Influence of Maternal Denomination, God Concepts, and Child-Rearing Practices on Young Children's God Concepts

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This study tests a model of individual differences in God concepts among kindergarteners, based on social learning and projection theory. Relations among maternal education, religious denomination, God concepts, child-rearing practices, and young children's God concepts were examined. Subjects were 363 Dutch preschoolers (mean age = 66 months) and 271 of their mothers belonging to three religious denominations (open Christian, orthodox Christian, and nonaffiliated). Child-rearing practices as well as God concepts were measured using questionnaires. God concepts were operationalized as ideas about potential characteristics of God. The model was partly supported. Maternal orthodox Christian denomination, God concepts, and child-rearing practices all had effects on children's "potent God" concept, confirming all parts of the model. Differences in children's "punishing God" concept were explained by strict child-rearing practices, providing evidence for projection theory only. Children's "loving and caring God" concepts were predicted by mothers' "loving God" concept, lending support for social learning theory.

INTRODUCTION

Although antecedents of God concepts have been a continuing source of fascination to psychologists of religion, they have been little studied among children (cf. Heller 1986; Hertel and Donahue 1995; Spilka, Addison, and Rosensohn 1975). Previous investigators of God concepts among preschoolers and older children have, for the most part, concentrated on children's age differences, focusing mainly on the role of cognitive development in God concepts (cf. Fowler 1981; Nye and Carlson 1984; Smoliak 1999; Tamminen et al. 1988). However, we know relatively little about the origins of individual differences in God concepts at a given age, especially in young children. The study of the sources of the concept of God is important because it has often been considered crucial in the development and formation of an individual's personal faith (Hyde 1990). God concepts influence religious feelings and experiences, as well as devotional practices (Hyde 1990; Tamminen 1991). God concepts may also indirectly become related to ethnic prejudice and political tolerance in adulthood via their possible association with aspects of religious fundamentalism, theocratic beliefs, and religious commitment and participation (Karpov 2002; Laythe et al. 2002). In addition, God concepts may have an effect on attitudes toward health. For example, emphasis on God as a potent helper can positively affect children's and adults' coping with chronic illness and death (Pendleton et al. 2002).

By *God concept* we mean subjects' ideas concerning the different potential behavioral characteristics of God, such as God as a loving, comforting, caring, potent, and/or punishing entity

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FIGURE 1
A SOCIALIZATION THEORETICAL MODEL OF INTERRELATIONS AMONG
MOTHERS' RELIGIOUS AND CHILD-REARING CHARACTERISTICS
AND CHILDREN'S GOD CONCEPTS
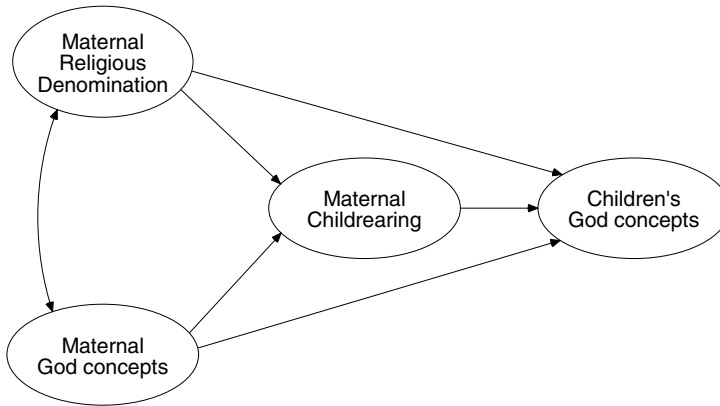
(cf. De Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001; Dickie et al. 1997). We refer to the Western Christian tradition here.

Framed by a socialization theoretical model (see Figure 1), we propose that both social learning (Bandura 1971; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997) and projection theory (cf. Rizzuto 1984; Spiro and D'Andrade 1958) provide useful explanations for understanding individual differences in young children's God concepts. We will concentrate on the socialization of children by their mothers, who, because they are often the primary caregivers, children have emotional ties with and feel a natural dependence on (cf. Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). Socialization by mothers was 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 do fathers (Acock and Bengston 1978; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Tamminen et al. 1988).

The model presupposes that mothers influence their children's God concepts through social learning processes, here operationalized by a measure of maternal God concepts. Children's God concepts are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of parental example (cf. Bandura 1971). In their religious instruction, mothers intentionally teach their children about God. They provide models by explicitly talking about God and their views on God to their children (cf. Herzbrun 1993). Children's God concepts may also be formed through more unintentional processes, such as symbolic and vicarious conditioning by mothers (Bandura 1971). Symbolic conditioning is the process by which children form evaluative reactions toward God, certain things, or other people on the basis of little or no personal contact with them. Such responses to God, an initial unknown, abstract, and invisible entity for children, are probably developed by the connection of "God" with symbolic stimuli, often in the form of emotion-arousing words used by parents. Children may develop positive or negative values of God depending on the symbols with which God has been associated. For example, God may be evaluated as pleasant by children through their mothers' repetitive pairing of the word God with adjectives having positive connotations, such as nice, kind, friendly. In vicarious learning, the emotional responses of parents when talking about God are conveyed through vocal, facial, and postural manifestations. This can arouse strong emotional reactions in the observing child, reinforcing certain God concepts (cf. Bandura 1971). For example, mothers' happy faces when talking about a nurturing God may reinforce children's idea of God as a trustful, loving, and caring entity.

In the present study we use explicit maternal God concepts as an operationalization of social learning and we expect young children to have God concepts that share the same features as their mothers' God concepts. In line with this expectation, among older children (from age 10 onward, see Tamminen 1991) and adolescents (Acock and Bengston 1978; Clark, Worthington, and Danser 1988; Gibson, Francis, and Pearson 1990) similarities between parents' and children's God concepts and religious beliefs, church attendance, attitudes toward Christianity, religious experiences, and religious practices have been found. Only one study dealt with kindergarteners (de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001). This study showed that the more mothers perceive God as a friend, the more their children will view God as a father or friend. A mother's view of God as distant was related to a less caring God concept among children. Children emphasized God less as punishing than as loving (cf. Hertel and Donahue 1995). Furthermore, young children's punishing God was not associated with maternal God concepts. The subjects in this study were mainly religiously nonaffiliated and "open" liberal Christians. Generally, mothers had low scores on a strict view on God. The present research will examine whether the above-mentioned findings will hold for a more diverse religious sample, including three conservative, orthodox Protestant subdenominations. Since orthodox Protestants have been found to view God both as loving and punishing (Stoffels 1995) and since a substantial number of our subjects are orthodox Christian, we hypothesize a significant relation between maternal and children's views of a strict and punishing God.

The second way the model hypothesizes that mothers affect their children's God concepts is through their child-rearing practices (cf. Hyde 1990) (see Figure 1). Characteristics of maternal child-rearing practices are thought to be projected by children onto their images of God (cf. Hertel and Donahue 1995). However, findings concerning the association of child-rearing practices with children's and youth's God concepts or other aspects of religion are inconclusive. Furthermore, only one study has focused on preschoolers (Dickie et al. 1997). Some studies demonstrated independent effects of child-rearing practices on aspects of children's and youth's religion (Hertel and Donahue 1995; Nelsen 1981; Potvin 1977; Tamminen 1991). For example, parents' anger toward children (from age seven and older) was negatively related to children's view of God's closeness, reality, care, and forgiveness (Tamminen 1991). Hertel and Donahue (1995) studied both parental God concepts as well as perceived child-rearing attitudes as predictors of youth's (fifth through ninth graders) God concepts. They found that parents' images of God as loving and authoritarian, and youth's images of parents as loving and authoritarian, predicted similar images of God among the youngsters.

Other research has not found independent effects of child-rearing practices on children's God concepts and concepts of prayer (Dickie et al. 1997; Tamminen 1991; Worten and Dollinger 1986). Dickie et al. (1997) studied, among other things, an aspect of child-rearing practices, specifically parental discipline, as a predictor of children's (4 to 11 year olds) God concepts. Children had to rate their mothers' and fathers' discipline on love and power. Although love-oriented discipline was positively and power-oriented discipline was negatively related to children's perceptions of God's nurturance and power, type of discipline did not contribute independently to explaining God's power and God's nurturance. Also, parental use of corporal punishment was not related to a picture of God as stern, punishing, and frightening (Tamminen 1991).

The existence of the above-mentioned ambiguous findings may be due to differences in methods used in assessing child-rearing practices, for example, parental reports (Tamminen 1991; Worten and Dollinger 1986) versus children's perceptions (Dickie et al. 1997; Hertel and Donahue 1995), in the operationalizations of child-rearing practices, such as parental discipline (Dickie et al. 1997), child-rearing attitudes (Hertel and Donahue 1995), and corporal punishment (Nelsen 1981; Tamminen 1991), and/or to difference in the age of the children studied. It may be that parental views on their child-rearing practices yield better results in the prediction of young children's God concepts than children's perceptions of their parents' methods of child rearing (cf. Dickie et al. 1997). In the present study, we use maternal information about child-rearing

practices. We will focus on aspects of control and nurturance in the methods of child rearing and expect strict and authoritarian child-rearing practices to be related to a punishing God concept among the preschoolers. We expect that more loving and supportive child-rearing practices will lead to a more loving perception of God among the children.

In our model we also assume an indirect link between the God concepts of mothers and children, connected through child-rearing practices in which mothers may demonstrate (some of the) characteristics they attribute to their God (cf. Hertel and Donahue 1995). If this hypothesis is valid, there should be a connection between maternal God concepts and child-rearing practices. Child-rearing goals and practices indeed have been found to differ as a function of religious beliefs. For example, it was found that parents who expressed the liberal religious belief that humans are basically moral tend to be permissive in their child-rearing attitudes. Those who embraced the belief that humans are at root immoral (a belief quite often shared with a literal interpretation of the Bible and its teachings, which is common in conservative Christian circles) expressed authoritarian child-rearing attitudes (Clayton 1988; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a). Parents' view of God as loving was associated with youth's view of parents having loving child-rearing attitudes (Hertel and Donahue 1995). Further support for the connection between religious beliefs and child-rearing practices comes from cross-cultural research (cf. Lambert, Triandis, and Wolf 1959; Rohner 1975). These studies have shown that cultures in which loving, nurturing parenting practices are predominant tend to have religious belief systems characterized by benevolent deities, whereas cultures in which rejecting, authoritarian child-rearing practices predominate tend to believe in more malevolent deities. In the present research we hypothesize that loving and authoritarian views of God among mothers lead to nurturing and strict child-rearing practices, respectively.

Finally, in predicting kindergarteners' God concepts from maternal God concepts and child-rearing practices, we control for maternal religious denomination since children's God concepts (de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2003), adults' God concepts (Noffke and McFadden 2001), and child-rearing practices (Alwin 1986; Danso, Hunsberger, and Pratt 1997; Ellison, Bartowski, and Segal 1996; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a, 1993b; Kelley, Power, and Wimbush 1992) have been found to differ as a function of denomination. In addition, we will control for (maternal) education, which has been found to be related to child-rearing practices (Deković 1991; Rispens, Hermans, and Meeus 1996) and aspects of religion (Alwin and Jackson 1982; Keysar and Kosmin 1995; Lehrer 1999; Loury 2004).

We understand maternal denomination as an aspect of children's socialization. Three main religious denominations will be distinguished among the mothers: nonaffiliated; "open Christian," consisting of Dutch Reformed and Catholic mothers; and "orthodox Christian," containing orthodox Reformed and Pentecostal mothers. Characteristic of the open Christian denomination is the inclusive view that God's revelation, as well as real experiences of God, are also found in religions other than Christianity. However, the revelation through Jesus Christ is interpreted as the ultimate means of salvation (cf. Miedema, 2000a, 2000b; Ziebertz 1994). The orthodox Christian parents adhere to a strict, exclusive Christian faith, believing that their religious faith is the only one that has the essential truth about humanity and deity (cf. Stoffels 1995). We expect maternal denomination and God concepts to be interrelated (cf. Noffke and McFadden 2001) without assuming a causal link. We expect that nonaffiliated mothers will have a more distant and less potent and loving concept of God than affiliated mothers. Orthodox Christians are assumed to have a more potent and punishing view on God than open Christians.

We also hypothesize that maternal denomination will affect child-rearing practices (cf. Danso, Hunsberger, and Pratt 1997) and children's God concepts (cf. de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2003). Orthodox Christian mothers are presumed to use more authoritarian child-rearing practices than other mothers and we propose that they reinforce their children's autonomy less than other parents (Alwin 1986; Danso, Hunsberger, and Pratt 1997; Ellison, Bartkowski, and Segal 1996; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a, 1993b; Wiley 1997). Children of orthodox Christian mothers are

expected to have a more punishing and potent view of God than do other children, whereas the nonaffiliated children are hypothesized to have a less loving, caring, and potent God concept than the other preschoolers (cf. de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001, 2003). In summary, in this article our goal is to test a model based on social learning and projection theory that predicts that young children's God concepts come from maternal God concepts and child-rearing practices, controlling for education and religious denomination.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 363 Dutch preschoolers (mean age = 66 months) and 271 of their mothers, sampled in two studies performed in 1999 and 2001 (92 mothers did not return the questionnaires). In 1999, 165 kindergartners (mean age 64 months) participated along with 105 of their parents (see de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001). These respondents were distributed over eight elementary schools belonging to four different religious denominations; 17 children of an orthodox Reformed school in Amersfoort, 75 children of a Dutch Reformed school in Nijmegen in the province of Zeeland, 26 children in two Catholic schools in Zeeland (southwest part of the Netherlands), and 47 children in three state schools in Zeeland and Nijmegen. Amersfoort and Nijmegen are medium-sized Dutch cities in the middle and east part of the Netherlands, respectively.

In 2001, we examined 198 kindergarteners and 166 of their mothers. The mean age of these children was 68 months. These children were recruited from six elementary schools belonging to five different religious denominations and from one Pentecostal church. All children came from the "Randstad," a conglomoration of cities in the western part of the Netherlands. There were 49 children from two orthodox Reformed schools, 26 children from a Dutch Reformed school, 30 children from a Catholic school, 53 children in an interdenominational school (open Protestant and Catholic), 20 children in a state school, and 20 children from a Pentecostal church. The children from the Pentecostal church attended orthodox Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Catholic, and state schools.

Among the mothers in both studies, 43.5 percent regarded themselves as churchless, 15.2 percent were Dutch Reformed, 14 percent were Catholic (thus 29.2 percent were open Christian), 21 percent belonged to orthodox Reformed churches, and 6.3 percent belonged to a Pentecostal church (thus 27.3 percent were orthodox Christian). The data collection for both studies took place between March and July.

Measures and Procedures

Overview

Children's and mothers' God concepts were measured using interviews and questionnaires. Maternal education, denomination, and child-rearing practices were studied employing a questionnaire. All children were interviewed individually by a female examiner in a 45-minute session to assess their God concepts, as well as their concepts of self and of others and their attachment representations (see de Roos, Miedema, and Iedema 2001). The 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 of God and to tell something about the drawing. Second, they answered open questions about the nature of God (for example, what is God, where is God, what is God able to do, etc.; see de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001). After that, the children completed scales referring to concepts of self and others.

Then the children were presented with a 23-item structured questionnaire concerning potential characteristics of God. Finally, the children's mother-child attachment representations were measured.

Scales for Child-Rearing Practices and Maternal and Children's God Concepts

To reveal possible dimensions of maternal child-rearing practices and the God concepts of both mothers and children, we conducted principal components explorative factor analyses with varimax rotation on the items and responses for each measure. A minimum eigenvalue of 1.00 and the scree test were used as criteria for extracting factors. Only items with absolute factor scores >0.4 were selected. Based on each factor, two scales were constructed by averaging the subjects' scores on each (randomly chosen) half of the constituent items. The two scales per factor were used as indicator variables in a latent variable model (Arbucle and Wothke 1999). In this way, we established how well the indicator variables represent the underlying latent variables. Using this method the effect of measurement errors in the observed variables is eliminated (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993). The standardized coefficients of a latent variable to its indicator variables are standardized validity coefficients (Bollen 1989), comparable to Cronbach's α. These coefficients are depicted in the last column of Table 1. Table 1 also shows the variables being used, with numbers, means, ranges, and standard deviations.

Maternal Child-Rearing Practices

To assess maternal child-rearing practices, mothers completed a 29-item questionnaire that is a Dutch version of the Childrearing Practices Report (CRPR) developed by Block (1965), four items of a Dutch version of the Family Life in America (FLA) (Wolins 1963), and six items of the Dutch questionnaire "Meningen Over de Opvoeding in het Algemeen"' (MOA) (General Beliefs about Childrearing) (Angenent 1974, 1976). Items were chosen on an empirical (Deković, Janssens, and Gerris 1991; Rickel and Biasatti 1982; Siebenheller 1990; Trickett and Susman 1988) and conceptual basis, with reference to maternal nurturance and control.

The FLA and MOA are questionnaires that use a six-point Likert-type scale. The Dutch version of the CRPR used here consisted of 100 items (cf. Siebenheller 1990), an addition of nine items to the original CRPR. The added items concerned parental restrictiveness and disciplinary practices, for example: "My child has to obey me, no nonsense" (No. 97) or "When my child behaves bad I will punish him/her by boxing his/her ear and slapping" (No. 95). Usually, the CRPR is administered in a Q-sort format with a forced-choice distribution. Deković, Janssens, and Gerris (1991) have shown that the CRPR can be used in a shorter questionnaire form simplifying the administration, scoring, and interpretation of the CRPR (cf. Rickel and Biasatti 1982). For this reason, the CRPR in the present study was employed just like the FLA and the MOA in the form of a questionnaire using a six-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all descriptive of me*) to 6 (*highly descriptive of me*).

Factor analysis yielded four scales, which we called *Strictness*, *Promoting Autonomy*, *Positive Relationship*, and *Openness*, and that explained 34.3 percent of the variance. *Strictness* refers to child-rearing practices that are characterized by a high degree of parental control, narrow limits on the child's behavior, and authoritarian maternal discipline (11 items; CRPR item numbers 97, 1 (reversed loading), 70, 23, 14, 73, and 95; MOA item numbers 29, 36, 31, and 45). *Promoting Autonomy* describes maternal encouragement of children's independent activity, responsibility, and problem-solving skills (nine items; CRPR item numbers 75, 6, 33, 41, 100, 67, and 21; MOA item number 41; FLA item "I allow my child to make a lot of decisions"). *Positive Relationship* shows the presence of affection, acceptance, and playful interactions, and the relative absence of conflicts and disappointment in the mother-child relationship (five items; CRPR item numbers

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE VARIABLES AND DIMENSIONS USED
($N = 271$). IN THE LAST COLUMN: LOADINGS OF THE OBSERVED VARIABLES
ON THE LATENT VARIABLES (The Measurement Part of the Latent Variable Model)

	Number of Cases				
Latent Variable	Junior Education	Secondary Education	Vocational College or University		Standardized Coefficient
Mothers' education	28	127	116		1*
Maternal denominational affiliation**					
Open Christian (dummy)	79				1*
Orthodox Christian (dummy)	74				1*
Nonaffiliated (reference category)	118				–
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	
Maternal loving God, scale 1	1	6	4.19	1.62	0.96
Maternal loving God, scale 2	1	6	4.31	1.68	0.99
Maternal strict God, scale 1	1	6	2.76	1.41	0.83
Maternal strict God, scale 2	1	6	2.51	1.28	0.91
Maternal distant God, scale 1	1	6	2.34	1.28	0.74
Maternal distant God, scale 2	1	6	2.14	1.59	0.75
Child rearing: strictness, scale 1	1.17	6	3.01	0.97	0.78
Child rearing: strictness, scale 2	1	5.2	2.79	0.86	0.84
Child rearing: autonomy, scale 1	1.4	5.6	3.48	0.74	0.74
Child rearing: autonomy, scale 2	1	5.75	3.42	0.75	0.65
Child rearing: posit. relationship, scale 1	2.67	6	5.18	0.64	0.71
Child rearing: posit. relationship, scale 2	1.5	6	4.39	1.08	0.61
Child rearing: openness, scale 1	3.33	6	5.32	0.51	0.76
Child rearing: openness, scale 2	1	6	5.43	0.61	0.55
Children's potent God, scale 1	1	3	2.60	0.53	0.78
Children's potent God, scale 2	1	3	2.68	0.50	0.66
Children's punishing God, scale 1	1	3	1.80	0.80	0.83
Children's punishing God, scale 2	1	3	1.81	0.96	0.81
Children's caring God, scale 1	1	3	2.56	0.67	0.66
Children's caring God, scale 2	1	3	2.51	0.54	0.84
Children's loving God, scale 1	1	3	2.82	0.48	0.77
Children's loving God, scale 2	1	3	2.64	0.60	0.85
Children's God as like their parents, 1 item: God looks like daddy	1	3	1.42	0.79	0.58
Children's God as like their parents, 1 item: God looks like mummy	1	3	1.26	0.66	0.74

*This variable has only one indicator variable with coefficient 1.
**Maternal denominational affiliation is a nominal variable represented by dummies for open Christian and orthodox Christian mothers.

34, 40, 69 (reversed loading), 32 (reversed loading), and FLA item "My child and I often have conflicts" (reversed loading). *Openness* indicates the willingness of mothers to share both positive and negative feelings and experiences with their children (five items; CRPR item numbers 58, 94, 42, 76, and 18).

Maternal Education, Denomination, and God Concepts

Mothers were asked their highest level of completed education (junior education, secondary education, or vocational college and university) and their denominational affiliation (nonaffiliated, open Christian (open Protestant and Catholic), and orthodox Christian (orthodox Protestant and Pentecostal)). They completed a 25-item questionnaire about their own God concepts using a six-point Likert scale. The items are intended to involve God's nurturance and power (cf. Benson and Spilka 1973), that is, "God is caring," "God is comforting," "God preserves the earth," and "God sees everything."

We found three scales (explaining 70.8 percent of the variance), called *Loving God* (e.g., God loves people, God is patient, God is caring, God loves me even when I do something against His will, God is merciful; 15 items), *Strict God* (e.g., God condemns, God punishes, God is strict, God controls me; seven items), and *Distant God* (e.g., God is aloof, God is not available, and God is available for believing people only; three items).

Children's God Concepts

To tap into the children's God concepts, a 23-item questionnaire was used (cf. Dickie et al. 1997). The items are intended to involve different possible characteristics of God (i.e., God loves me, God makes me happy, God sees everything you do, God is angry when you do something bad). The experimenter read the items, and children rated each item on a three-point (no = 1, sometimes = 2, or yes = 3) scale.

Five scales were distinguished (explaining 53.4 percent of the variance), called *Potency of God* (e.g., God sees everything you do, God is the boss, God is very strong; seven items), *Punishing God* (e.g., God punishes often, God punishes when you are naughty, and God is angry when you do something bad; three items), *Caring God* (e.g., God helps people, God cares for people and animals, God can comfort you when you're sad; five items), *Loving God* (e.g., God loves me, God makes me happy, God is a friend, and God is nice; four items), and *God is like their parents* (e.g., God looks like daddy and God looks like mummy; two items).

Analysis Effects Study and Missing Mother Data

Before the research questions could be answered we first had to check whether subjects of the 1999 study and the 2001 study differed with respect to maternal education, the answers on the three dimensions of maternal God concepts, four dimensions of child-rearing practices, and five dimensions of children's God concepts. These dimensions (the two subscales of each measure were summarized and averaged) were used as dependent variables in a multivariate analysis of variance with study and maternal religious denomination (nonaffiliated, open Christian, and orthodox Christian) as between-subjects factors. The main effect of study was not significant, $F(13, 215) = 1.28$, ns, neither was the interaction effect between study and maternal religious denomination, $F(65, 1095) < 1$, ns. Thus, the two studies seem comparable with regard to the variables assessed here.

Ninety-two mothers did not return the questionnaires. They were excluded from the analyses, leading to 271 children and their mothers without missing data. We compared children's God concepts between the group without mother data and the group with mother data in a multivariate analysis of variance and found that there was no multivariate significant difference, $F(5, 353) = 1.76$, ns. To examine the research questions, structural equation modeling was used with the program *Amos* (Arbucle and Wothke 1999).

RESULTS

The path diagram in Figure 2 shows the results of the structural equation modeling. The model fits reasonably well: $\chi^2(292) = 362.19$, $p = 0.003$; normed fit index (NFI) = 0.98; relative fit index (RFI) = 0.98; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.03 (satisfactory values are a nonsignificant χ^2, NFI > 0.90, and RFI > 0.90; RMSEA < 0.05 indicates a close fit). The χ^2 is significant, but as Jöreskog and Sörbom (1993) have pointed out, it may not be realistic to assume that the model holds exactly in the population and, therefore, in practice it is more useful to regard χ^2 as a measure of fit rather than as a test statistic. In this regard, the RMSEA is preferable as it takes account of the error of approximation in the population.

In Figure 2, latent variables are drawn in ellipses. Unobserved residual or error variables are depicted in circles. Straight lines with one arrow represent an effect of one variable on another (so-called paths). Curved lines with two arrows represent a covariation between two exogenous (predictor) variables or an error covariation (a covariation between the residuals of two variables) between two endogenous (dependent) variables. For maternal religious denomination, two latent variables were used, comparing open Christians and orthodox Christians with the nonaffiliated as the reference category. These latent variables have only one indicator variable and therefore the measurement error cannot be estimated and is set to zero. The same holds for the latent variable mothers' education, also with only one indicator variable.

The final model shown in Figure 2 was created in a number of steps. First, we allowed the exogenous latent variables (the first column in Figure 2) to covary with each other (a common

FIGURE 2
STANDARDIZED ESTIMATES OF THE RELATIONS AMONG MATERNAL
EDUCATION, RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION, AND GOD CONCEPTS,
CHILD-REARING PRACTICES, AND CHILDREN'S GOD CONCEPTS
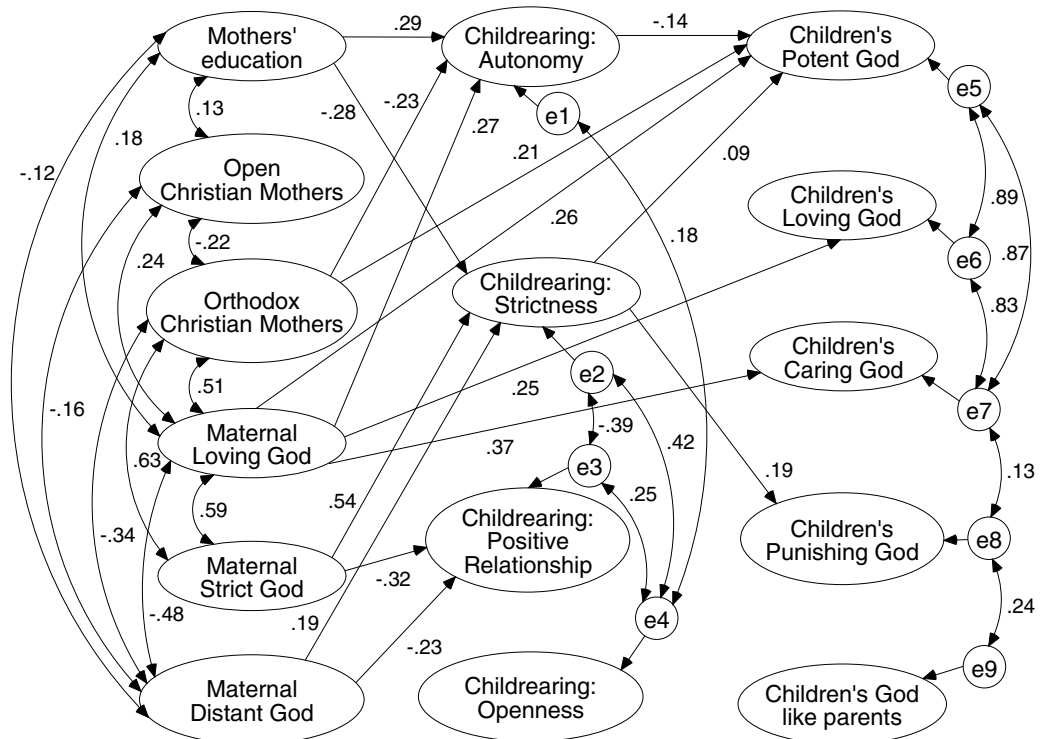
routine for latent variable analyses). Next, child-rearing practices latent variables were allowed to covary among each other, followed by the children's God concepts latent variables. Nonsignificant covariations were removed. Then, paths were drawn between the latent variables of, on the one hand, maternal education and religious denomination and mothers' God concepts, and, on the other hand, child-rearing practices. Nonsignificant paths were removed. After that, paths were traced between the latent variables of child-rearing practices and children's God concepts. Again, nonsignificant paths were removed. Next, paths were drawn between, on the one hand, the latent variables of maternal education and religious denomination and mothers' God concepts, and, on the other hand, children's God concepts, dropping the nonsignificant ones. Finally, modification indices were used to examine whether significant and theoretically meaningful paths could be added.

As can be seen in Figure 2 and in accordance with our expectations, differences were found in mothers' and children's God concepts as a function of their religious denomination and education. Open Christian mothers had a more loving and less distant view of God than did nonaffiliated parents. Orthodox Christian mothers perceive God as more loving and more strict, and also as less distant, than do the nonaffiliated ones. The orthodox mothers have children who see God as more potent than other children. In addition, in line with the hypothesis, these mothers promote children's autonomy less than other mothers do, which in turn leads to a more potent God concept among these children.

Mothers' education was positively related to mothers' view of a loving God and to an open Christian denomination. It was negatively related to a distant perception of God. Mothers' education was positively connected with the promotion of children's autonomy, leading to a less potent view on God among the kindergarteners. In addition, maternal education was negatively associated with strict child-rearing practices, resulting in a less punishing and potent image of God among the young children.

Our hypothesis that maternal God concepts contribute independently to children's God concepts was partly confirmed. As expected, mothers' loving God concept was positively related to children's loving and caring God concept, as well as to children's potent God concept. Furthermore, mothers' loving God led to the allowance of children's autonomy, which in turn led to a less potent perception of God among the children. However, children's punishing God and God is like their parents were not (directly) predicted by mothers' God concepts. In line with our hypotheses, a strict, authoritarian, and distant image of God among the mothers led to strict, authoritarian child-rearing practices, resulting in more potent and punishing God concepts for their children. The last finding and the relation found between autonomy and children's potent God concept confirms the expectation of independent effects of child-rearing practices on children's God concepts.

Mothers' strict and distant God negatively predicted a positive mother-child relationship, but this relationship had no effects on children's God concepts.

A number of error correlations were found among child-rearing practices and preschoolers' God concepts. Maternal strictness was negatively related to positive relationship and positively to openness. Promoting autonomy was positively associated with openness. Children's potent, loving, and caring God concepts were highly positively interrelated. Finally, small positive relations were found among children's punishing God concepts with children's caring God and God is like their parents concepts.

DISCUSSION

The present research tested a social learning and projection theoretical model of individual differences in preschoolers' God concepts by examining associations between maternal education, denomination and God concepts, child-rearing practices, and young children's God concepts. Mothers' and children's God concepts were operationalized as ideas about potential characteristics

of God, such as God as a potent, punishing, caring, and/or loving entity. Mothers were either nonaffiliated, open Christian (Catholic or Dutch Reformed), or orthodox Christian (conservative Protestant). Maternal child-rearing practices were defined as mothers' view on the strictness, promotion of autonomy, positiveness, and the openness they use and experience in the relationship with their child.

Employing causal modeling analysis, we found a significant latent variable model describing many relations among the studied variables. We contribute to the parenting and religion literature by providing a clearer understanding of the role of social learning and projection theory in the formation of young children's God concepts. Although the betas in the latent variable model were often relatively small, they are statistically significant even after controlling for maternal education and religious denomination.

Before we turn to the findings of the test of our model, we first will draw attention to the predictability of the preschoolers' different God concepts. Children's caring and potent images of God seem to be more strongly predicted by the antecedents studied here than were children's punishing God images. This finding is in line with results of previous studies (cf. de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001; de Roos, Miedema, and Iedema 2001; Hertel and Donahue 1995). An explanation for this finding may be that a punishing God concept is less salient for young Dutch children in the present time than a caring and potent God and, therefore, is less predictable than other God concepts. This suggestion is congruent with results of empirical studies of the last two decades that show an emphasis on the prevalence of God's care over God's authority (cf. Hertel and Donahue 1995; Nelsen, Cheek, and Au 1985; Nelsen, Potvin, and Shields 1977). The present study also shows that children score higher on a caring God ($m = 2.53$) and loving God ($m = 2.73$) than on a punishing God image ($m = 1.81$). The suggestion is also conceptually consistent with contemporary (post)modern theologies in which a loving God is emphasized and a wrathful God is shifted away from (cf. Tieleman 1995; Tilley 1995). Moreover, it is consonant with findings by Hutsebaut (1998) and Janssen and Prins (1998), who demonstrated that Belgian and Dutch adolescents and adults construct a personal, changeable concept of God and do not express images of a traditional, punishing, and wrathful God. So, our findings are, theoretically speaking, fully in line with a constructionist concept of God as the result of a process of "bricolage." The individualization of the concept of God in the domain of private and social religion finds its societal counterpart in the broad processes of individualization that have developed since the 1960s (cf. Taylor 2002). It may be read as an example of metaphoric parallelism, that is, the association between the supernatural (here, God) and society in which assertions about God are metaphoric representations of social facts (cf. Durkheim's [1915] 1964 perspective on religion as a social construct; see also Hertel and Donahue 1995).

Children's image of God as like their parents was not predicted by any variable in the present study (cf. de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001). Potential differences in children's perceptions as to whether God is like their parents probably are caused by age effects. In a recent study (de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2003), for example, four year olds more often refer to their parents in their idea of God than do five and six year olds. This was explained by the idea that the youngest preschoolers are more dependent on their parents than the older ones (cf. Kirkpatrick 1999).

Now we attend to the test of our model. Findings concerning the prediction of children's potent God image confirmed all parts of our model. As anticipated by our hypothesis based on social learning theory, maternal God concepts had an independent effect on young children's potent God concept. Mothers who have a loving idea of God were found to have children who view God as potent. This result accords with previous research (de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2001; Hertel and Donahue 1995).

Following projection theory, strict, authoritarian child-rearing practices, and reinforcement of autonomy, independently affected children's potent image of God. Our results showed that the more mothers reported strict child-rearing practices, the more their children have a potent concept of God. Strict child-rearing practices encompass punitive as well as power-assertive characteristics

of parents that probably are attributed by the children to God. The less mothers stimulate their child's autonomy, the more their children tend to perceive God as potent. This finding may also be interpreted as an example of social learning theory. It may be that children of these mothers are taught that they can't rely on themselves to learn to decide what is right and wrong, but that they are dependent on a very powerful God and that they have to be submissive to Him (cf. Stoffels 1995). It seems that maternal information about child-rearing practices is more connected with preschoolers' God concepts than children's own perception of parenting (cf. Dickie et al. 1997).

Concerning the effect of maternal denomination on young children's potent God concept, we found that children of orthodox Christian mothers have a more potent image of God than children of nonaffiliated and open Christian mothers. A similar finding was reported by de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema (2001, 2003) and is consonant with the hypothesis. However, contrary to the other hypotheses, we did not find independent effects of mothers' denomination on children's loving, caring, and punishing God concepts.

The results concerning associations of mothers' denomination and God concepts with child-rearing practices, and about the indirect link of maternal God concepts with children's potent God concept via child-rearing practices, are generally in line with our hypotheses and findings from previous studies. Orthodox Christians were found to promote their children's autonomy less than other parents (cf. Alwin 1986; Danso, Hunsberger, and Pratt 1997; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a). Orthodox mothers probably emphasize obedience and submission to a supernatural authority. In line with this, children of these mothers probably are taught to obey and submit to the earthly authority system (here, parents) that represents the supernatural authority. Orthodox mothers seem to value obedience as a virtue, restricting the child's autonomy (cf. Altemeyer 1996) and resulting in a more potent view of God among the kindergartners. Interestingly, we did not find orthodox Christian mothers to have more strict, authoritarian child-rearing practices than other mothers. This result is in accordance with recent studies suggesting that the disciplinary style of conservative Protestant parents is not as authoritarian as has often been charged (Bartkowski and Ellison 1995; Wilcox 1998). Although conservative Protestant caregivers are more likely than other parents to rely on corporal punishment in child rearing, recent work reveals that they are also more likely than other parents to praise and hug their children (Wilcox 1998) and are less likely to report yelling at their children (Bartkowski and Wilcox 2000).

Mothers' loving God concept was positively related to the promotion of their child's autonomy, which in turn was negatively associated with children's potent God concepts. This latter result seems to contradict the finding that mothers' loving God images independently lead to a potent God concept among children. Thus, mothers' loving God leads in a direct way to children's potent view of God, but it results in a less potent view via the simultaneous support of children's autonomy. Although these findings emerged across denominations, it may be that the direct "positive" path of mothers' loving God with children's potent God is more applicable for orthodox Christian families, whereas the indirect "negative" path may be more appropriate for liberal Christian families. Liberal Christian families may teach their children that God loves you as you are and that you are allowed to seek and find your own destiny, which may result in a less potent image of God among the children.

Another explanation for these seemingly contradictory findings may be potentially different connotations of "potency." Although the items in the present potency scale mainly seem to refer to a theistic, transcendent kind of potency (God as an almighty and omniscient majesty, as a supreme ruler) it may be that for many children the items are connected with other connotations for potency, for example, an immanent, pantheistic view, or a combination of transcendent and immanent views, the so-called transcendence-in-immanence view (cf. Van der Ven and Biemans 1994). An immanent understanding of potency is, for example, (in grown-up language): "God is an inner force in me that enables me to do the right things." A mixture of both kinds of interpretations of potency is, for example: "God has the power and is willing to feel our pain and to cry with us and to give us unconditional love" and/or "God is the power who won't

let the poor and underdogs be resigned to their fate" (cf. Caputo 2001; Schoonenberg 1991). It may be that mothers' image of a loving God is directly positively related to the latter two interpretations of potency among children (immanent or transcendence-in-immanence), whereas it may be negatively related to a transcendent form of potency via respect for children's autonomy. Further research is recommended to test these explanations more extensively.

Our results concerning the prediction of children's loving and caring God concepts were in line with only the social learning theoretical part of the model. The more mothers have a loving concept of God, the more their children will perceive God as loving (including as a friend) and caring. However, unlike our hypothesis and findings of de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema (2001), a maternal distant God concept was not predictive of children's caring God concept. Also, our expectation based on projection theory was not confirmed, that is, we found no relations between loving child-rearing practices and children's loving and caring God concepts.

Findings about maternal influences on children's punishing God concept are in accordance with hypotheses based on projection theory only. Strict child-rearing practices lead to a punishing image of God among the preschoolers. Hertel and Donahue (1995) reported similar findings among older children. Remarkably, no associations were found between maternal and children's strict, punishing God images, whereas links between both generations for loving God concepts were demonstrated. It may be that in the present time mothers express their views of a loving and benevolent God more easily and straightforwardly to their children than a punishing God concept; this may be a result of the appreciable decline in the popularity of images of God as punitive (cf. Hertel and Donahue 1995; Nelsen, Cheek, and Au 1985; Nelsen, Potvin, and Shields 1977). Therefore, mothers may not explicitly talk about a punitive God, but show punishing God concepts in their strict, coercive interactive behaviors with their children.

In addition, in accordance with our expectation about indirect links between maternal and children's God concepts via child-rearing practices, we found that those mothers who have a strict image of God tend to be more inclined to mention strict child-rearing practices than other mothers, resulting in a punishing image of God among the preschoolers. Hertel and Donahue (1995) and Potvin (1977) reported comparable findings among older children and adolescents. We suppose that mothers who perceive God as vindictive, stern, and wrathful emphasize children's obedience to God and to parents (e.g., Colossians 3:20), which is reflected in the endorsement of strict child-rearing practices to enforce such obedience (cf. Danso, Hunsberger, and Pratt 1997). Also, a distant God concept of mothers led to more strict child-rearing practices, which in turn led to children's punishing God concept.

Although we did find some connections between maternal God concepts and positive mother-child relationships, this dimension of child-rearing practices did not predict any of the children's God concepts. This last finding is not coherent with findings of research among adults based on attachment theory (cf. Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1992) or with Tamminen's (1991) results that showed that among 10 to 15 year olds a close relationship with parents was connected to the concept of God as close, real, caring, and forgiving. As could be expected, the more mothers view God as strict and distant, the less they report a positive mother-child relationship.

Mothers' God concepts were not related to openness in maternal child-rearing practices. Furthermore, mothers' openness did not predict preschoolers' God concepts. This may be due to the relative low reliability of the openness scale (subscale 2: 0.55). That we found no connection between positiveness and openness in the mother-child relationship with children's God concepts may also be caused by the social desirability of many items within these child-rearing dimensions. Since the forced-choice format of the original child-rearing Q-sort was skipped, social desirable responses among mothers may have been reinforced, which may obscure true associations among the variables.

The last issues we would like to raise are the differences in maternal God concepts according to religious denomination, and the relation of maternal education to aspects of maternal religion and child-rearing practices. As hypothesized, orthodox Christian mothers had a more strict and

loving, and less distant, view of God than did nonaffiliated mothers. Open Christian mothers describe God as more loving and less strict and less distant than nonaffiliated mothers. Although we did not explicitly test this, on the basis of the covariances we may conclude that the open Christian mothers have a less loving and less strict perception of God than the orthodox mothers. These results are in line with those of Noffke and McFadden (2001). That nonaffiliated mothers more often say God is not accessible or is only available for believers is understandable. A remarkable and unexpected finding, however, is that the nonaffiliated mothers have a more strict view of God than do the open Christian ones. An explanation may be that the nonaffiliated ones 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 (cf. de Roos, Iedema, and Miedema 2003). Therefore, they view God as more punitive and less loving than do the open Christians. Further research is needed to test this explanation.

With respect to the relation of mothers' educational level with religious affiliation, God concepts, and child-rearing practices, it was shown that the higher the educational level among the mothers, the more these mothers belonged to an open Christian denomination, the more they viewed God as loving, and the less they perceived God as distant. Comparable results were reported by Lehrer (1999). Mothers with a higher educational level stressed the importance of autonomy in their child rearing more, and reported less strict child-rearing practices, than those having lower educational levels. The latter findings are in line with Rispens, Hermanns, and Meeus (1996). The educational background of the majority of the mothers in the present study was a secondary education, vocational study, or university. Additional research among mothers having junior education is recommended to determine whether our findings are sample specific.

In conclusion, our social learning and projection theoretical model of individual differences in young children's God concepts was confirmed for children's concepts of a potent God. Children's loving and caring God concepts were influenced by a maternal loving God concept, lending support for the social learning theoretical part of the model. Finally, children's punishing God concept was predicted by strict child-rearing practices, providing evidence for our hypothesis based on projection theory.

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