

**Religious Development in Children  
and Their Spiritual Lives**

Religion Senior Seminar paper  
written by:

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Sigmund Freud was a person who seemed to take a stance on any issue regarding the human psyche which we can address. Human spirituality, being such a personal endeavor with no specific, concrete, or universal laws is most definitely something stemming from the human psyche, whether it be divinely inspired or a complete manifestation of the mind. Therefore I find Freud an appropriate start toward an investigation of some of the most well respected, and profoundly voiced people in history who have made an impact and devised fundamental theories toward particular aspects of children's spirituality.

Freud, the founder of the psychoanalytic school, was an atheist who regarded religion as a neurosis which needed to be cured. Despite his secular Jewish background, his Catholic nannie took him to church until the age of three, and later he gained knowledge of the Bible. His theories regarding people and their religious beliefs arose from working with clients suffering from obsessional neurosis. According to Freud religion was an outlet for resolving inner tensions. Freud's Oedipal conflict states that a male child has a longing to possess his mother and develops incestful feelings which he must repress. This results in a hatred for the father whom he had held compassionate feelings for. A sense of guilt arises from these repressed feelings of incest and murder. This inability to overcome lives frustrations results in regressing to a time in which he was dependent on his father. Added frustration arises,

and is only resolved by attempting to incorporate the father's qualities and follow his wishes. This brings about a need for a father image which, according to Freud, is a misconceived security resulting in an illusion. An illusion of a divine father which is brought into consciousness and leads to the concept of God. This concept of God is a new alternate father figure of power and the source of all religion. As a result, Freud views religion as an escape from the frustrations of life, leading to an illusionary strength and assurance of one's belief in God. Therefore, according to Freud, hope and belief in God was a regressive experience. <sup>1</sup>

Weather or not we agree with this, the importance of parents in the development of children is unquestioned. The relationship between parents and a child involves the parents sustaining and encouraging, as well as withholding and restraining their child. Closely related to this is the idea of God. Ana-Maria Rizzuto, a psychiatrist who investigated the formation of the god representation in human development, regards Freud's explanation as reducing the human quest for God "to a represented fossil, freezing it at one exclusive level of development".<sup>2</sup> She believes this view comes from not considering that one's entire concept of the world around them, whether it be science or religion, is an illusion which we cannot live without. Illusions

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<sup>1</sup>Hyde, Kenneth. Religion in Childhood and Adolescence. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990. p 84.

<sup>2</sup>Coles, Robert. The Spiritual Life of Children. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990. p 3.

reflect our personal history, make up what we term "reality", and thus, give us a meaningful existence to live in. As Freud views religion in a negative way, Rizzuto sees it as something completely healthy.

"A wishful childish illusion." Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker's movement, speaks of this illusion as something Jesus encouraged us to strive for.

*"Jesus kept on telling us we should try to be like children and more open to life, curious about it, trusting of it, and be less cynical and skeptical and full of ourselves as we so often are when we get older. I'm not romanticizing childhood, but I also remember all of the wondering I did, all the questions I had about life and God and the purpose of things, and even now when I'm praying, or trying to keep my spiritual side going, and before I know it, I'm a little girl...Some of the things I ask them [children],...I'm still asking myself now, 50 or 60 years later."<sup>3</sup>*

When examining human spirituality, this is the mode of thought I choose to pursue. However, I do not disregard Freud's theories and realize that his, as well as those of Piaget, Kohlberg, Elkind, and Goldman must be included in a careful study which the rest of this section will entail.

Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Ronald Goldman, and their followers have approached the study of development as an interactional process. They view development as resulting from an interaction between an active, creative being, in a dynamic, changing environment which makes us construct new systems of learning and functioning. We have an innate potential to reach a

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p 329.

given range of possibilities which allow us to fulfill our capabilities. In addition, the theories from the behaviorist perspective, in terms of the significance that our own particular environmental surroundings play in influencing our lives, must also be considered. I will consider these philosophies I agree with and approach I will use in my paper. Therefore the theorists I will focus on will be Elkind, Goldman, and Fowler, without disregarding any profound criticisms given to them.

There appears to be more regard toward the Piagetian model among people today who are thinking and writing on this topic. Pioneers in this field such as David Elkind and Ronald Goldman used Piagetian theory as a basis for many of their findings, therefore Piaget's theory and its bearing must be considered.

Piaget regarded moral development, as stemming from spiritual development, a product of social learning. He interpreted adult influence as putting constraints on the developing mind of a child. The importance of the way children think and express themselves was of great interest to Piaget, and although he never applied this to the way children view religion it was inevitable that the topic would be pursued from this perspective. Piaget's work dealt more with mental structures and the biological basis of their growth. The outcomes of his theory, rather than the theory itself, are what has been applied to the understanding of the development of thinking about

religion. As a result, that is what I will investigate.<sup>4</sup>

One aspect of his theory is that mental development progresses in a fixed hierarchial order of stages which vary within an individual and one's culture, while building on the previous stage. Each stage can be characterized by its own particular ways of thinking. As a child experiences the world new phenomena are integrated into the structures of their mind with respect to their particular stage of mental development. Their mental scheme must, at the same time, be adjusted to accommodate the new information more efficiently, and eventually the next stage will govern their interpretation of the world. This process starts with a completely egocentric approach to new phenomena in the unorganized world, and finally advances to the stage in which objects of thought are symbolic, and the extent of the development is seen in terms of how well one mentally deals with reality.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest of these stages, from birth to the age of two, Piaget termed the sensory-motor stage. During this time children are mainly concerned with things which only have to do with themselves. From the ages of two to four Piaget claimed that children are engaged in preconceptual thought. They are not yet able to think logically or discriminate between a particular object and the class it comes from. The next stage, termed

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<sup>4</sup>Hyde, Kenneth. Religion in Childhood and Adolescence. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990. p 370.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

preconceptual thought, is from about four to seven. Children at this stage think in terms of intuition, and explain the unknown by magic. They can not incorporate unconnected details and do not yet understand ideas of conversion and changing volumes. From about seven to twelve one enters the stage of concrete operational thinking. This is when one can logically think out problems as a result of prior experience. This they have learned from dealing with a similar experience before that become internalized and concrete, allowing one the ability to apply the operation to similar experiences. Once a conclusion at this stage is reached the process can be reversed and thought out from the end to the beginning. This is the concept of reversibility. This ability becomes significant when dealing with concrete ideas, although the ability to grasp abstract ones is not yet possible. Children can consciously see succession behind their ideas and interpret a result from their actions.<sup>6</sup>

With the entrance to adolescence abstract thought is now established. This is a trait of mature adult mental processing incorporating full logical activity characteristic of formal operational thinking. Parallels can be drawn to generalize between different events not yet encountered, and forming deductions from a hypothesis, as well as manipulating numbers and variables, is now possible. A better understanding of the relation between the present, past, and future is also attained. However, full maturity of this stage varies greatly between

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p 371.

adolescence, and full formal operational thinking rarely develops prior to adulthood. It is not until the age of adolescence that a more complex understanding of religion is achieved. This is due to the ability to grasp abstract theological concepts. These stages of mental development affect every aspect of thought, including ones ideas on religion and ones concept of spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1960's, the work of Goldman addressed questions regarding a child's aptitude to understand religious ideas. The basis of his theory reflects a well developed understanding of Piaget's work and for the first time made it concrete to religion. His first major study consisted of a series of interviews given to children from the ages of five to fifteen. The children were asked questions about three drawings. One depicted a child kneeling at a bed praying, the second was a child entering a church with two adults, and the third was a child looking at a large book titled "Holy Bible". There were three different versions of the pictures, each one age specific. The three stories were; Moses at the burning bush, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, and Jesus' temptation.

The types of questions asked were, "Why do you think the ground Moses stood on was on was holy?", and "How do you explain the parting of the Red Sea?", or "Why would Jesus turn the stones into bread?". The children's responses were judged and classified in accordance to Piaget's stage theory. The responses

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p 329.



of children five to seven illustrated aspects of intuitive thinking. They often focused on irrelevant details displayed in answers such as, "God had a funny face; the ground was holy because grass grew on it, or because it was hot; the Red Sea divided by magic".<sup>8</sup> The importance of the Bible was interpreted by its physical size or because it had small print. In children seven to eight years old, concrete operational thought was displayed until thirteen or fourteen when the stage of formal operational thought was first expressed. A typical characteristic of children typically of aged ten was a two-world mentality. One aspect of this sort of thought was the way they understood happenings during biblical times. During this period children thought God was especially active, helping the good combat the bad, with more participation in all that could happen. The other world was that of emerging scientific thought in which God did not exist or played a more distant role in our lives only if we were to sincerely desire help. The separation between these two worlds led to misconceptions about the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Mature religious thinking, not usually seen prior to adolescence, is a complex process that develops with abstract, symbolic understanding. The ability to conceptualize historical time so that different events could be seen in their sequential order is a characteristic of formal operational thinking not yet obtained by most children five to seven years old.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p 24.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p 24.

In another study, Goldman investigated differences between boys and girls scores; consecutive ages or differences between children of a particular age born in different decades. He found no significant differences, but mental capability and age played a large part in the development of religious thought. Higher intelligence and reading comprehension showed a stronger correlation to religious understanding than if a child was merely exposed to the church, however a lack of exposure did hinder the children somewhat which Elkind has researched and proven true. It is important to make aware that when a child has a larger vocabulary they can obviously understand and communicate a text better. Also, ethnic phrases or idioms are usually not universal to all children, therefore it is very important to take this into consideration when analyzing a child's comprehension of either a written or spoken word.<sup>10</sup>

Around the same time as Goldman's studies, in the early 1960's, David Elkind was publishing the first research studies and using them to formally address the American audience about cognitive development in religious studies. He, like Goldman, did this largely by replicating a number of Piaget's studies from Geneva. Elkind focused himself on investigating the nature of children's spontaneous religious ideas in conjunction with understanding their religious identity. The basis for his work were interviews with Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant children, aged five to fourteen from homes in which religion was stressed.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p 27.

The first study was with Jewish children whom he asked questions such as: Are you Jewish? What makes you a Jew? Can a cat or dog be Jewish? Why? What is a Jew? How can you tell if a person is a Jew? Can you be Jewish and American at the same time?.

Similar answers were given by Protestant and Catholic children of the same age without significant global differences. A Catholic was "a person" as was a Jew. Jews and Catholics differed because "some have black hair and some have blonde" or "he comes from a different country and speaks a different language". Some thought cats could not be Jewish because "Cats walk on four legs". Another child did not know how Catholics differed from Protestants because Protestant was not a term yet understood by young Protestant children." These children lacked the ability to make the distinction between religious and nonreligious classes. Being a member of more than one group seemed impossible to them so they gave replies such as "Are you an American?" "No", "Are you a Jew?" "Yes".

The children's responses to these questions met the standards set up by Piaget. The ideas expressed at an early age were expounded on or continued to be part of more advanced ideas as the child aged. Also, with increased age there was a higher level of conformity with adult conceptions. As a result Elkind did not regard religious concepts as any different then those of mathematics or science which Piaget had studied.<sup>12</sup> Elkind also

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid. p 19.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p 18.

observed that Piaget had discovered the same sort of reply when he asked children if they were Swiss or Genevan.

During the first stage there was an understanding of ones religious identity as if it was appointed by God and therefore, in the child's eye one, could not convert to another religion. The root of this religious identity was explained in terms of Piaget's idea of artificialism and moral causality. With regards to religion, a child thinks at this age, "God makes you Catholic" or "Your mother turns you Jewish" children see their religious identity in terms of a requisite similar to the way one of Piaget's children explained the movement of the clouds by saying that, "the clouds just must move". Many of these stage one children simply viewed going to church or synagogue, or doing good things and not saying bad, as the extent of their religious piety. Their own concrete philosophies were not yet something they could develop and therefore actions make up the extent of their religious composition.<sup>13</sup>

During the second stage of about seven to nine, religious identity was seen to be by cultural orientation and by participation. Being born Jewish consisted of behaving in certain ways, such as going to synagogue or attending Mass, and by certain actions such as the wearing of particular symbols and other specific pious actions. Religion was now understood in terms of actions and by categories. Some children thought that since their cat was part of their family it shared in their same

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p 19.

religion, however others were equally as sure that animals were not human so they could not say prayers or attend worship service and therefore not be associated with any religion. The first example represents being part of a category, and the second illustrates participation by action. This is a reflection of a child's understanding for the need to participate in particular actions, which an animal could not do, and also realizing that one must be a member of the faith if they were part of the family. Jewishness was accurately viewed as a quality of the family, but the perception of what constituted a family was not yet fully developed, because this age children viewed a family in terms of people living together with out much regard to participation in it such as a cat might not be able to do. A significantly greater number of Jewish children said they were Jewish because their families were, then the number of Protestant or Catholic children who claimed the same reasons for orientation toward their particular faith. This could give way to Jewishness not only being the practice of a particular religion, but a particular cultural distinction. Children at this stage demonstrated insight as to religious affiliation and nationality. They recognized that they were "Born a Jew, but live in America". A person could not be Catholic and Protestant at the same time, because "You could not go to two churches at once", but it was possible to change churches and thus religions.

During the third stage, from about ten to fourteen, children expressed patterns of initiation, practice, and ritual, now with

more reflection as to what they were doing. With the entrance into confirmation and the onset of bar mitzvas, Children now viewed being a member of a religion as including "studying your catechism and receiving communion". Their religious identity was expressed as stemming from within. Religious groups were separated by the content of the different belief systems such as, a Jew is: "a person who believes in one God and doesn't believe in the New Testament". Animals did not have religious affiliation for reasons that: "they are dumb, have no brains, and can not understand things like that". It was during this stage when children discover that people of all different monotheistic denominations held the common belief in one God. This is a manifestation of the fact that they could develop the category of religion, and distinguish the difference between being Catholic as religious and American as a nationality by realizing that they are two different groups which one person can fit into.<sup>14</sup>

Goldman and Elkind have been major contributors to modern thought with regards to children's religious life. As a result, their theories and studies conducted have been responded to by criticisms as well as received support. One of the main criticisms regarding Goldman's work is that he attributed the legitimacy behind his sampling to the quality of the children samples verses the quantity of children sampled. Although Goldman did not view this as a hinderance to his results, F.H. Hillard viewed this as a problem. In addition to this Hillard

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<sup>14</sup>Ibib. p 20.

also saw the need for a longitudinal study which would allow for a focus of the child's background and education over several years. This is important to take into consideration when thinking of what an impact different outside influences have on ones developing beliefs. Symbols in myth or ritual are passed on culturally. They are first absorbed passively, therefore understanding a story such as Abraham and Issac may be influenced by underlying anxieties or aggressiveness. Goldman did not investigate how this might affect a child's interpretation and distort their perceptions of the stories, which is a very important consideration. A level of formal operational thinking must be obtained in order to go from a literal understanding of an event, to understanding it as a spiritual event, and children have usually not had experiences to relate to such miracles. However, I do not see this as a problem because Goldman realized the limits of a child at this age and realized they were not yet at a level of formal operational thinking, and that is why they reacted the way they did. Goldman proved what he set out to.

In 1968 Marthe Godin questioned whether or not Goldman's stage development would be observed in interpreting narratives of personal encounter, such as Zacchaeus' call or Peter's denial. She found evidence to support the fact that understanding miracles did not occur until around the age of twelve, when a level of formal operational thinking was usually reached. Goldman, and Piaget both made it clear that religious thinking is symbolic, however Goldman never investigated the origins of

religious symbolic thinking. He stated that the reasons for this was that although he recognized the need for children to get a sense of their own means into religion, and actually used techniques to incorporate this into his own program of worship and exploration with young children, the problem in communicating it at a verbal level with this age group, probably due to a limited vocabulary.<sup>15</sup>

A second, criticism by Hillard was that the question which Goldman asked regarding the story of Moses, "Do you think this really happened?" was not asked until the end of the sequence of questions. The children's answers may have been different if they would have known that their ideas, regarding the story, were not necessarily secondary to an expectation of literal belief. With younger children this may have been true, but a later study by G.B. Miles showed that miraculous components did not affect the responses of adolescents.<sup>16</sup>

These are all valid studies displaying the way a child reacts to the dynamic stimuli found in a constantly changing environment. Their ability and level of functioning has been interpreted via several different means. However, one must still consider how outside influences affect the child.

The next section of my paper will discuss this with special regard given to the parental influences and cultural images, and how they contribute to a child's idea of God. In doing so, I

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p 36.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. p 36.



will investigate many of the researchers who used Freud and psychoanalytic theory as a basis to stem their research from.

A study by E. Lewis in 1956 described the development of one's religion from a psychiatric standpoint in three stages similar to those of Piaget. According to Lewis, during infancy one's relationship to the mother was of great significance. In later life, her goodness became the basis of faith in God. If the child's view of the mother was flawed with regard to these terms, it would give rise to problems of belief. During middle childhood the bond with the mother was weakened and the capability for religious development was most easily lost. However, ideas of magic persisted resulting in the child's desire to work with or experience miracles. An interest in heroes grew because of the power the heroes possessed. Even those who chose Jesus as their model did so because he performed miracles and displayed his command in many ways. The image of fatherhood now grew to importance and had repercussions for later ideas about God. In adolescence, spiritual ideas were gained quite readily resulting in what we see as a move from the mystical, when influences of the mother were so great to the magical when children imagined unlimited possibilities that their heroes possessed, to adolescence when an awareness of the existence of God was to be found.<sup>17</sup>

In an examination in 1964 of how parental influences affect

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<sup>17</sup>Hyde, Kenneth. Religion in Childhood and Adolescence. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990. p 85.

the image of God, Odin and Hales conducted a test in which emotional responses such as "I have a sense of being protected" were matched with key sentences such as "whenever I think of God..." using twenty adjectives in positive, neutral, and negative senses. It was found that feelings of God were related more toward the father but with differences between men and women. A sample of French Catholic adults, not necessarily members of religious orders, with ages ranging from late adolescence to middle life were tested for ideas about mother and father. The results exhibited a tendency for the image of God to be influenced by the psychological image of the parent of the other sex. This was enhanced when the preferred parent was of the opposite sex, and its influence tended to decline with age.<sup>18</sup>

As stated earlier, Freud asserted that ones image of God was a direct result of the relation to our father. Neither Carl Jung nor Alfred Abler ever followed up on this suggestion. However, Jung does regard ones image of God as one of the many archetypes of the human psyche. "The God-image does not coincide with the unconscious as such but with a special content of it, namely the archetype of the self. It is this archetype from which we can no longer distinguish the God-image empirically"<sup>19</sup> Thus, Freud and Jung agree on the inherited quality of the rudimentary God image and that it derives from the inner world of the individual. What

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p 86.

<sup>19</sup>Raised, Ana-Maria. The Birth of the Living God. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. p 37.

they disagree on is the object-related origin of that image. For Freud the image is an internalization, and Jung, it is the self fulfilling a structural formal archetype.<sup>20</sup>

In 1971 Nelson compared Freud's theory of the image of God as an glorified father with Alfred Adler's theory that one's image of God arises from the recognition of perfection. The image of God was found to be more closely related to that of the preferred parent who was more often the mother, but relied somewhat on the image of the parent of the opposite sex. In this experiment association to the image of God was about equal for both parents and a little greater when there was a preferred parent. If no preference was shown, both parents appeared to be more equal to the child's ideal of perfection. This gave no support for Freud's assertions, but was in agreement with Adler's hypothesis.

Raised states the views of Adler in comparison to Freud as "Adler moves still further away from Freud and makes God into a highly metaphysical 'value'".<sup>21</sup> Adler agrees with Jung and Freud that we inherit a particular God image which is innate and a combination of Being and Value. Adler defines "the idea of God...as a concretization and interpretation of the human recognition of greatness and perfection",<sup>22</sup> which is combined with their idea of perfection stemming from the qualities seen in the

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p 37.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

preferred parent.

Another argument of Rizzuto's, regarding these theories, was that Adler only referred to the subjects idea of perfection and not to the internalized parental image. She observed that Freud was concerned with the effect of the father and not other members of the family who also may have contributed to ones image of God. Within the Oedipal conflict the image of the mother was not significant nor were daughters similarly described. She described two case studies that demonstrated how the image of God was affected by one's image of their father. In one case, a warm conception of the father gave rise to an image of God that supported the warmth and belief of the subject toward their father. The next case dealt with a dominant, remote father and thus produced a latent belief in a remote and authoritarian God in someone who no longer practiced religion. However, this could have also been the case with a reflection of the mother.<sup>23</sup>

In 1964 Spilka, Armatas, and Nussbaum compared God images of a "very religious group of Catholic girls" to girls from a general group of students. The two groups showed quite different results. The very religious group showed concepts of a wrathful, avenging, and punishing God, while the general group gave attributes to God such as comforting, patient, faithful, kind; more socially desirable qualities. This demonstrates that different groups give different qualities to their God which many see as a result of influences such as parents or social

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid. p 38.

contacts.<sup>24</sup>

So far I have mainly reviewed studies originating in English-speaking areas, now I would like to take this investigation further. In 1981 Tamayo compared Catholic adolescents in different cultures and found that characteristics of the parental figures, the mother in particular, varied from culture to culture. This was understood as arising from cultural differences in the affect of the mother-child relationship. God was as much paternal as maternal for the American and Colombian groups, and more paternal for the Indonesian and Filipino groups and for males in Belgium and Zaire, and more maternal for females in Belgium. Many other cultural differences were seen. For instance, the American sample perceived God in terms of law more strongly than did the Filipino sample. It has been concluded that it was the culture, and not the individual psychology that decided which characteristics of the parental figures were ascribed to God. However, when people who believed in God, but did not associate themselves with a particular religious order were compared to those who did, very personal factors seemed to affect their representation of God, so that their own personal factors seemed to affect the way they portrayed God.<sup>25</sup>

A study which I found interesting because it studied people of my age, in college, compared a group of French Canadian

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<sup>24</sup>Hyde, Kenneth. Religion in Childhood and Adolescence. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990. p 86.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. p 91.

students aged twenty-one and found a difference between sexes with regards to the image of their parents, but not God. Women displayed less contrast between their parents than men in the way they viewed their mother and father. Also a higher degree of faith and level of the students' studies affected their conceptual image of God, and the image was more similar to their mother image than that of the father. With regards to one's type of educational background, the liberal arts students from the U.S. described a more maternal mother and less paternal father than the science students, whereas the Belgian science students viewed God more in maternal terms and literary students more in paternal terms.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the image of God is seen to evolve from early childhood from a child's perceptions of what their parents are and what they think they ideally should be. Punitive or loving images of God are closely related to the nature of one's parents. Some indication has been given as to the importance of a preferred parent, and some evidence points to the influence of the image held of each parent, but whatever aspect of the parents is focused on there is always a rich variety of ideas to be found.<sup>27</sup>

Now that a clear synopsis of the fundamental theories from who I consider, are the most profound of researchers in the area of faith development in childhood has been formed, I will

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. p 97.

attribute this next section of my paper to laying out a concrete representation of the thought processes a child goes through from infancy to adolescence. I will use James Fowler's Stage's of Faith, as a basis for this because it summarizes each stage by encompassing the strong points from the people I have discussed.

Although faith development is such a personal endeavor, it is important to maintain a clear understanding of the stages of mental as well as emotional development a human being goes through. There are certain limitations a two year old child brain has compared to that of a six year old. If this is clearly laid out, a child's faith can be examined and more closely understood.

During the first seven to eight months after birth our first pre-images of God are obtained. This is when a baby goes through what Piaget terms the "scheme of object permanence"<sup>28</sup>. Mental images of people and objects can be conserved and this is when the baby realizes that his or her parent is not being replaced by the baby-sitter, instead mom and dad will return and are not gone forever. Fowler terms this the stage of undifferentiated faith. It is a time when aspects of faith such as trust, hope, courage, and love are experienced in an undifferentiated way. The baby's faith at this stage is a result of the relationship established with his or her primary caregivers. The importance of it is due to the fact that they now realize that they are not central in

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<sup>28</sup>Fowler, James. Stages of Faith. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981. p 120.

respect to the entire world, but rather other people, objects, and images in their life leave, return and often change.

The next stage begins with one's thought processes combining with language to create symbols in speech and ritual play.<sup>29</sup> Fantasy is a means for the child to fill a void in their understanding of their relation to the world around them. This is combined with facts and feelings, but not well differentiate. Speech and symbols are recognized as a medium for sorting out and giving meaning to the novel experiences their senses are relaying. During this stage a two to three year old identifies God with nature and living in churches or heaven in conjunction with a magical aura toward God's being. They do not know much more than that God loves and cares for them. During their fourth and fifth years children recognize God's power and gain a sincere interest in wanting to please God while picturing God as watching over them and punishing them for wrong doing. During the next two years a feeling of being close to God is experienced, and some children may construct more abstract views toward God as love and spirit or fairies and magic.<sup>30</sup>

Episodes in a child's life are interpreted through imagination because logical inductive or deductive reasoning is not yet developed until they reach the age of about six. It is very important to be sensitive to the images we give children at this age, who have such a high degree of imagination, regarding

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid. p 123.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. p 65.



terror and taboos without any boundaries. A young mind constructing its first conceptions of the world around him or her, which is led primarily by imagination and feeling without much logical reasoning, is ever so malleable and impressionable that any adult must realize that they are somewhat of a teacher and must be ultra sensitive as to what images of the spiritual realm they choose to relay to the young mind.

A child's brain prior to the age of about five can not comprehend a perspective other than their own, they think that their experience toward some incident is universal. Fowler gives an example of this stage, which he terms "cognitive egocentrism" through a conversation with a four year Catholic boy named Freddy.

*Fowler: "Can you tell me what God looks like?"*

*Freddy: "He has a light shirt on, he has brown hair he had brown eyelashes..."*

*Fowler: "Does everyone think he looks like that?"*

*Freddy: "Not when he gets a hair cut."*

<sup>31</sup>

This is a prime example of a child's incapacity to construct an image in their mind from another perspective prevalent in the world around them. When children draw pictures or describe God, they often attribute their own eye or hair color as well as when they see a picture of their deity they are quick to take note of these color based differences which other people may use to portray God.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid. p 127.

Fowler terms the next stage that of Mystical-Literal faith. During this stage children see the world as more predictable and patterned. A ten year olds mind is marvelous, they can memorize facts and trivia, and retell the details of a Star Wars movie, in detail, for an hour. Systems of classification can be created consistently and accurately. They can reverse operations and thus understand volume and weight when objects or liquids are changed in form. Now they can take on another persons perspective on some common interest, and retell rich stories that they have been told which provide images, symbols and examples in helping develop impulses, feelings and aspirations with in themselves, but not yet generate stories.<sup>32</sup>

Here is a conversation with "Millie", an nine year old, in which we can see the concrete operational mind working creatively, within its limits, to grasp and express ambiguous insights. It is a typical example of the literal quality of Stage 2's use of symbols.

*Millie: I imagine that he's [God] an old man with a white beard and white hair wearing a long rove and that the clouds are his floor and he has a throne. And he has all these people and there's angels around him. And there's all the good people, angles and-and um, cupids and that he has like-I guess I-he has a nice face, nice blue eyes. He can't be all white, you know, he has to-he has blue eyes and he's forgiving. And I guess that's the way I think he is.*

*Fowler: How do you get to be a good person?*

*Millie: To believe in God and try your hardest to do what is good.*

*Fowler: When we do something wrong, does God know?*

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid. p 138.

Millie: Yeah. God's with you all the time.

Fowler: He is? How is that?

Millie: Well, God's inside of you in a way-but in a way God isn't. He's inside of you because you believe-if you believe in him he's inside of you, but he's all around?

Fowler: How can he be all around?

Millie: Well, that's a good question. Um, well he's- he lives on top of the world, so in a way he's all around.<sup>33</sup>

The anthropomorphic elements in Millie's image of God are far more developed than the basic images in Freddy's depiction of God I cited earlier.<sup>34</sup>

Fowler's final stage that I will talk about is that of Synthetic-Conventional faith. This stage emerges with puberty and adolescence. This is a time when values and self-image are mediated by significant others. They realize the mystery and that they do not know everything. During this realization God can become an especially important significant other and help with the mysteries. This is primarily what Fowler focuses on with regards to this stage therefore, I will cite a conversation with Linda.

Linda: Well, I feel like I'm not afraid of anything now because I know what I believe in and I know what I want to do in life, and nothing could really set me off course...Before, if we moved I got into people, different people, and I sort of changed as the people went. But I have learned that just the best thing is to be yourself.

Fowler: Linda, when you say you know what you believe in can you try to trace how you came to know what you believe in?

Linda: I guess religion. I've always gone to church

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid. p 139.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

*and everything. And my parents, they always guided me...They've always taught me that God's always there and, you know, he's the only way that you can really make it...You depend upon him and I really believe in him and, you know how they say God talks in many mysterious ways? Well, in a sense he's told me lots of times...I really think that he's led me to where I am today. 'Cause lots of times I've just thought the world is just, you know, I just don't feel anything. But then that morning I'll just have a feeling that...I guess there is Somebody, you know?<sup>35</sup>*

Linda did not have any proof in God, she just knew Someone was there. God cared when she really struggled with a problem, and this gave her inspiration to do something about it herself.

The first three sections of my paper have primarily dealt with discussing different peoples interpretations of one's religious development. These research findings have emerged to form stages which we can apply to people across the entire spectrum of normal or average mental capacities. These are the sorts of conclusions so many social scientists and psychiatrists find refreshing. When trying to understand why a child is interpreting certain aspects of their religion in a particular way it is a very useful approach, however this is not, by any means the entire issue.

So much of childhood is filled with the "blooming, buzzing, confusion", with which William James describes their religious and spiritual experiences, and I do not think any sort of stage theory can describe this aspect. It is easy to focus on these sorts of theories. Most of the literature, I at least, think to turn to with regards to understanding children in an academic

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid. p 155.

sense, are the journals which describe the research and the sorts of theories people come up with. But what about learning from conversations with the kid next door, or through literary characters such as Charles Dicken's Pip in Great Expectations, or Henry James's child in What Maisie Knew. Children who attempt to make sense of the world frequently showing inconsistent, ironic, complex actions often contrary to human nature, but real and ever so relevant to their lives. This can result in times of strong faith or doubt. These are the aspects in one's personality which are real experiences and must also be taken into consideration. A persons religion, combined with the way they use it to adapt to their surroundings on a day to day basis is what I term spirituality.

Robert Cole's has spent his whole life using this sort of approach to learn about and learn from children. His research entails recording and reporting conversations with hundreds of children, primarily from the ages of six to twelve. He does not use questionnaires to get a response to a structured series of statements in order to develop a linear theory resulting in an examination of their "faith development". Rather, this is the method he uses:

*"I describe this work as phenomenological and existential rather than geared toward psychopathology, or toward the abstractions that go with 'stage theory,' with 'levels' of 'development'."*<sup>36</sup>

This is the method which I will use for the following section.

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<sup>36</sup>Coles, Robert. The Spiritual Life of Children. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990. p 39.

An eight year old girl named "Connie" was one of the first children Coles worked with who expressed her inner most spiritual side of herself and thus began to teach him something about spirituality. This Catholic girl found many faults in herself and termed them "bad habits". She was referred to the child psychiatry unit at the hospital because she was "unruly at school-fresh and surly with certain classmates...the teacher called her a 'tease girl'".<sup>37</sup> Connie's "bad habits", Coles thought, was some sort of a "smokescreen" for describing sexual feelings which she had possibly acted upon. Although this girl is not the typical eight year old, her experience was very real and worth discussing.

Connie said, "The church saves me." This was a healthy outlet for finding forgiveness and release of her inner tensions. When working with her, Coles focused on the girl's religious and spiritual life. He had sensed a strong pride in her, but also knew that her Catholic upbringing led her to believe that pride was the "sin of sins". This sort of attitude resulted in many people acting very condescending toward this girl, and that is why Coles took the approach he did. He came out and explained this to her by stating that his supervisor had asked them to talk more about her religious beliefs and practices, while explaining that "we could try to learn from this girl [and] let her teach us her spiritual psychology".<sup>38</sup> Connie's response was "how

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid. p 11.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid. p 16.

satisfying it can be to have 'someone looking over you.'<sup>39</sup> God was who gave her contentment and satisfaction which she so desperately needed in a world which she found so condescending. God was her accepting supervisor which she needed so desperately to give her direction.

With regards to Jesus, this young girl realized he could be angry, but was also forgiving. She had a very close relationship with Jesus and wondered if he was happy with her, or if he played favorites, "I worry that I'm asking for too much of His time".<sup>40</sup> She was concerned with Jesus' feelings. The influence of her work with a nun had stirred very powerful emotions in her describing him as "very angry" when he threw the money changers out of the temple. This led her to wonder if she slipped and made mistakes would he also become enraged with her? With regards to what the devil was like the nun said, "He gets you and he'll never let go of you".<sup>41</sup> This brought about fear, but also aroused her to wonder what such a long lasting possessiveness would be like. She had been taught, and knew that this sort of grasp would not suit her best interests, but she desperately needed some sense of belonging and thus, this intrigued her. Coles later found that her aggressiveness was a tactic she used to make sure Jesus did not overlook her. She asked, "How can He

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid. p 16.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid. p 17.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. p 17.

have so many people in His grip and never let go even once?"<sup>42</sup>  
She wanted and needed attention.

Coles explained how he learned about Connie's personal life by learning about her spiritual life first.

*"None of these psychological difficulties are all that unusual and surprising in a child, but I'd never have been able to work with Connie on their nature and consequences had I not learned of them as she talked about her personal way of being a devout Catholic."*

Her way of being a Catholic was to contemplate, wonder, and speculate about heaven, hell, grace, damnation, and what these words mean in human practical terms. In Connie's terms, "Heaven is right here, and so is Hell - because we're choosing when we smile or we have that bad look on our face."<sup>43</sup> The spiritual statements she affirmed gave Coles insight into her daily actions. The responsibility she took upon herself, to consciously attempt to do God's will by choosing right and wrong with her every move, was intense, but ever so rewarding. Cole's also began to learn how her spiritual life kept Connie together psychologically. "I see Jesus smiling when everyone else is looking real mean, even me,"<sup>44</sup> she explained. With Connie, Coles did not try to investigate her faith from a clinical standpoint, because she had built her own version of faith which, through patience and respect, he simply let her tell him about herself

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. p 18.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.



while she let her mind float to heaven, and plunge to hell, communicate with saints and the sinners. <sup>45</sup>

Another girl in Cole's studies who particularly interested me was "Anne". A Catholic girl of eleven never failed, in Coles' terms, to "provoke" him. What intrigued Coles so was a certain unselfconsciousness in her spiritual life. Because Anne was so intent on learning about the mysteries of her God, she would push for answers and not allow Coles to stand by and merely be a detached observer. Anne explained, "The priest says we should get to know Jesus, I wanted to raise my hand, right there in church, and ask him how we're supposed to do that. But I was afraid to - I'd never have the nerve!" <sup>46</sup> Although Anne would have never had to nerve to raise her hand in church, she still had profound ideas and inquiries as to God.

Anne, as Connie, found sanction and support in God. Her faith was one of deep sincerity. Through her busy day, Anne was well aware that:

*"I mustn't be in a hurry when I pray, really pray. There are the fast prayers, and I don't think they're very good. It's when I can go to my room and settle on my knees and stay there and talk with God, not just try to get something out of Him - it's then that I'm on the right track and not turning my prayers into a joke."*

God was who she turned to out of deepest despair, even when the

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid. p 88.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

people closest to her made her sad. Anne told of a time she and her family spent out in Cape Cod when she got poison ivy. She came home that afternoon, itching all over, and began to cry. She felt "dumb and lousy" for crying and blaming the incident on her family dog. She explained that afternoon she wanted to be alone, "well not completely alone. I wanted to talk with God...I know it was selfish of me to throw all my silly troubles at Him [God], but I wanted to." <sup>48</sup>

She laid in bed and prayed, asking God for forgiveness because she had been so selfish. She explained that she thought she might lie there forever, not use calamine lotion, and not move. Soon she fell asleep and explained a dream she had.

*"It was a nice day. The sun was out, but I saw a big cloud, and it began covering the sun, getting right between it and me! I looked down and there was a shadow, my shadow, and then as I was looking toward the ground, I saw poison ivy, lots of it. I was ready to scream and run when I felt this hand on my shoulder, and I whirled around, and there wasn't anyone there, no one, but I heard a voice, I heard Him - I knew it was Him - saying: 'I am the light of the world,' saying my favorite words from the whole Bible. I felt so good, hearing those words. I was even ready to smile at the poison ivy, instead of running away from it!...Then I came to...I felt warm inside; I felt at peace with myself. I was waiting for the poison ivy to start up again, but I just didn't care. I almost dared it to get the better of me."* <sup>49</sup>

From this dream Anne explained that God's words had taught her what was important and what was not. Although from an adults point of view her issue may seem quite minor, to Anne the problem

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid. p 89.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

very real. Her spirituality ran deep within her, encompassing her whole being, and that in itself has so much to say.

The last child that I will talk about is "Gil". The reason for this is because I find reading about this child the most inspiring for my own personal life. Gil was ten years old and receiving a Hebrew school education. While appreciating this education he still had no reservations toward openly questioning it. His questions reflect the stage of thinking most ten year olds are at, but, upon reflection, they run so much deeper than that:

*"How can you prove it's [Judaism] right? My father is a real Jew! He loves Shabbat - all week he's thinking ahead to Shabbat. My mother likes the food we eat then - she makes alot of it, the callah, always - but she says, 'It's all a big mystery!' Sounds right to me - I think we could just be here, and when you go, you just go."*<sup>50</sup>

Questioning heaven and hell, and wondering about the proof of religion is what theologians and philosophers have traditionally done over the centuries. No one has the answers, and even a young boy ponders them.

*"When I look up at the sky, I wonder if there are people up there, looking down at us. My daddy says no. But how can you know? Maybe God put us Jews on other places up there. He could have - right?...I had this idea: Jews shouted across the whole universe, the stars, to other Jews! I told my dad of my idea, and he laughed: 'It's as good a stroy as any!'"*<sup>51</sup>

I can remember thinking in these terms, but it seems as though now I need a class to stimulate these questions. The thoughts

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid. p 138.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

which enter my day to day thinking do not usually allow for these sorts of questions. Gil's father thought this was cute or funny. It is just a myth, but in so many aspects so is religion.

"When I take the dog out in the morning it's still dark, and you can hear your dog sniffing, it's that quiet: it's then I know there's someone up there, maybe God, maybe lots of people, too, the souls of all the dead folks. It's too big for you to figure out. My dad tells me that when I ask him about God and where heaven is and if there's a soul. He says there is definitely a soul, but it's not 'physical,' so I shouldn't keep asking him, 'Where is it?'...He's right, that's me - always trying to find out answers to everything!" <sup>52</sup>

Gil experiences "God" every morning that he takes the dog out. I have realized that some of the only times that I really feel the aura of God is when I am camping in the essence of nature, or if I allow myself the time away from the academic and social seen of Gustavus, I might feel this. Even at church, I rarely feel this. There are so many people around and so many activities to participate in that I seldom allow myself to truly experience and feel God's presence.

Gil explains the way his father tries to teach him to approach people with discretion:

"Dad was trying to be nice - but he was telling me to think of other people when I want to know something, and 'behave with discretion'; that means be careful not to offend someone, and don't shoot your mouth off, but think first! I asked Dad if Moses showed 'discretion' when he asked the Pharaoh to 'let the Jews go,' and Dad said, 'Gil, you'll be a lawyer one of these days!' I don't want to be a lawyer. I think I'd like to be an astronomer, maybe, or an astronaut. By the time I'm grown up, people will be flying all over the place, to the planets and into the space beyond the planets.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid. p 140.

*We'll explore, and we might be surprised by what we find! I'd like to find God!"* <sup>53</sup>

Perhaps it will never be feasible for Gil to become an astronaut, but already his father is taking his ideas and mainstreaming them into practical terms. Gil was searching for God even though he wasn't sure there even was one. At this point in his life Gil felt ready to pursue that venture the rest of his life. It is too bad that in the future this dream will not be too realistic or feasible. Instead, he will probably begin to think along these lines:

*"You have experiments in science in school - you see how you can create things. Well, we've been created, and were in an experiment, and one day God will try to figure out what the answer is to the experiment. I don't know how He'll do it. How could He ever decide? I asked Grandpa, and he said, 'Look, Gil, these things are too big for you and me. All you can do is try to be good, and let God take care of the rest!' I asked him some other questions, but he said if you think too much you get 'brain exhaustion,' so we went in his car and got some ice cream."* <sup>54</sup>

If you think too much you get: "brain exhaustion", "screwed up", "you'll go crazy". I sometimes find myself responding to the mysteries of life in a similar manner just because some things are unexplainable. However, if you tell a seven year old child to do the same they will respond is by asking, "Why?".

"Why ask why?", Budweiser's latest campaign has been spewing this through all of our senses. We should take the time to ponder these questions. In a way we are all children with

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid. p 141.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid. p 146.

spiritual worries or concerns. Only, as we get older, it's so tough to keep up with the demands of our daily lives that, for some, worship on Sunday simply becomes a time to relax and not think at all. I suppose this is fine, but for me at least, I think there are more efficient ways to relax. Sometimes I hardly make the time to eat a proper meal, let alone pray before it. I am not, by any means insinuating that religion is for everyone, but I think in everyone there is spirituality, and I just find it a shame when we get too caught up in our daily routines to play, dream, think, and let the little kid in us run on out.

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