

1992

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Jill Kasserman
Spring Arbor College

Jennifer L. Johnson
Spring Arbor College

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Recommended Citation

Kasserman, Jill and Johnson, Jennifer L. (1992) "A comparison of non-verbal God concept in United Methodists," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol1/iss1/6>

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A Comparison of Non-Verbal God Concept in United Methodists

Jill Kasserman and Jennifer L. Johnson
Spring Arbor College

ABSTRACT

The goal of this project was to examine how a person's perception of God changes as a function of age within a Piagetian framework. After 88 United Methodist Sunday School attenders drew a picture of God, the drawings were analyzed in terms of the themes they communicated and the effort put forth. It has been concluded that the subjects did not stay entirely within the Piagetian framework. Furthermore, differences were evident between the United Methodist's perceptions and those of the Free Methodists and Wesleyans in that the United Methodists failed to draw pictures with strong Biblical themes, or abstract ideas.

INTRODUCTION

When dealing with religious issues on the practical or instructional level, a person's perception of God is a major factor in how an individual will interpret such information. Research has shown that a person's concept of God is greatly influenced by past experiences (Paloutzian, 1983). Furthermore, it changes considerably as a person develops cognitively (Goldman, 1964). Researchers have attempted to devise ways to study a person's God concept. Most have relied upon words (e.g. Vergote, 1967), yet at times this may not be the most effective method. The use of vocabulary is often limiting. One solution to this dilemma is to utilize the use of drawings (Bassett, 1990).

Many researchers have devised theories as to what characteristics are present in an individual's God concept at what age. Most of these, as mentioned earlier, reflect specific stages of cognitive

development (Paloutzian, 1983). Piaget's preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages are most often referred to by researchers. E. Harms (1984), after asking several thousand children to draw their idea of God, came up with three specific stages. Children from age three to six were said to be in the "fairy-tale stage". At this stage, religion seemed to be at the same level as stories about Santa Clause and the Easter Bunny. For children between seven and twelve years of age, who are said to be in the realistic stage, ideas about God tended to be much more concrete. Then between thirteen and eighteen, the subjects entered what is called the individualistic stage. This stage was broken down into three categories by Harms. One group held traditional religious ideas, one was more mystical, and one expressed religion through symbols of religions and cults which they had imagined and/or are slightly familiar with.

Ronald Goldman (1964) also conducted research on religious development. Like Harms, Goldman concluded that there were three stages of religious development. Goldman's stages parallel Harms' very closely, except Goldman utilized many Piagetian terms. Goldman claimed that children up to seven or eight years of age had "preoperational intuitive thought." It was characterized by unsystematic and fragmentary religious thinking. Then those between seven or eight and thirteen or fourteen had "concrete operational thought" which was typified by the children focusing on specific details of pictures and stories. Finally, those thirteen or fourteen on up were considered to have "formal (abstract) operational thought". Those in this stage are capable of hypothetical and abstract religious thought.

When pictures are drawn by those in one of these specific groups, the themes of their drawings should, hypothetically, reflect the characteristics of that stage. Rodney L. Bassett and colleagues (1990) stood upon this hypothesis and developed a set of pictures, anchored in a Piagetian

framework, that would indicate developmental changes in perceptions of God. His method and instrument was used as a basis for this project.

In this study a number of United Methodist Sunday School attenders were asked to draw a picture of God. The goal was to see if the drawings paralleled the proposed stages of religious development. Some discrepancies were found. Furthermore, relying on the hypothesis that the meanings of religious symbols and ideas are molded by an individuals background, experiences, and beliefs (Paloutzian, 1983); a comparison was made between pictures drawn by United Methodists, and those drawn by the Free Methodists and Wesleyans in Bassett's study. Some subtle differences were found.

It is important to keep in mind an individuals perception of God when teaching certain religious principles. When the teacher is aware of what or who their pupils believe God is, he or she can teach more effectively at their level. Furthermore, it is important to be aware of differences in the God concept between denominations.

METHOD

Subjects

Following phase one of the method used by Bassett (1990) in his article "Picturing God: A Non-Verbal Measure of God Concept in Conservative Protestants", 88 people were asked to be a part of an attempt to distinguish trends in the God Concept of United Methodists. Unlike Bassett, who used Wesleyan and Free Methodists, only United Methodist Sunday School attenders were used in this study. This allowed for a comparison to be made.

The subjects attended one of the two United Methodist churches chosen. Both suburban and rural areas of Michigan were accounted for. Furthermore, there was great diversity in the ages of the subjects; the youngest

being 3 years and the oldest being 61. The mean age was 28 years.

Procedure

Each of the subjects were approached on a Sunday morning in their regular Sunday School classrooms. Each person, after agreeing to be part of the study, was given a white 5X7 card and an uniform black ink pen. This was followed by a set of brief instructions. Each subject was asked to place their age and sex on the back of the card then wait for further instructions. Once everybody in the class was finished with that step, they were asked to visualize God then draw what they saw. No time limits were given, yet most were finished within five minutes. They were also informed that the quality of artwork did not matter, rather the ideas expressed in the picture. On the most part, the subjects enjoyed drawing the pictures and were extremely cooperative.

Once all the pictures were drawn, they were put into chronological order by age. From there the drawings were recorded as to if it displayed a concrete idea, such as a picture of a man with a beard; an abstract idea, such as a nature scene or a picture of the universe; or a symbolic idea, such as a heart or sun. The drawings were also classified as to if the subject put forth little, a medium amount, or much effort. In both situations, the age and sex of the subject was recorded to help in detecting specific trends. Furthermore, the age and sex were known while deciding where each picture fell. This factor did not play a role when determining if the picture was concrete, abstract, or symbolic. Yet, the age of the individual was taken in consideration when determining the amount of effort.

The drawings were also analyzed in terms of subject matter, then compared to the drawings compiled by Bassett (1990) who used only Free Methodist and Wesleyan subjects. The absence and abundance of some of the themes displayed in Bassett's study was noted.

RESULTS

The drawings were each analyzed for commonalities in themes (concrete, abstract, and symbolic) and the amount of effort shown (little, moderate, much). The subjects age and sex were also analyzed.

After separating the drawings into the categories of concrete, abstract, and symbolic, it was found that 47% of the subjects drew a concrete idea, 30% drew a symbolic idea, and 21% drew an abstract idea. The number of males and females represented in each of the categories was very similar. The mean age for those with a drawing in the concrete category was 18.9: while the mean for those in the abstract category was 36, and those in the symbolism category was 37.07. As can be seen the mean age of those in the concrete category was much lower, showing significance ($p < .001$). Furthermore, when those under the age of twelve were eliminated from the concrete category, the age difference was still significant ($p < .001$). Once again, there was no significant differences in the rate of males verses females in each group.

As previously stated, the amount of effort was also analyzed in terms of age, sex, and the number classified in each of the three categories (little, moderate, and much). It was found that 41% of the subjects showed little effort, 26% showed moderate effort, and 27% showed much effort. The mean age for those who displayed little effort was 30.22, moderate effort was 29.651 and much effort was 23.08. No significance has been found in the differences in ages. Furthermore, no significance was also found in the ratio between males and females in each group.

DISCUSSION

From the information gathered in this study, it can be seen that younger individuals tend to draw more concrete images, while the older individuals, opted for the more abstract and symbolic images. This coincides with the conclusions Bassett (1990), Harms (1944), and Goldman (1964). Each of these theorist believed this

is due primary because of the subjects level of cognitive development. Yet, this study has shown that even after the subject has supposedly reached formal operational thinking, he/she is still likely to refer to a concrete image of God for some time after. It is not until the subject reaches his/her thirties when the likelihood of drawing something abstract of symbolic increases. Furthermore, The subjects gender pertaining to elements related to their perception of God was also noted as non significant by Bassett (1990).

A comparison was performed between the pictures drawn by United Methodists, and those drawn by the Free Methodists and Wesleyans in Bassett's study. Many of the themes were present in both studies. For example, pictures of the sun, hearts, a man with a beard, nature scenes, and various other images were shared mutually by both groups. On the other hand, many images were not shared. For example, not one of the United Methodists drew a picture of an extremely abstract idea, a bible, or anything pertaining to a biblical story (e.g. Jesus as a baby, Jesus with the children, Noah and the ark). These themes were very common in the Free Methodists and Wesleyans.

The question remains, why is this so? Raymond F. Paloutzian, in his book *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, proclaims that a person's God concept is molded by his/her background; particularly the parents. If that fact is applied in this situation, it could be assumed that United Methodist parents are not putting as much stress on biblical images. At the same time, it could be concluded that perhaps United Methodists put more emphasis on God being a man-like being; accounting also for the large amount of pictures drawn of a bearded man. Only theories can be proposed at this time as to why this occurred.

It is also interesting to note that only religious symbols, or related symbols (e.g. hearts) were drawn by the subjects in this study. This fact does not coincide with the Harm's conclusion (1944). He proclaimed that a person between the ages of thirteen and eighteen enters the "individualistic stage." During this time the adolescent,

when describing God, either stick to traditional religious ideas, opt for more mystical images, or describe/draw symbols of religions or cults in which they have little to no exposure to. In our study, nobody drew anything resembling a symbol of another religion or of a cult. Perhaps that was due to the fact that the subjects are church attenders and were asked while in a church situation.

It has to be noted that there were many weak areas to this study. For example, not all the subjects grew up in an United Methodist background; therefore were perhaps exposed to other factors that aided in molding that person's concept of God. Furthermore, the categorizing of the drawings was very subjective. No firm guidelines were developed. Another weakness is that very few of the subjects were under the age of ten. This was particularly due to the fact that one of the two churches refused to allow us to enter the lower elementary Sunday School classes.

The data gathered in this project could be used in various ways. Since it has been concluded that the God concept of United Methodists is subtly different than that of Free Methodists and Wesleyans, the developing of a tool, much like the one developed by Bassett to indicate developmental changes in perceptions of God, could be done. In doing this, a more accurate means to measure these developmental changes in United Methodists would exist.

A person's perception of God is continually changing as a person develops. Although, the shift from concrete ideas to more abstract and symbolic ideas does not necessarily coincide with the onset of formal operational thinking. Furthermore, it has been shown that perceptions of God differ from background to background, denomination, to denomination. The question still remains, exactly why is this so?

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