of the preschool child in the nature of God, and in His relationship to the child. Wann (1962) in his research on the intellectual development of the young

child states that in all of his areas of study, he found children struggling with the question of God and of his relation to reality. This concern was a general one and was not limited by the amount and type of religious training the child was receiving.

The writer, in her work with young children in the laboratory nursery school situation, has noted with great interest the spontaneous comments involving the preschool child's probing into an understanding of the question of God. She has been impressed with the earnest quality of their expression of their newly found knowledge. Following are a few of the spontaneous remarks recorded by the writer which influenced to a great extent her interest in the topic of study, that of the young child's concept of God:

Four year old Kathy was saying her prayers the night before the family was to leave for a year's stay in Italy while the father was to study at a university there. She closed her prayer with, "Well, goodbye now, Heavenly Father, I'm going to Italy for a while."<sup>1</sup>

Bobbie, four, had climbed to the top of the spiral slide and looked down on the teacher standing below. "I'm big!" he said with exuberance. "Yes," replied the teacher, "you're taller than I am." "I'm as big as Heavenly Father," Bobbie said with apparent satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

Karen was examining a trailer truck that had more than the usual four wheels. She looked up at Sally who was almost five and inquired, "Why does this truck have so many wheels?" Sally, obviously a little disgusted at such a lack of knowledge, put her hands on her hips and replied, "Heavenly Father made it that way!"

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<sup>1</sup>Notes taken from laboratory study Fall Quarter, 1965.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Tommy and John were busily engaged in Q-tip painting and were making "maps." They made dots on their respective "maps" and told each other who lived at that location. Four year old Tommy suddenly made a very large mark at the top left-hand corner of his paper and said with much vigor, "That's where Heavenly Father lives."<sup>4</sup>

From these few illustrations, the writer noted that, interestingly enough, all of the spontaneous remarks she had recorded involved four year olds, and that, also, most of them were volunteered by boys. These observations from a very limited record served to whet the writer's interest in the subject and ultimately led to a partial guide in formulation of the hypothesis to follow.

Therefore, with a realization of this relatively great interest in diety manifested by the preschool child followed by a latency period in religious interest demonstrated by the school-age child, the author feels the study of the concept of God in the three and four year old child to be of particular interest and importance.

A great deal of research has been done on general concept development in children with many of the specific concepts being studied, also, as to timing and nature of their development. However, as is indicated by the lack of research information available in this area, the development of the preschool child's concept of God has been somewhat neglected.

#### Objectives

The study will attempt to investigate the following hypotheses pertaining to the development of the child's concept of God at ages three and four:

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from notes taken in laboratory study Fall Quarter 1965.

1. Because of his greater store of experience and the possibilities of a more complex intellect, the four year old should possess a more fully developed and more abstract concept of God than does the three year old.

2. Because this is a specific concept fully dependent upon learning through verbal contact, those children in whose homes religion and its corresponding concepts have been consciously imparted through parental teaching and church experience should have a more mature level of concept development in this specific area.

3. The child whose experience (in nursery school) has given him a more mature level of general concept development may also possess a more fully developed concept of God.

#### Method of procedure

It is proposed to study the level and nature of the development of the concept of God in the preschool child by informally interviewing a sample of three and four year old children in the laboratory nursery school. The sample will include eight to ten three year old, and eight to ten four year old children who are entering the nursery school for the first time. In addition, there will be a similar number of children who have been attending the nursery school for at least six months prior to the study. If possible, an equal number of boys and girls will be used in each group. The parents of the children participating in the sample will also be interviewed.

Through verbal discussion and the use of pictures for verbal response, the child's concept of God will be investigated.



Independent variables to be investigated as possible influences on the child's concept include the child's age, sex, attendance at nursery school, religiosity of parents, and the child's church experiences.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

General concept development

Young minds are continually searching and working to bring order and reason to the chaotic world of which they are a part.

"I'm Eric's sister," Tracy announces proudly.

"We can't have two daddies! There is only one daddy!" insists Athena with determination.

"That bug isn't dead because it's still here," states Paul with conviction.

What are the tools which these young children use in organizing their environment and attacking problems? They are concepts. In the words of Sigel (1964) these concepts ". . . function as an adaptive mechanism through which we deal with reality." Wann (1962) defines a concept as a convenient framework into which a person categorizes his experience and into which he can fit new experiences. This framework is subject to continual changes and revision and as such gives a basis for efficient learning through reducing the complexity of the environment. Wann (1962, p. 11) further states that concepts ". . . are the premises, the foundations, and the structural steel of thinking."

General concept development is a subject about which much information is available in educational and psychological literature. Piaget was perhaps among the first to delve into the specific topic of defining stages of concept development and, in spite of the controversy involving the imperfection of his method, his work has acted as a springboard for

much of the research which has subsequently been done. Not all authorities agree with the validity of the stage theory of concept development or with the chronological sequence purported by Piaget. Nevertheless, it may offer a framework within which a more complete understanding of concept learning in young children may be gained. Perlyne (1964), Flavell (1963), and Sigel (1964) have all reported on the stages of intellectual development as follows: The first stage, or sensory-motor period, occurring from birth to about two years of age is characterized by the movement of a primarily reflexive organism to a state of being an individual responding to his environment in sensory motor actions in a fairly organized manner. The four main developmental tasks of this period are those of attaining rudiments of concepts, establishing a differentiation of self from objects, localizing of himself in space, and gaining a beginning awareness of cause and effect, time and space. During the second period of "preoperational thought," extending from about the age of two to approximately seven years, two substages are noted. From two until four years the child is thought to be preconceptual. He is approaching the ability to function symbolically; that is, he is able to distinguish between the symbol and the actual object at this time. His thinking is transductive, characterized by egocentricity and lack of reflection. Formation of preconcepts in which conceptualization is perceptual-dominant is the general occurrence. From the ages four to seven, the "intuitive" phase occurs with a transition to increased symbolic functioning. By the time a child is approximately seven years old, reasoning processes have begun to appear somewhat logical and the stage of concrete operations is said to be present. With the completion

of this period comes the beginning ability to use the conceptual framework as a way of organizing the diverse world. The final steps toward true abstract thinking and conceptualizing are taken during the period of "formal operations," when the child is in the age range of about 11 to 15. He can now operate in hypothetical deductive procedures of logical thought.

Other authorities have developed states of concept learning more specific to the very young child. Among these are Curti (1940) who defines the following: (1) presymbolic stage during which the child learns to react in characteristic ways toward objects and persons; (2) a preverbal symbolic behavior stage when the child has an idea, but no concept--that is, he can abstract (names an object not present) but makes no attempt to generalize; (3) a stage of implicit general ideas during which time abstraction or the idea of class is present, but generalization or categorization is vague and disorganized; (4) finally, the stage of explicit generalization or the ability to formulate meaningful words. These first generalizations are concrete, fragmentary, and somewhat egocentric with no absolutely complete and final concepts at this time.

Buhler (1930) also sets forth a meaningful sequence of concept learning in the following way: First the child learns to use and to understand the most common words of the language. He begins to realize certain constant factors in objects as well as variable ones and with practice is able to distinguish these. Next he learns the use of more general categories although these abstract concepts are not necessarily built upon a pyramid of concrete meaning. The third step is a growth of causality with the children beginning to notice that events occur in

sequence. With the development of a definition comes the fourth step in which the child now has some concept of order and genus-species relationships. This ordering ability generally begins about five or six.

Chukovsky (1963) presents a fresh and charming portrait of the young child's intellectual growth. He states that it is impossible not to be amazed at the short length of time during which the child acquires such a wealth of varied knowledge. "The enormous difference we notice between the young preschool child and the young school child tells us about the miracle-performing mental activity during this early period of the child's existence," says Chukovsky (1963, p. 23). During his study, the questions of a four year old during a two and one-half minute period were recorded as follows:

Where does the smoke fly?

And who rocks the trees?

Can one find a newspaper that is large enough for wrapping a camel?

Do chickens go out without rubbers?

How did the sky happen?

Who makes bugs?

Upon the basis of this and other similar observations, Chukovsky states:

No matter how unstable and shaky the mental life of the preschool child may seem to us (especially during the first five years of his existence) we must not forget that the child "from two to five" is the most inquisitive creature on earth and that the majority of the questions he asks are evoked by the daily need of his tireless mind to comprehend his surroundings. (Chukovsky 1963, p. 24)

Isaacs (1930) also supports the observation that the preschool child

is a being with an almost insatiable curiosity for knowledge of the world around him. She states, as well, that they are capable of reasoning and testing opinions.

In giving more insight into the intellectual life of the preschool child, Chukovsky (1963) reports from his observations of children's conversation that the young child poses an hypothesis for a puzzling fact only to promptly forget it and improvise a new one. Using the zig-zag method (a mistaken hypothesis is not always followed by a more correct one), he gradually works toward a more correct understanding of the truth. Chukovsky (1963, p. 26) further states that because the young child has no need for certain sociological or biological truths, he plays lightly with concept, ". . . creating for himself, with ease, various fictions and making use of them this way or that according to his whim."

Pitcher and Prelinger (1963) confirm the use of fantasy in the preschool child. They report that fantasy has adaptive value in the mastery of reality in that it allows the provisional filling of gaps due to lack of knowledge. These authors further state that during this time (preschool years) when perception, causal thinking, and other conceptualizing processes are still immature, fantasy allows the child to temporarily improvise answers for questions involving a knowledge of his environment. However, as stated by Isaacs (1930), this use of fantasy is not, even at quite young ages, a haphazard, unintentional thing. She says she is convinced that children beyond the first three years, although indulging in fantasy, rarely confuse it reality.

As observed by Russell (1954), there is a rapid growth of concepts at three years of age which is at least partially explained in that reasoning abilities seem to be fairly well established by this time.

In spite of this seemingly innate curiosity, growth in reasoning power, and ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality, we commonly hear such examples of errors in concepts as follows:

"Hey!" shouts Jill animatedly, "Foot tracks on the mat!"

"I must not be as tall as Suzy was last year," reports Kathy seriously. "She was four years old last year. Now I'm four. She could tie her shoe, but I can't."

"Look, a juice apple," cries Tracy in excitement (pineapple).

"His shirt's unlaced," observes Wendy.

"My brother has the lumps," reports David sadly.

When told that it was almost time to leave, Hal retorted rather indignantly, "My momma told me there were no short half hours."

The obvious errors in the above statements are overshadowed by the spontaneity of expression evident in these young children. Russell (1954) says that such errors occur because, obviously, these children must develop their concepts slowly from nothing and because they live in a complex world about which so many concepts can and should be formed. He lists specific causes for errors in concepts as follows: (1) errors in the percepts from which concepts emerge; (2) confusion between images and memories aroused during recall; (3) lack of experience to validate generalizations reached; (4) the set of mind caused by certain environmental features being more influential than others of equal importance; (5) over-confidence in results of observations and conceptual thinking

caused by the child's egocentricity.

Chukovsky (1963, p. 24), in regard to these errors, states, "No matter how many childish mistakes we quote, it is impossible not to be enraptured by the apparently stubborn determination of the child to bring at least illusory order into his limited and fragmentary knowledge of the world."

In conclusion, Russell (1954) states that in children, concepts are a result of perception, memory and imagination. An integration of these objects through discrimination (or differentiating out unrelated items) plus generalization (or reponse to common elements) takes place during sensory impression, muscular activity, motor manipulation, questioning, reading, and problem solving.

In the above citation of research in the field of general concept learning, the author has attempted to focus on those elements which seem to be most vital and applicable to the more specific topic of the development of the concept of God in the preschool child.

#### Young child's concept of God

Now we turn to more specific research available in the area of the young child's concept of God. In his recent study of religious questions of the school-aged child, Lawrence (1965) sent out questionnaires to parents and Sunday School teachers to children aged from six to twelve. The parents and teachers were asked to record spontaneous questions and comments volunteered by their school-aged children over a six-month period. An extremely low number of returns of the questionnaire prompted Lawrence to investigate the matter further. Upon questioning the participants, he discovered that questionnaires were not returned because of the



extreme lack of interest in religious matters manifested by this age group. Indeed, a great majority of the comments which were recorded came from the six and seven year olds. Lawrence concluded that during the school years there was a latency period of religious interest and that the preschool and very early school years were those during which most spontaneous questioning of a religious nature occurred.

Gesell (1946) in reporting his characteristics of the three, four, and five year olds seems to agree with Lawrence's findings. Three year olds have an awakening interest in religion, will repeat whole prayers, have a great interest in Sunday School, and may enjoy part of the church service. At four years of age, the child manifests a marked interest in God illustrated by the many detailed and factual questions asked of parents. He enjoys prayers and elaborates upon those he hears. With the age of five comes a beginning of the disinterest of the latency period for some, while others continue the interest characteristic of the four year old. Gesell (1946, p. 86) further states, "The vast intangible creative force called God is often grasped rather well by the mind of the four year-old." In contrast, five's have a tendency to view God in more concrete and everyday terms. A child of five will often pose such questions as "What does He look like?" "What does He do?" "Where does He live?" They are more aware of God's presence. They may fear He sees what they do.

These descriptions tend somewhat to contradict Jersild's (1956) generalization that the younger a child is, the more his religious concepts will be built upon his own concrete experiences and elaborated with fantasies. However, Hurlock (1956) seems to confirm this statement

when she suggests that if religion is to mean anything to a child it should be concrete in form and presented in understandable language. Young children build concepts of the unknown through those that are familiar. She further states that distortions of religious concepts often are due to misunderstandings of words used to describe or explain them. Because religious beliefs are based upon realistic concepts, pictures are important in forming these concepts. She describes the "typical" young child's concept of God in the following words:

Most children have a concept of God as a person, made of flesh and blood. He is very large, has a kindly or stern face, is old, wears long white flowing garments, and has a white beard or whiskers. Some children think of God as wearing a crown and having wings. God's role is that of a creator, a provider, and a controller of natural phenomena. He can see everything everywhere, and He spends His time watching people to see how they behave. (Hurlock 1956, p. 602)

Landis (1960, p. 186), states that children of the preschool age form their ideas about God with "frail capacity and slight experience" and that with growing years, these ideas usually become gradually like those of their parents or other adults with whom they associate.

Strang (1963) explains that during the preschool years when much in the child's environment is animate, God is often near at hand and may be vividly alive to him. However, she also warns that the child's life consists of things that he can see and touch while God is a symbol, an abstraction of the highest order. The idea that premature introduction of too many ideas about God and His power may lead to fantastic misconceptions was also brought forth by Strang.

Lawrence (1965) also found this problem in concept learning. He reports that it was very difficult to assess the level of understanding

of the child because often that which has been learned has not been understood. Children of conscientious church members are likely to have more "sophisticated" concepts than those of non-church goers' children, but this is limited by their level of cognitive functioning.

Sigel (1964, p. 260) supports the findings of both Lawrence and Strang stating, "Even though the child's verbalizations suggest he is at a more advanced stage, the child will quickly abandon the explanations received and revert to his primitive schemata or else he distorts the adult interpretation to adjust to his own current beliefs."

Werner (1957) also warns that the child's observed ability to reproduce or produce concepts does not necessarily mean that the child's underlying intellectual processes are accurately reflected. In short, the young child cannot be taught a particular concept unless he already has the mental maturity of that specific cognitive level.

Chukovsky (1963, p. 37) expresses his observation of this problem in the following way:

I have been convinced many times over of how well the child is armored against thoughts and information that he does not yet need and that are prematurely offered him by too-hasty adults . . . he, in accordance with the laws of his childish nature, will immediately transform this truth into material for boundless fantasy.

In shedding further light on the preschool child's ability to understand and to form concepts of God, Chukovsky further states that the tremendous task facing the young child of mastering the spiritual heritage of the adult world can be accomplished only when he is satisfied with the world around him. Strang (1963, p. 160) confirms his ideas with the following statement: "The child's ideas of God, sex, guilt, and forgiveness grow

out of his experiences with parental love, authority, and the parents' treatment of his successes and failures, accomplishments and mistakes, joys and sorrows."

Although a review of the literature related to the development of the concept of God is by no means profuse, the writer has gained some insight into the problem and, most of all, a feeling of the challenge inherent in the study of such a neglected area of the child's growth and learning process. The writings of Wann (1962), and especially those of Lawrence (1965) and Gesell (1946) have led to a realization of the importance of such a study. Although much of the basis for the previously stated hypotheses was direct observation of the children and a limited analysis of their spontaneous interest in the nature of God, the review of literature served to bring into focus how such a study might be conducted. Through a study of the previous research of Lawrence (1965) and Harms (1944), items of importance to be considered in planning the child interview were gleaned while Gesell (1964), Hurlock (1956), and Chukovsky (1963) have enabled the writer to go into the study with a broader understanding of the young child's concept of God.

In conclusion, the preceding review of literature readily demonstrates the dearth of valid research on the topic of the preschool child's concept of God. A majority of the authors of child development texts pass over this arealightly or avoid it altogether. Because of the relatively great interest in God manifested by all preschool children, whether they have religious parents or not, as noted by Wann (1962) in his study, the author feels further study of this area to be of importance and interest to those concerned with the education and care of the preschool child.

## SAMPLE

The sample for the present study was selected from the laboratory nursery school of the College of Family Life at Utah State University during the winter quarter. The children attending this nursery school are drawn from the campus and community, are three and four years of age, and participate in the program for an average of three academic quarters of the school year. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or Mormon church) was the predominant but not the exclusive religious preference of the parents. Although many of the participants in this program are children of members of the faculty, this factor, again, is not consistently true.

The sample consisted of 32 children divided into an experienced group of 16 who had attended nursery school for at least six months. (It was not possible to obtain two of the three year olds in this group, so the time of attendance was lowered to three months for these two.) The other group of 16 was composed of new children who were attending for the first time winter quarter. In each of these two groups the children were divided equally as to sex, and as to whether they were three or four years of age.

The mothers of these 32 children also participated in filling out a related questionnaire.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES

Child's questionnaire

The development of the child's questionnaire was a result of consideration of previous relevant studies and personal impressions of head teachers in the laboratory nursery school.

Because, as brought out by Russell (1954), concept formation cannot be studied directly but must be inferred from behavior, the interview, structured by a simple questionnaire, was chosen as the research tool. As an aid to expression and establishment of a feeling of ease and confidence in the child, each child was supplied with the necessary materials and encouraged to draw a picture of God if he wished to do so. This method of gaining rapport and aiding spontaneity was suggested by Mussen (1960). In addition, the picture method was attempted in testing the idea set forth by Harms (1944) who, after collecting about 800 drawings of God done upon request by three to six year olds, found that verbal expression by these children was not necessarily his total or real God experience and that the drawings helped to supplement these verbalizations.

Actual questions to be used on the interview were derived from the study of Lawrence (1965) by using a portion of the recorded questions asked by children which seemed applicable to the understanding of the young child. Some of these questions which were used as a basis for the questionnaire, included the following: "What is God like?" "Where is He?" And, "How does God do everything?" With the further aid of

Hurlock's (1956) description of a child's concept of God, the following questions were formulated for the questionnaire to determine the young child's concept of God:

"What does His face look like?"

"Is He big or little?"

"Where does He live?" Or, "Where is He?"

"What does He do?"

"Do you like Him?"

"Does He like you?"

With the pretesting of this questionnaire, using ten children attending the laboratory nursery school, some changes were found to be necessary, although the basic form seemed effective and valid. First, drawing the picture was threatening to several of the children and therefore assumed a more insignificant part of the interview. The question on what God's face looked like appeared to be a meaningful one, especially when broken down into parts such as, "Is it a happy face, or a mad one, or a sad one?" This served to enable the child to begin to express himself freely. However, in regard to the question on the size of God, the writer found one child answered, "He's big. As big as my daddy!" which led her to realize that her idea of what was big and the child's idea were two very different things. Therefore, the question was changed to, "How big is God (Heavenly Father)? Is He as big as your daddy or bigger, or is He littler?" Because of the spontaneous qualifications added by some children to the question, "Does He like you?" such as, "Except when I'm mean," or "Not when I say nasty words," the writer added, "Are there times when He doesn't like you?" to the above question. In

order to gain further insight into the child's real feelings about God, the questions "Would you like to see Him?" and "What would you do if you were alone with Him?" were also added.

#### Parent's questionnaire

The parent's questionnaire was developed with the major purpose of determining the nature and quantity of the child's religious experience and the religiosity of the parents. Originally an interview was planned as the exclusive tool; however, the writer, upon contemplation of the nature of the questions, felt that perhaps a structured questionnaire, followed by an interview, might prove less threatening and therefore increase the validity of the results.

The following questions were deemed relevant to discovering the nature of the child's religious experiences and were to be responded to in terms of the degrees "never," "sometimes," or "regularly":

He receives conscious verbal instruction about God while at home.

He prays.

He hears others pray.

Religious stories are read to him.

He receives religious instruction outside the home.

He shows an interest in religious matters through questions.

In addition, two open-end questions were added in order to make more complete the picture of the child's concept of God. They were, "How do you think your child perceives God at this point?" and "Do you recall any questions or comments regarding God volunteered by your child within the last three months?"

The questions were formulated on the basis of readings and factors



necessary to investigate the hypotheses stated previously. The idea developed by Lawrence (1965) that children of church-goers would have a more sophisticated concept than those of non-church-goers prompted the asking of questions regarding religious instruction inside and out of the home. Hurlock (1956) indicates the importance of everyday experiences in the development of concrete concepts. With this thought in mind, the questions on prayer were developed. Because of the suggestion by Russell (1954) that reading of books to children enables the rather complete understanding of some concepts, the question on reading of religious stories was included.

An exploratory test of the parent's questionnaire involving four parents of children who had previously been in the nursery school revealed that the questionnaire was acceptable and seemed to be satisfactory. It was discovered, however, that an interview was not necessary to clarify the responses, and proved to be somewhat threatening. It appeared that parents felt they must explain why they had, or had not, followed a certain plan in the religious training of their child. Therefore, the parent interview was omitted.

## COLLECTION OF THE DATA

Child's interview

The setting for the interview with the children was the small library room where the books, records and pictures used by the nursery school are stored. A low, round table and traditional nursery school chairs were located in the center of the room. Because most of the children had never seen where their books were stored when not in use, this was of interest to them. Upon being brought to the room, the library and books were discussed. The interviewer asked if the child had a favorite book or books and, further, asked him to tell her about them. After a short discussion she said, "I imagine you could tell me many things, but today I'd like you to tell me about God (Heavenly Father)."<sup>1</sup> The child was then told he could draw a picture to help him tell what he knew, if he would like to, but if he would rather not, that was all right. The questions were then administered verbally. At the conclusion the child was shown three pictures and asked what they showed in order to help ascertain his religious orientation. These pictures included traditional pictures of the nativity, of Jesus with small children, and a last picture of a child praying with the sex of the child in the picture corresponding with that of the one being interviewed. The child was then thanked for his help and taken back to the nursery school room.

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<sup>1</sup>Because of the predominance of the Mormon religious orientation, which commonly uses the term Heavenly Father to designate God, this term was used except in cases of children with a non-Mormon background.

Parent's questionnaire

Each of the parents was personally notified of the study and asked to cooperate in completing the data. The questionnaires were then sent home with the respective child and returned after being completed. Response was 100 percent.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA

Because of the nature of the study, statistical analysis was not attempted. Instead, the material collected in the child interviews and parent questionnaires was studied to determine patterns and trends in development of the concept of God, as well as to determine the possibilities for acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses.

## FINDINGS

Child interview

In interviewing the three year olds, the writer discovered a very real language barrier, with many difficulties in understanding the speech of some of the children. In regard to the questions themselves, the writer found that in describing the so-called physical characteristics of God such as His facial expression, size, and form, the three year olds fluctuated in their answers. There was no observable pattern or continuity. Of the 16 three year old children, eight expressed the idea that God had a happy face, while the others felt He had a mean or sad one. When questioned as to His size, the three year old group was again divided with some saying that God was little and others insisting that He was big, "Big--up to the sky." The question of whether God was like a spirit or ghost or somewhat like their daddy brought similar random results. On the other hand, definite patterns seemed to emerge from the answers given by the four year olds to the above questions. Four year olds consistently state that God had a happy or smiling face as well as supplying a few qualifying statements such as, "He has a happy face when little boys and girls say their prayers," and "A sad one when people don't share their toys."

In the question concerning the size of God, four year olds also answered quite consistently with only one exception to the general trend of considering Him at least as big as their daddy, and in most cases, bigger than he was. When considering the form of God, not as

definite a pattern was evident as was the case in the previous two questions. Of the 76 children answering the question on what God was like, 12 expressed the idea that God was something like their daddy, while the remaining four children said that He was kind of like a ghost or spirit.

In the next group of questions dealing with God's whereabouts and His activities, the three year olds leaned rather heavily upon some experience within their own realm to which they could relate the question. When asked where God lived, only four of the children indicated the traditional answers of the sky or heaven, while the others resorted to such answers as, "In a house," "Down that street," "At my house," and "In California." However, the four year olds quite consistently expressed the idea that God lived up in the sky or in heaven with only three children expressing other views. In regard to the question involving what God did, the three year olds quite consistently related this to their own experiences with such answers as, "Irons," "Bakes cookies," "Writes," (his dad was an English teacher), or "Plays," being the usual trend. Two involved Santa Claus in such ways as, "He makes toys for Santa Claus." Among the four year olds, there was little certainty as to what was appropriate for God to be doing, with only a few answers such as, "Blesses children," "Watches on us," and "He makes us," However, instead of making up an answer when their concept was unclear in this area, the four year olds consistently said, "I don't know," to the above query.

In analyzing the results of the next section of questions dealing with the child's relationship to God, no real patterns seemed to emerge.

With very few exceptions, all three and four year olds expressed the feeling that God liked them with only four children from the entire sample qualifying the statement with such things as, "When I'm good," or "Not when I say naughty words." Two of the children said, "He loves me," with much emphasis. All children but one reported that they liked God, including those who seemed to lack a clear concept in other areas. When asked if they would like to see God, three of the three year olds and one of the fours expressed doubt while the others said that they would. One little fellow reported enthusiastically, "If I see God, I'll see my doggy," but to most of the others, judging from the manner of answering the question, this was a new thought. The idea of being with God alone also seemed to be a new one to most of the children. Possibly because of the novelty of this idea, a great many of the sample did not answer the question. With those who did, however, a vague pattern was again manifested in that the three year olds answered from experiences within their realms such as "Play drums," or "Paint a picture." These activities appeared to be those in which they had recently been, or were at present engaged. With the four year olds, however, although a relatively few answered the question, even those who were not able to do so seemed to approach it thoughtfully. Those who did answer did so in the following ways: "Well, I'd invite Him to play with my toys," "I would help Him with the prayers and blessing the children," and "We'd walk around." Judging from their uneasiness and unwillingness to answer, the writer feels that this question might have been a somewhat threatening one.

The use of the three pictures presented for description at the

end of the interview brought out a slight trend. Except for the one child who had had absolutely no contact with religious ideas, all the three year olds correctly described at least one of the pictures. The one most frequently recognized was that of "baby Jesus," with only three children failing to mention Jesus. Four children did not relate the picture of Jesus and the children to God or Jesus while two stated that this was God (Heavenly Father). Also, four children failed to respond correctly to the child praying. When only one picture of the three was recognized, it was either the one depicting the nativity or that showing a child praying with emphasis upon the latter. On the other hand, all of the four year olds with the exception of one child who had had very little religious orientation, were able to identify the pictures with seeming ease.

One little girl of precisely four was found to answer questions in a way more indicative of the three year old patterns presented here, while the next oldest child, one four years and five months, clearly demonstrated the trends of the four year old pattern.

As far as the variable of nursery school experience was concerned,<sup>1</sup> no consistent difference in concept development was noted between those who had nursery school experience and those who had had none. Also, with regard to the variable of sex, no pattern or trend of significant difference could be identified.

In order to aid the reader in gaining further insight into the concept of God as expressed by these three and four year olds, the following section will include excerpts from the actual interviews with a few of the children.



- (1) Boy - four years, six months (non-Mormon background)  
 What is God like? "Like a ghost, but he's a friendly ghost in your heart, huh?"  
 How big is He? "About this little (spread fingers to show about 4 inches)."  
 What is His face like? (He had great difficulty with this question. It was probably too concrete in nature for his concept)  
 "Kind of angry."  
 Where is He? "In my heart."  
 What does He do? "Oh, He eats when I eat. Your food goes through your heart, doesn't it?"  
 "If I got dead then the cowboys would bury me and I'd go up to the Heavens and then I'd get all better and come back home."  
 Do you like Him? "Yes, I guess."  
 Does He like you? "Yes."  
 Would you like to see Him? "Yes."  
 What would you do if you were alone with Him? "Go in my heart with Him."
- (2) Boy - three years, eleven months (non-Mormon background)  
 What is His face like? "It's a mean face."  
 How big is He? "I'm big, see (jumps from chair and stands as tall as he can). He's littler than I am."  
 Where is He? "I think he's in California." "I saw Him last year. He's old. I don't like old people."  
 What does He do? "He writes." (His dad is an English professor.)  
 Do you like Him? "I don't know Him."  
 Does He like you? "I don't like old people."
- (3) Girl - three years four months (not indicative of usual three year old pattern)  
 What is His face like? "Happy face."  
 How big is He? "Bigger than Daddy."  
 What is He like? "Kind of like a spirit."  
 Where is He? "In the sky."  
 What does He do? "Looks at the children."  
 Do you like Him? "Yes. If I be an angel I'd fly up to Him."  
 Does He like you? "Yes, He likes me."  
 Would you like to see Him? "Yes, if I be an angel."  
 What would you do if you were alone with Him? "I'd fly up to the sky."
- (4) Girl - three years nine months  
 What is His face like? "Happy."  
 How big is He? "Littler. My Daddy's BIG."  
 What is He like? "Like my Daddy."  
 Where is He? "In Germany." (The children had just had a visitor come into the class and talk about Germany.)  
 What does He do? (No comment on the question, but said matter-of-factly, "Jesus says, 'Love one another.'")

Do you like Him? "Yes."  
 Does He like you? "Yes." (Muttered something about the devil to herself.)  
 Would you like to see Him? "Yes."  
 What would you do if you were alone with Him? "I think He likes me."

- (5) Girl - four years ten months  
 What is His face like? "Happy."  
 How big is He? "Bigger than Daddy, except when Jesus was a baby He was little. He couldn't walk."  
 What is He like? "Like Daddy. He is a Daddy."  
 Where is He? "Up there." (Points with finger to the sky.)  
 What does He do? "Watches us."  
 Do you like Him? "Yes."  
 Does He like you? "Yes. All the time."  
 Would you like to see Him? "Yes."  
 What would you do if you were alone with Him? (Thought seriously, but could not think of an answer.)
- (6) Boy - four years, four months (very little if any religious experience)  
 What is His face like? "Like a pumpkin--like this--smiley."  
 Where is He? "In a brown house with a walk and a tree."  
 What does He do? "Plays. I know what He's doing right now. Swinging on a black swing."  
 Do you like Him? "If I knew where He was."  
 Does He like you? "Yes, He likes me."<sup>1</sup>

#### Parent's questionnaire

The results of the parent's questionnaire were not as useful as the writer had hoped. As was feared, participants seemed to answer questions pertaining to the child's religious experiences, to some degree, at least, the way they felt they should be answered. This situation made it possible to determine only extremes in religious experience. In this light, it was found that two children, one three-year old and one child of four, who had been exposed to little if any religious experience, were completely lacking in a concept and merely invented imaginative replies to the questions as the four year old did, or showed no interest at all as was done by the three year old. The

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from children's questionnaires January 1966.

writer had hoped to determine correlations between types of religious experiences and clarity of the concept at various ages as well as to determine whether conscientious religious instruction influenced the attaining of a clear concept at an earlier age. However, these relationships were impossible to determine from the results of the questionnaire. The homogeneity of the group in reference to religious preference except for four exceptions adds to the difficulty in determining effects of various experiences.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the questionnaire turned out to be that requesting parents to report recent comments and questions which children had volunteered. Some of the typical comments are as follows:

Three year olds: "When our bird died it went to sing for God."

"Heavenly Father flew me down here."

"When I say my prayers does Heavenly Father hear me up in the sky?"

When she saw an old man with a bear on television, one little girl said, "That's Father in Heaven. I love Father of Heaven."

"Does Heavenly Father make it snow?"

"Where is heaven? Where does God live?"

"Who made me? What else did He make? Did He build me like I build a block house?"

"Who is God?"

"What does He do?"

"What will God do if I tell a lie?"

"God will be unhappy if I ---- (something she thinks is bad)."

"Is God a picture?"

"Does He eat food?"

"Will He get mad and hurt me?" (Saw the picture of Jesus driving the money changers from the temple.)

"Can He see us? How? I can't see His eyes."

Four year olds: "Who made God?"

"What happens when we die? What happens to our bodies? Do I have to go to sing to God when I die?"

"Do spacemen see God? Where is Heaven, then?" (He was puzzled because the rockets didn't seem to pass through heaven.)

"Did God make Santa Claus?"

"Heavenly Father hears our prayers because He has His windows open."

"----- got run over with a car and now he's gone to heaven."

"Where is God? Is heaven up or down?"

"When I cry, Jesus is in my heart feeling sad, too."

"Are Jesus and God the same person?"

"Why was Jesus born in a manger?"

"Where does God live? Where is heaven?"

"Does God make it thunder and lightning?"

"When will we die?"

"God helps the sick."

"When is Heavenly Father coming here?"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted from parents' questionnaires February 1966.

## DISCUSSION

In an attempt to consolidate some findings and expressions of thought stimulated by the research procedure, the writer, in the following section, will discuss several points which could not be validly included in previous sections of the study.

Failure of the adult questionnaire to provide information on the finer distinctions of religious experiences of the child has indicated the need for a more perceptive and non-threatening tool. Perhaps the use of an informal interview structured only by indirect questions might prove more effective. However, in recognizing limitations of the present tool, the writer conjectures that the religious homogeneity of the sample might have contributed to a great extent to the inability of the writer to make finer distinctions. In short, perhaps the sample was so homogeneous that such distinctions were simply not present.

In regard to the variable of the religiosity of the parents, an effective and valid method for measuring this quality could not be found. However, the writer is reluctant to eliminate this variable, suggesting that the underlying quality of religiosity might be one of the determining factors in assimilation of concepts of God by the child at a relatively early age. It is suggested that attention be given to acquiring and using a valid measuring tool of adult religiosity in conjunction with previous studies of the nature of the preschool child's concept of God.

Although no significant patterns were evident in the findings

connected with the questions in the child interview related to the child's relationship with God, it might be suggested that there appears to be a definite lack of fear toward God demonstrated by a majority of the children. Perhaps this might indicate that parents in this particular sample have not used God as a threat of punishment to a great extent.

With a presentation of the findings, the question of whether answers obtained in the child interview could be attributed to real understanding or merely to conditioning might well be raised. The writer suggests that such a distinction is very difficult to make with this age group. However, non-empirical observations on the part of the interviewer may cast some light on the question. In many instances, gestures, facial expressions, and the general manner of the child revealed more than did the answers to the interview questions themselves. The seeming thoughtfulness with which an answer was formulated, the length of time taken to decide upon an answer, and the words used helped to give the interviewer a clue as to whether the concept was a real understanding or merely a conditioned response. The writer suggests that the child who said she would ". . . help Him with the prayers and blessing the children," when asked what she would do if she were alone with God demonstrates a tendency toward a concept that has become internalized and somewhat meaningful to her, not merely a conditioned response. Similarly, the child who said that God was "Big--up to the sky," showed evidence of original thought in the matter. It is further suggested that with the exception of the rather traditional question concerning where God lives, a majority of the questions included in the child interview were phrased so as to require a

child to adapt his concept in order to express an answer. Perhaps, in this way, the nature of the questions discouraged, to some degree at least, conditioned responses.

It is suggested that in order to determine more accurately the relationship between the child's real understanding and his concepts as suggested in the child interview that parents be asked to keep a record of all questions and comments on God volunteered by the child over a certain period of time.

Gestures and facial expressions also suggested the validity of the answers given by some children. In two of the cases where four year olds stated that God was something like a ghost, the interviewer noticed a distinct twinkle in the eye of the child being interviewed. The writer suggests that this might be attributed to the thought that the ghost or spirit idea appealed to their imaginations. This observation, however, is merely conjecture, but demonstrates the value of acute observation and recording of behavior accompanying answers during the child interview.

Although the writer finds no evidence of a positive effect of nursery school experience upon clarity of the child's concept of God, she feels that the level of concept development in the child would affect the level of development of the specific concept of God. Indications of the possibility of such a relationship are found in two of the children interviewed who had talked very late in their development and also seemed to possess a very limited concept of God. The writer feels that a more specific measure of general concept development was needed than that of nursery school attendance.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the present study, an attempt has been made to determine the nature of the preschool child's concept of God through a partially structured interview with the child combined with a written questionnaire filled out by the parent. The sample consisted of 16 three-year olds and 16 four-year olds divided equally as to sex and nursery school experience. These children were selected at random from the group attending the laboratory nursery school at Utah State University and were of quite a homogeneous background in regard to religion and socio-economic status.

From this limited study of the concept of God in the three and four year old child, it can be concluded that a somewhat defined and relatively clear concept of God seems to be formed shortly before or after the fourth year of age. Before this time, ideas concerning God are hazy and unformed with religious pictures serving as an important part of their knowledge.

The writer also discovered that when a child lacks a clear concept regarding a question, he will make up an imaginative answer, apply it to his own experience (often is to his immediate play or present situation), or merely admit his lack of knowledge.

In answering questions about God, the child of four years of age generally shows that he has thought about the issue with some indicating real contemplation of the subject beforehand. Self involvement to some extent also seemed to be a part of the concept of the four year old.



This was indicated in the way the child of four qualified and explained answers while three year olds usually answered more spontaneously and at random.

From the data collected, any evidence of the variable of sex influencing the child's concept of God was also found not to be evident.

Since the responses to the parent's questionnaire were not well enough defined, only extremes in religiosity and religious experience were correlated to the child's concept of God. Thus, it can be concluded that with little or no contact with religious ideas, the three and four year old child will have no concept of God, but with many integrated religious experiences, even the younger three year old may be able to form a somewhat clear concept in this area. However, enough data has not been collected to enable the writer to state with confidence that the latter statement is valid. Correlations between types and frequencies of religious experiences and degree of clarity of the concept at various ages were not possible to obtain from the data collected as had been hoped by the writer.

In regard to variations among religious denominations, the writer concludes, although the sample was very small, that there is a difference in the nature of the concept of God, but not in the level of its development. That is to say, the information may be varied, but the nature of the child's understanding is similar.

The writer feels also that from the overwhelming number of positive responses to the question of whether they like God and He liked them, even by those lacking a clear concept, it was indicated that even at this young age children are beginning to answer in a culturally accepted manner.

From the data collected in this study, the writer concludes that the hypothesis stated as follows: Because of his greater store of experience and the possibilities of a more mature intellect, the four year old should possess a more fully developed and more concrete concept of God than does the three year old--may be considered to be well supported. In regard to the hypotheses stating, "Because this is a specific concept fully dependent upon learning through verbal contact, these children in whose homes religion and its corresponding concepts have been consciously imparted through parental teaching and church experience should have a more mature level of concept development in this specific area," the writer feels that the present study supports the hypothesis but that further data collected in a more heterogeneous sample is necessary to prove it valid. The last hypothesis stating, "The child whose experience (in nursery school) has given him a more mature level of general concept development may also possess a more fully developed concept of God," finds no support from the data collected in the present study. However, the writer feels that with a more specific measurement of the level of general concept development such a relationship as hypothesized may well be found to exist.

In summary, the writer states that from the data collected in the present study, it can be concluded that when accompanied by at least a moderate amount of religious experience, age appears to be the most important variable in determining the level of development of the pre-school child's concept of God.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Since the present research has been conducted primarily as an exploratory study, due to the lack of studies carried out in this area, the writer suggests that the possibilities for further research are varied and numerous. She suggests the value of a study of the present hypothesis in which a larger and more heterogeneous sample is used. Further study in the area of developing a more perceptive parent's questionnaire to determine finer distinctions in religiosity of parents and the nature of religious experiences the child has had as influences on the child's concept of God at various ages is needed.

It is also suggested that a follow-up study involving a recording of the child's questions and comments regarding God by the parents over a six-month period preceding or following this type of study might be useful in determining the validity of answers given by the children in the child interview.

Independent variables not investigated in the present study which might cast further light upon the development of the concept of God in the preschool child are those of social class, differing cultures, the effect of working or non-working mothers, the effect of broken homes, and religious affiliation.

The writer further suggests that research need not be limited to the preschool group because so little work has been done throughout the entire scope of the development of this concept that study of any of the developmental phases would be valuable. However, the writer concludes

from the data collected in this study that research involving the child younger than four years of age would not yield much information that is either valid or reliable.

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