

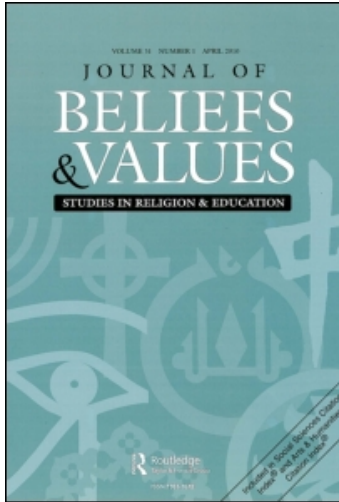
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ABSTRACT *This study examines denominational, age, and gender differences in young children's God concepts. Subjects were 198 Dutch preschoolers (mean age 68 months) whose mothers and schools belonged to six different religious denominations. The mothers were non-affiliated, pentecostal, catholic, Dutch reformed, orthodox reformed, or strictly orthodox reformed. The schools were religiously neutral (state schools), interdenominational (protestant/catholic), catholic, Dutch reformed, orthodox reformed, or strictly orthodox reformed. Children's God concepts were measured using structured interviews and were operationalized as spontaneous references to aspects of the Bible and as ideas about potential characteristics of God. Results showed that both maternal and schools' religious denomination have independent effects on children's God concepts which generally correspond to theological descriptions of mainline Dutch religious beliefs. Boys identify God more with Jesus than girls. Older preschoolers perceive God less like their parents than the younger ones.*

Introduction

Although the early years of childhood have been the subject of intense psychological study, relatively little research has been undertaken regarding the beginnings of religion (Hyde, 1990). Insights into early religious development has tended to

depend on inferences from stage-like cognitive developmental theories (Elkind, 1964; Fowler, 1981; Nye & Carlson, 1984). Less attention has been paid to antecedents of individual differences in religion in young children (cf. Tamminen, 1991). This article will focus on differences in one aspect of religion, namely God concepts. The purpose of our study is to investigate the effects of religious denomination of mothers and schools on God concepts in early childhood. We refer to the Western Christian tradition here.

God concepts are operationalized in a comprehensive way, that is, first in an open, descriptive way that should shed light on biblical information the children give about the nature of God. Spontaneous utterances about several elements of the Bible were measured. In an earlier study De Roos, Iedema, and Miedema (2001a) distinguished a general *Biblical God* dimension (mentioning biblical stories, terms, and names) in children's God concepts without further specifying parts of the Bible. Other previous studies concentrated on children's concrete or abstract knowledge about a number of Bible stories (Goldman, 1964; Whitehouse, 1972). Less is known about differences in children's spontaneous references to several aspects of the Bible. In the present study our goal was to examine young children's spontaneous references to aspects of the Bible more specifically, i.e. to distinguish between stories of the Old Testament, stories around Easter, Christmas, and other parts of the New Testament, abstract biblical terms like God is invisible or a ghost, etc.

In the second place, God concepts were studied in a more structured format which should tell us something about subjects' ideas concerning potential behavioral characteristics of God, like God as a caring, loving, potent, and/or punishing entity (cf. De Roos, *et al.*, 2001a; Dickie, Eschleman, Merasco, Shepard, Vander Wilt & Johnson, 1997; Heller, 1986).

Religious socialization at home is postulated to be one of the major factors in the development of individual differences in children's God concepts and other aspects of religion (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Hyde, 1990). Also, in the past few years, the role of religious education in schools for children's (religious) identity formation has been frequently discussed (Altena, Hermans & Van der Ven, 2000; Astley, Francis, Wilcox & Burton, 2000; Driessen & Van der Slik, 2001; Holloway, 1999; Miedema, 2000; Wardekker & Miedema, 2001). Religious socialization and education is operationalized here as religious denomination of schools and church membership of mothers. Mothers' denominations were taken into account because women have been found to be more religious than men (Hyde, 1990) and mothers probably have more impact on the development of their children's religious ideas than fathers (Acock & Bengston, 1978; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Tamminen, Vianello, Jaspard & Ratcliff, 1988). Fathers have been found to influence adolescent church attendance (Clark, Worthington & Danser, 1988). Previous research into influences of parents and schools on aspects of religion generally has shown parents to be associated more strongly than schools with fostering the religiousness of children and youngsters (Alma, 1993; Hyde, 1990).

In a recent study, however, the religious denomination of schools was found to have independent effects on preschoolers' God concepts whereas parental denomination had no effects (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). This result may be explained by the

high percentage of open christian (37%) and churchless (45%) parents, and the low level of orthodox protestantism in the sample (18%) combined with the high percentage of religiously affiliated schools. In this former study, four religious denominations among Dutch schools and parents were investigated, i.e., orthodox reformed, Dutch reformed, and catholic schools and parents, as well as state schools (religiously neutral, cf. De Ruyter & Miedema, 2000) and non-church members.

The present research will examine whether the above mentioned findings will hold out for a more diverse and more orthodox religious sample, that is six different religious denominations among mothers and schools, including three different orthodox reformed denominations of maternal church membership and two types of orthodox reformed schools. It may be that mothers' orthodox christian denomination has independent effects on children's perceptions of God, particularly when the children go to open christian or religiously neutral state schools. In open christian schools less exclusive christian faith is educated than in orthodox families and schools (cf. Miedema, 2000).

In addition to the four school types studied in our previous study, an interdenominational (protestant/catholic) and strictly orthodox reformed school was investigated. The parents of the children adhered to the four denominations examined earlier or attended either a pentecostal (evangelical) or strictly orthodox reformed church. Children belonging to the orthodox reformed and strictly orthodox reformed schools/churches and the pentecostal church have parents who adhere to a strict, exclusive christian faith (Stoffels, 1995). These parents believe that the soul can be saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. The strictly orthodox reformed people believe that God has decided long before the appearance of mankind, who will receive eternal life. They stress the importance of conversion, which can be given by God only, and can not be accomplished by human beings. These people use very strict rules in child-rearing, for example, children are not allowed to watch television and girls have to wear skirts or dresses. The orthodox reformed people place less emphasis on the importance of conversion than the strictly orthodox reformed people. They believe that you can call yourself a child of God when you are baptized. We have to accept the sacrifice of Jesus' cross in order to get forgiveness for our sins and to receive eternal life. The pentecostal people emphasize the workings of the holy spirit and the divine gifts, for example the power to heal the sick (cf. Hoekstra & Ipenburg, 2000; Noffke & McFadden, 2001; Stoffels, 1995). The catholic and Dutch reformed schools/churches and the interdenominational school considered here are open, inclusive christian institutions (cf. Miedema, 2000).

Considering the influence of schools on children's God concepts, it is hypothesized that children of the two types of orthodox reformed schools have a more potent view on God than the children of the open christian and state schools (cf. De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). The pupils of the three reformed schools will probably have a more loving, caring God concept and will allude more to different aspects of the Bible than children of the catholic and state schools (cf. De Roos *et al.*, 2001a; Heller, 1986; Hyde, 1990) since the former ones receive a more extensive religious education at school than the latter ones. Since the data collection took place around Easter, it is postulated that the children of these schools differ especially in their

spontaneous references to the Easter story. We expect children of the interdenominational school (protestant and catholic) to score in between the pupils of the Dutch reformed and catholic schools on the different God concepts. Although in previous research no differences in a punishing God concept was found, it may be that preschoolers of the strictly orthodox reformed school perceive God as more punishing than other children due to the high level of strictness in the child-rearing ideas and practices of their parents and teachers (cf. Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Hertel & Donahue, 1995; Stoffels, 1995).

In our previous study (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a) no differences in God concepts between children of religiously affiliated and churchless parents were found. Since in the present study more orthodox believing parents participate and with different subdenominational views, it may be that differences will be found. Orthodox children are supposed to refer more often to different parts of the Bible than open christian or non-affiliated children because the families of the former children generally pay more attention to religious education than those of the latter ones (Stoffels, 1995). In addition, on the basis of theological differences it is supposed that the content of orthodox children's open and closed perceptions of God may also differ according to the type of orthodox church their mothers belong to (cf. Stoffels, 1995).

Finally, it will be explored whether children's God concepts differ according to gender and age (ages four, five, and six years). Research among adults remains inconclusive concerning whether gender differences in God concepts exist (Noffke & McFadden, 2001). Some studies showed that women view God as more relevant and less punitive than men (cf. Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls & Frease, 1986). Other studies have demonstrated that men and women endorse similar perceptions of God (Greeley, 1989; Roof & Roof, 1984). Gender-related aspects of God concepts have been less extensively examined among (young) children. Studies among children revealed that boys stress the power of God whereas girls consider more God's nurturance (Heller, 1986; Tamminen, 1991; Vergote & Aubert, 1972). However, among four- to eleven-year-olds both boys and girls saw God as equally powerful (Dickie, *et al.*, 1997). With respect to effects of age on the content of God concepts older children have been found to focus more on God's care and power than younger children (Dickie *et al.*, 1997). We expect older preschoolers (age six) to refer to several aspects of the Bible more often than the younger ones (cf. Tamminen *et al.*, 1988).

In summary, the objective of this study is to examine whether preschoolers' God concepts differ according to the age and gender of the children, and mothers' and schools' religious denomination.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 198 Dutch kindergarteners and their parents. The children were recruited from six elementary schools belonging to six different religious denomina-

TABLE I. Number of subjects by religious denomination of mothers and schools

	Strictly orthodox reformed	Orthodox reformed	Dutch reformed	Interdenominational	Catholic	State	Total
Strictly orthodox reformed	18	1					19
Orthodox reformed	1	21			1		23
Pentecostal			9		6	3	18
Dutch reformed		4	1	9	1		15
Catholic		1		21	3		25
Churchless			14	21	25	20	80
Total	19	27	24	51	36	23	180

tions and from one pentecostal church. All children came from the 'Randstad', a conglomeration of cities in the western part of The Netherlands. A complete data set was available for 180 children. The denomination of the mother was missing for 16 children and the denomination of the school was unknown for two pentecostal children. There were 30 children of an orthodox reformed school, 19 children of a strictly orthodox reformed school, 26 children of a Dutch reformed school, 30 children of a catholic school, 53 children of an interdenominational school (open protestant and catholic), 20 children of a state school, and 20 children of a pentecostal church. The children of the pentecostal church were spread over Dutch reformed, catholic, and state schools (see Table I for denomination of parents by denomination of schools). Among the parents 44.4% regarded themselves as churchless, 8.3% were Dutch reformed, 12.8% belonged to orthodox reformed churches, 10.5% were strictly orthodox reformed, 10% belonged to a pentecostal church, and 13.9% were catholic. The mean age of the children was 68 months. The data collection started three weeks before, and ended seven weeks after, Easter.

Measures and Procedures

The God concepts of the children were measured using structured interviews. All children were interviewed individually by a female examiner in a 45-minute session to assess their God concepts and concepts of self and others, as well as attachment representations (not described further here). The pentecostal children were investigated at home, the other children at school. The latter children were taken from their kindergarten classes to a separate room.

The order of the different parts of the interview session was the same for each child. First, in order to get acquainted with the interview procedure and experimenter, the children were asked to draw a picture about God and to say something about the drawing. The children of the strictly orthodox reformed school were asked to draw a little figure, because they are not allowed to draw pictures of God. Second,

they answered open questions about the nature of God (e.g. What is God? Where is God? What is God able to do? etc.). Third, they completed scales referring to concepts of self and others. Then, the children were presented a 23-item structured questionnaire concerning potential characteristics of God. Finally, the children's mother-child attachment representations were measured.

Children's God Concepts based on Open Questions

In the interview session the experimenter first said she never heard about God hoping the child could help her to understand more about God. Then she asked six questions about God and three about prayer (not described further here). The questions about God were: 1. Did you ever hear about God? What is God? 2. How does God look? 3. Is God a man, woman, or something else? 4. Where is God? 5. What is God able to do? And, 6. What have adults and children to do according to God?

Children's answers on the six questions were placed in non-biblical (like associations with churches and death) and biblical categories. In the present study we focused on answers in the following nine biblical categories: 1. Abstract biblical elements (like God is a ghost, is invisible, eternal, is a king); 2. Old Testament (persons and stories, e.g. Adam and Eve, Noah); 3. New Testament (persons and stories, except Christmas and Easter); 4. Christmas; 5. Easter (cross and resurrection); 6. God is Jesus; 7. God is the Creator, makes things; 8. Biblical anthropomorphism (like having a beard, wearing a white dress); and 9. Onlogical biblical elements (confusion over names and stories; for example 'I know what Christmas is about, that is the day that Jesus died', or 'Mary and Joseph hang on the cross too'). For each child the frequency of each of these categories was summed and averaged over the six questions. A second coder independently scored the biblical answers of 36 randomly chosen children (about 20%). Intercoder agreement calculated as the number of agreements divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements was 0.90.

Children's God Concepts based on Closed Questions

A 23-item questionnaire concerning potential characteristics of God was used (cf. De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). The items are intended to involve different behavioral characteristics of God, pertaining to God's nurturance and power, i.e. characteristics like 'God loves me', 'God makes me happy', and 'God is very strong', 'God is the boss'. The items were read by the experimenter. Children rated each item on a three-point scale, that is, if they answered no (one point), sometimes (two points), or yes (three points) after each item.

Based on factor analysis over these items in the previous study (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a) five scales were constructed including items with absolute factor scores above .4. These items were summed and averaged. Internal consistencies of the scales were measured by Cronbach's α . Trying to form the same dimensions as in De Roos, *et al.* (2001a), in the present research four scales and one single item were

distinguished. Generally, the four scales resembled the first four of earlier research. The fifth scale of previous research 'God as loving friend' could not be constructed now, because reliability was too low (α below .50). The four scales were called *Loving God* (originally called Caring God, but now mentioned Loving God due to high loadings of the item 'God loves you'. Other sample items are the same as before, e.g. God is nice, God helps people, God can comfort you when you're sad, 8 items; $\alpha = .82$); *Potency of God* (e.g. God sees everything you do, God is the boss, God is very strong, 6 items; $\alpha = .71$); *Punishing God* (e.g. God punishes often, God is angry when you do something bad, God is strict, 5 items; $\alpha = .75$); and, *God like parents* (God looks like daddy and God looks like mummy, 2 items; $\alpha = .59$). The single item used as index of a close, intimate relationship with God was *God is my friend*.

Results

Influence of Children's Gender and Age, and Religious Denomination of Mothers and Schools on Children's Biblical Answers to Open Questions About God

To examine whether biblical answers differ for boys and girls, age, and religious denomination of mothers and schools, we employed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Children's scores on the nine biblical categories like abstract biblical elements, Old Testament, New Testament, etc. were used as dependent variables, and gender, age (four, five, and six years), and maternal and schools' religious denomination as between subject variables.

A significant multivariate main effect of gender on children's biblical answers was found, $F(9, 158) = 2,60, p < 0.01$. Effects of gender were univariately significant for one of the nine dependent variables only, i.e. for God is Jesus $F(1, 166) = 4,24, p < 0.05$. Boys scored higher on God is Jesus ($M = 0.38$) than girls ($M = 0.22$).

Maternal and the schools' denomination both had an independent multivariate main effect on children's biblical answers, $F(45, 782) = 3,06, p < 0.0005$, and $F(45, 782) = 3,36, p < 0.0005$, respectively. Interaction effects of maternal with schools' denomination could not be analyzed, due to empty cells. Effects on three of the nine biblical elements were univariately significant for maternal denomination (Abstract Biblical, New Testament, and God is Creator) and four of the nine for schools' denomination (Old Testament, New Testament, Easter cross and resurrection, and Biblical anthropomorphism). Tables II and III show the means on biblical content of open God concepts of the groups children belonging to the six different religious denominations of mothers and schools, respectively.

As can be seen in Table II, children having (strictly) orthodox reformed, Dutch reformed and pentecostal mothers used more abstract biblical terms than children of catholic and churchless mothers. The preschoolers of orthodox reformed mothers referred to the New Testament more often than those of the strictly orthodox reformed mothers, who in turn had more associations with the New Testament than children of churchless mothers. The children of the pentecostal, Dutch reformed, and catholic mothers scored in between those of the strictly orthodox reformed and churchless mothers. God is Creator was mentioned most often by the children of

TABLE II. Means of biblical content of children's open God concepts by religious denomination of mothers

	Strictly orthodox reformed	Orthodox reformed	Pentecostal	Dutch reformed	Catholic	Churchless	<i>F</i> (5,166)	<i>p</i> <
Abstract biblical	1.16 _A	1.35 _A	1.28 _A	1.27 _A	0.28 _B	0.30 _B	2.64	0.05
Old Testament	2.26	0.52	0.00	0.07	0.20	0.10	1.91	n.s.
New Testament	0.68 _B	1.57 _A	0.22 _{BC}	0.18 _{BC}	0.32 _{BC}	0.16 _C	13.34	0.0005
Christmas	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.20	0.41	0.35	n.s.
Easter	0.16	0.30	0.22	0.73	0.92	1.00	1.28	n.s.
cross/resurrection								
God is Jesus	0.26	0.39	0.17	0.40	0.48	0.29	0.59	n.s.
God is Creator	0.79 _{AB}	0.70 _{AB}	1.56 _A	0.80 _{AB}	0.64 _{AB}	0.51 _B	2.3	0.05
Biblical	0.79	0.65	0.56	1.47	0.92	0.73	1.82	n.s.
anthropomorphism								
Onlogical	0.37	0.26	0.22	0.27	0.28	0.61	1.23	n.s.
Biblical								

Note: Means in the same row that do not share the same subscripts differ significantly for denominations of mothers ($p < 0.05$).

TABLE III. Means of biblical content of children's open God concepts by religious denomination of schools

	Strictly orthodox reformed	Orthodox reformed	Dutch reformed	Interde- nominational	Catholic	State	<i>F</i> (5,166)	<i>p</i> <
Abstract biblical	1.16	1.29	0.51	0.55	0.47	0.22	0.41	n.s.
Old Testament	2.84 _A	0.03 _B	0.03 _B	0.13 _B	0.19 _B	0.00 _B	5.01	0.0005
New Testament	1.26 _A	0.87 _A	0.17 _B	0.26 _B	0.17 _B	0.04 _B	11.55	0.0005
Christmas	0.00	0.00	0.20	0.04	0.61	0.57	1.27	n.s.
Easter	0.16 _B	0.39 _B	0.64 _{AB}	1.36 _A	0.57 _B	0.22 _B	2.69	0.05
cross/resurrection								
God is Jesus	0.21	0.42	0.11	0.36	0.42	0.17	1.46	n.s.
God is Creator	0.74	1.19	0.77	0.81	0.47	0.09	2.21	n.s.
Biblical	0.58 _{BC}	0.90 _{AB}	0.86 _{AB}	1.32 _A	0.61 _{BC}	0.09 _C	4.49	0.005
anthropomorphism								
Onlogical	0.37	0.23	0.51	0.43	0.58	0.22	0.82	n.s.
biblical								

Note: Means in the same row that do not share the same subscripts differ significantly for denominations of schools ($p < 0.05$).

pentecostal mothers and least often by those of non-affiliated mothers. The other children had intermediate scores.

As shown in Table III, children of the strictly orthodox reformed school talked more about the Old Testament than the pupils of the other schools who hardly even mentioned this. The children of both orthodox reformed schools scored higher on

the New Testament than the other children. Pupils of the interdenominational school referred more often to Easter than the ones of both orthodox reformed schools and the catholic and state schools. The preschoolers of the Dutch reformed school scored in between the ones of the interdenominational and other schools. Finally, the interdenominational pupils used the most biblical anthropomorphisms in their descriptions about God, whereas the children of the state school used least. The preschoolers of the orthodox reformed, Dutch reformed, catholic, and strictly orthodox reformed had intermediate scores. No other effects were found.

Influence of Children's Gender and Age, and Religious Denomination of Mothers and Schools on Children's Closed God Concepts

To investigate whether closed God concepts differ for boys and girls, age, and religious denomination of mothers and schools, a MANOVA was performed. Children's scale scores on the five closed dimensions, i.e. loving God, potency of God, punishing God, God as friend, and God like parents were used as dependent variables, and gender, age (four, five, and six years), and maternal and schools' religious denomination as between subject variables.

A significant multivariate main effect of age on children's closed God concepts was found, $F(10, 316) = 4,16, p < 0.0005$. Effects of age were univariately significant on one dependent variable only, i.e. for God like parents $F(2, 162) = 20,78, p < 0.0005$. Four-year-olds scored higher on God like parents ($M = 1.72$) than the five- and six-year-olds (means are 1.25 and 1.14, respectively).

Maternal and schools' denomination both had an independent multivariate main effect on children's closed God concepts, $F(25, 588) = 1,90, p < 0.01$ and $F(25, 588) = 2,94, p < 0.0005$, respectively. Interaction effects were not analyzed, again due to empty cells. Effects on three of the five closed dimensions were univariately significant for maternal denomination (Loving God, Potency of God, and God as friend) and four of the five for schools' denomination (Loving God, Potency of God, Punishing God, and God as friend). Tables IV and V show the means on closed God concepts of the groups children belonging to the six different religious denominations of mothers and schools, respectively.

TABLE IV. Means of children's closed God concepts by religious denomination of mothers

	Strictly orthodox reformed	Orthodox reformed	Pentecostal	Dutch reformed	Catholic	Churchless	$F(5,162)$	$p <$
Loving God	2.89 _A	2.85 _A	2.94 _A	2.85 _A	2.87 _A	2.53 _B	3.71	0.005
Potency of God	2.94 _A	2.88 _{AB}	2.96 _A	2.73 _{AB}	2.72 _B	2.43 _C	5.25	0.0005
Punishing God	2.08	2.18	1.68	1.79	1.83	1.76	1.74	n.s.
God as friend	2.33 _{BC}	2.91 _A	2.89 _A	2.87 _A	2.67 _{AB}	2.19 _C	2.41	0.05
God like parents	1.06	1.22	1.53	1.43	1.35	1.24	1.13	n.s.

Note: Means in the same row that do not share the same subscripts differ significantly for denominations of mothers ($p < 0.05$).

TABLE V. Means of children's closed God concepts by religious denomination of schools

	Strictly orthodox reformed	Orthodox reformed	Dutch reformed	Interde- nominational	Catholic	State	<i>F</i> (5,162)	<i>p</i> <
Loving God	2.89 _A	2.92 _A	2.86 _A	2.84 _A	2.59 _B	2.20 _C	10.87	0.0005
Potency of God	2.94 _A	2.97 _A	2.78 _{AB}	2.65 _{BC}	2.51 _{CD}	2.30 _D	4.87	0.0005
Punishing God	2.07 _A	2.11 _A	1.97 _{AB}	1.65 _{CD}	1.72 _{BC}	2.01 _{AB}	2.38	0.05
God as friend	2.33 _B	2.87 _A	2.59 _{AB}	2.67 _{AB}	2.39 _B	1.83 _C	2.81	0.05
God like parents	1.06	1.23	1.44	1.37	1.24	1.39	0.38	n.s.

Note: Means in the same row that do not share the same subscripts differ significantly for denominations of schools ($p < 0.05$).

As can be seen in Table IV, children having religiously affiliated mothers viewed God as more loving than the children of churchless mothers. The preschoolers of strictly orthodox reformed and pentecostal mothers perceived God as more potent than the ones of catholic mothers, who in turn had higher scores on potency of God than children of churchless mothers. The children of the orthodox and Dutch reformed mothers scored in between those of the strictly orthodox reformed and pentecostal, and catholic mothers. Children belonging to orthodox and Dutch reformed, pentecostal, and catholic churches scored higher on God as friend than the churchless children. The strictly orthodox reformed children scored in between the catholic and churchless ones.

Concerning influences of school denomination on children's closed God concepts (see Table V) it was found that pupils of the (strictly) orthodox and Dutch reformed schools, as well as the interdenominational school, had a more loving idea about God than the ones of the catholic school, followed by the pupils of the state school. The preschoolers of both orthodox reformed schools had the highest scores on potency of God, followed by the pupils of the Dutch reformed, interdenominational, catholic, and state school, respectively. A punishing God was mentioned most often by the preschoolers of both orthodox reformed schools, and least often by those of the interdenominational and catholic school. The pupils of the state and Dutch reformed school scored in between those of both orthodox reformed schools and the interdenominational school on a punishing God. Children of the orthodox reformed school viewed God more as a friend than the ones of the strictly orthodox reformed and catholic school who in turn perceived God more as a friend than the ones of the state school. The children of the Dutch reformed and interdenominational school scored in between those of the orthodox reformed school and strictly orthodox reformed and catholic school on God as friend.

Discussion

The present research examined denominational, age, and gender differences in young children's God concepts. Six religious denominations were distinguished

among children's home (mothers) and school environment. Children's God concepts were operationalized as children's spontaneous references to nine different elements of the Bible and as children's ideas about five potential characteristics of God, i.e. a loving, potent, and punishing God, God as friend, and God like parents. Generally, many denominational trends were found that correspond to theological descriptions of mainline Dutch religious beliefs (cf. Hoekstra & Ipenburg, 2000; Stoffels, 1995). In accordance with our expectation, but contrary to our previous results (De Roos, *et al.*, 2001a), both mothers' and schools' religious denomination had independent effects on preschoolers' God concepts. This finding can be explained by the high percentage of orthodox believing families among the subjects of the present study.

With respect to biblical elements, we found somewhat stronger significant effects for school denomination than for maternal denomination which resembles our previous finding that teachers' God concepts were related to a biblical God concept in kindergarteners (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). In school the children are probably taught more regularly and extensively about the Bible than in their homes. Concerning potential behavioral characteristics of God, stronger effects for school denomination than for maternal denomination were also found. It was demonstrated that mothers' denomination influences the idea of God as potent, loving, and as a friend. Effects on the latter two characteristics are consistent with our earlier findings of a relationship between mothers' religious practices and the view of God as a friend and children's concept of God as a loving friend (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). School denomination had effects on the same behavioral descriptions and on a punishing God concept as well.

Looking at effects of mothers' denomination on children's spontaneous references to aspects of the Bible, it was found that differences between the denominations emerged for abstract biblical elements, references to the New Testament, and God is Creator. Children of all reformed and pentecostal mothers use more abstract biblical terms than children of catholic and churchless mothers. The former mothers probably talk more about God and also more in an abstract biblical way than the latter ones. The children of these mothers are probably confronted more with these terms in the church as well than children of catholic and non-affiliated mothers. Despite the fact that the pentecostal children do not attend orthodox religious schools (about only half of the pentecostal children go to open protestant schools and half of them to catholic or neutral state schools), they still utter many abstract biblical words in their descriptions about God. They also mention most often that God is the creator. Non-affiliated children have the lowest scores on God is Creator, other children score in between.

References to the New Testament were most often given by children belonging to the orthodox reformed church, followed by the strictly orthodox reformed children and least often by children of non-affiliated mothers. Pentecostal, Dutch reformed, and catholic children scored in between the strictly orthodox reformed and non-affiliated children. Non-affiliated and open christian mothers probably spend no or less time reading biblical stories at home than orthodox mothers (cf. Stoffels, 1995). However, a remarkable finding is that children of the pentecostal mothers hardly

told stories of the New Testament, whereas their parents are highly committed to their religion (cf. Mockabee, Quin Monson & Tobin Grant, 2001; Stoffels, 1995).

This can be explained in a few ways. First, it may be due to the environment in which the data were collected. All children were interviewed at school except the pentecostal ones who were visited at home. It may be that a home environment triggers less 'knowledge' about biblical stories than a school situation (cf. Coles, 1990). However, about half of the pentecostal children did not attend schools in which Bible stories were regularly told. Second, it may be caused by an interaction of maternal denomination with school type. All pentecostal children were pupils of open christian or religiously neutral schools. When they attend Dutch reformed schools they are read from the Bible about two to three times a week. The pentecostal children probably receive most religious instruction at home and at church, whereas orthodox reformed children (who almost all attend orthodox reformed schools) are widely read from the Bible at home, in church, as well as at school (every day). It may be that the pentecostal children would say more about the New Testament if they went to orthodox schools. One could even hypothesize that the pentecostal children, attending Dutch reformed schools, will refer to the New Testament more often than the ones attending catholic schools since in Dutch reformed schools more attention is paid to Bible stories than in catholic schools (Kwakman & Van Oers, 1993). We could not analyze the interaction effects between maternal and schools' denomination. Comparing both (small) groups of pentecostal children using analysis of variance showed, however, that they did not differ in talking about the New Testament. Third, it may be due to the religious history of the mothers. Only one-third of the mothers were originally raised evangelical/pentecostal. The other mothers were relatively recently converted and originally came from open protestant or catholic churches. It may be that children of the latter mothers are less used to Bible reading than the ones whose mothers have longer histories in pentecostal churches, and, therefore, are less inclined to tell New Testament stories. Additional research among larger groups of pentecostal children is recommended to study these three explanations, and to determine whether our findings are sample specific.

Although the Old Testament was mentioned almost exclusively by children of the strictly orthodox reformed church, the differences with other denominations were not significant which can be caused by a high standard deviation in answers.

However, we did find a significant difference in references to the Old Testament for school denominations. Only the strictly orthodox pupils talked about the Old Testament, especially about Adam and Eve and the original sin. This is compatible with their denomination's theological ideas about the need for conversion, i.e. to get a new, less sinful heart (Stoffels, 1995). This may also be in line with didactics of religious instruction at school. In many strictly orthodox reformed schools, the emphasis is on the history of the relationship of God with His people. So, the Bible reading starts with Genesis followed by the other parts of the Old Testament and New Testament, respectively. Two-thirds of the time is spent on the stories of the Old Testament. In other reformed schools, however, a more thematic approach is used in which no strict order of the Bible is followed (Imelman, Meijer, Van der

Ploeg & Wissink, 1986). The strictly orthodox reformed and the other orthodox pupils tell a lot of stories about the New Testament as well. Other pupils hardly even mention the New Testament. Another eye-catching difference in biblical elements was that the Easter story was most often told by the interdenominational pupils, followed by the Dutch reformed ones, whereas the pupils of the other denominations had relatively low scores on Easter. Since Easter is the most important protestant holiday and since our data collection took place around Easter, we would expect the orthodox reformed pupils to elaborate at great length on the Easter story. We may explain these contra-intuitive findings by the quantity and content of religious education at school. Both orthodox reformed schools pay a lot attention to all kinds of Bible stories, i.e. five days a week during the whole year. Therefore, the pupils of these schools probably have ready knowledge about many parts of the Bible, and not only around christian holidays. The interdenominational school, especially, spends a lot of time on christian holidays like Easter and the Easter story. About once a week the teachers read a biblical story. Since the interdenominational pupils hear less about the Bible than the orthodox reformed ones and hear most stories around christian holidays, they probably associate God predominantly with the most recent christian holiday which was Easter in the present study. The interdenominational pupils also described God most often as a biblical human being, like Jesus having a beard and wearing a white dress and sandals (cf. Brunner, 2001) which is compatible with the most recently told Easter story.

Our last issue regarding elements of the Bible deals with Christmas. Although there were no significant differences in the mentioning of Christmas (probably due to a high standard deviation in answers) it was found that Christmas was mentioned almost exclusively by the catholic children/pupils, non-affiliated children and pupils of the state school. Likely due to extensive commercial attention for Christmas, it presumably is the most well known christian holiday for these groups of children leading them to recall it even in springtime.

Looking more specifically at effects of maternal denomination on children's closed God concepts, a striking finding was that God is a loving entity for all religiously affiliated children. Most of these children emphasize God as friend as well, except for the strictly orthodox reformed children. The latter ones and the pentecostal children underline God's potency. Slightly lower scores on potency were found for the orthodox and Dutch reformed, and catholic children, respectively. Non-affiliated children viewed God the least as potent. The relatively low ratings of the strictly orthodox reformed children on God as friend possibly reflect their denomination's idea of God as extremely great, sacred, and transcendental (cf. Stoffels, 1995). It may be that God's holiness and supremacy is not compatible with the view of God as a close companion (cf. Gorsuch, 1967).

Our hypotheses concerning the influence of school denomination on children's closed God concepts were generally confirmed. In line with our predictions, the pupils of all reformed schools perceived God as more loving than those of the catholic and state schools, respectively (cf. De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). Also as expected, the children of both types of orthodox reformed schools viewed God as more potent than those of the interdenominational, catholic, and state school. However, unlike

results of De Roos *et al.* (2001a) the Dutch reformed pupils had a similar potent view of God as the orthodox groups of children. In accordance with the hypothesis, the interdenominational children scored in between the Dutch reformed and catholic children on potency. Yet the interdenominational pupils resembled the Dutch reformed pupils more than the catholic ones in loving God and God as friend, whereas they reported comparably low ratings of a punishing God concept as the catholic children. Thus, the interdenominational pupils endorse elements of both catholic and protestant doctrine.

A striking finding is that although a punishing God was less emphasized as a loving God concept (cf. De Roos *et al.*, 2001a; Nelsen, Cheek & Au, 1985), differences in a punishing God concept were found among a number of school denominations. Strictly orthodox reformed pupils' higher endorsement of a punishing God concept was expected. However, comparably high ratings of a punishing God among the orthodox reformed pupils were not predicted, neither the relatively high ratings of the children from the Dutch reformed and state school (cf. De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). These findings may be explained by the part of The Netherlands in which the research took place (cf. Knippenberg, 1992). The data of the earlier study were mainly collected in the south-west and east part, whereas the present data came from the (north)west part of The Netherlands. It may be that a punishing and potent God concept is more emphasized in reformed schools than in catholic or interdenominational schools in the north-west part than in the south-west and east part of The Netherlands. The shift to modern/postmodern theologies described in De Roos *et al.* (2001a) and De Roos, Miedema, and Iedema (2001b) doesn't seem to have been generalized to all parts of The Netherlands. Institutional views on God within reformed schools seem to prevail here over a personal construction of God.

However, it remains remarkable that the pupils of the state school view God as punishing as the ones of the reformed schools and as more punishing than the ones at the interdenominational school. It is conceivable that this result is due to the specific population attending this particular state school. All parents of the pupils of this state school were non-affiliated, whereas in the former study children of a lot of church members attended state schools as well (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). It may be that many parents of the present state school doubt the existence of God due to the suffering in the world, don't believe in God or even blame God for wars, disasters, and poverty which may color their children's view on God in a less loving and more 'negative', i.e. punishing way. This suggestion is in line with our previous finding that children's negative fantasies about God were predicted by parents' doubts about the existence of God and their problems with suffering (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a). It is also consistent with the relatively low response rate of parents belonging to the present state school. Of this school only 70% of the mothers and 50% of the fathers returned the questionnaires, whereas over all schools and parents this percentage was 84%. Further research is needed to test this explanation.

The catholic group deserves some attention here. Children of catholic mothers have about the same loving, potent, and intimate (God as friend) view of God as children of orthodox and Dutch reformed mothers, whereas catholic pupils have lower scores on these characteristics than both reformed groups of pupils. Thus, it

seems that God is more existent for children of catholic mothers than for the ones of catholic schools. Both groups of catholic kindergarteners talked relatively little about aspects of the Bible. The latter result is in line with our previous study (De Roos *et al.*, 2001a).

Finally, some gender and age differences in God concepts were found. Boys identified God more with Jesus than girls. It may be that boys think more of the miracles Jesus performed than girls and, therefore, mention more often that God is Jesus than girls (cf. Tamminen, 1991). No gender differences in closed God concepts were found. Girls did not view God as more loving than boys and boys did not stress the potency of God more than girls. These results are in line with those of some studies among adults (Greeley, 1989; Roof & Roof, 1984) and children (Dickie *et al.*, 1997). Older preschoolers did not refer more often to the different aspects of the Bible than the younger ones. With respect to content of children's closed God concepts it was shown that four-year-old children perceived God more like their parents than the five- and six-year-olds. The youngest preschoolers are probably more dependent on their parents than the older ones and, subsequently, more often refer to their parents in their idea of God (cf. Kirkpatrick, 1999).

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