

God and Child: Children's God Concept and Deadlock of Cognitive Stage Theories

Tanrı ve Çocuk: Çocukların Tanrı Algıları ve Bilişsel Evre Teorilerinin Çıkmazı

Rümeysa Nur DOĞAN 

Division of Psychology of Religion,
Ankara Social Sciences University,
Ankara, Turkey



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Corresponding Author/Sorumlu Yazar:
Rümeysa Nur DOĞAN
E-mail: rumeysanur.dogan@asbu.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

Some scholars in the area of psychology of religion have stated that children until a certain age cannot comprehend God as a God but instead, they can concrete God in a superhuman format (anthropomorphic). However, some studies conducted with children have shown that most of the children at a young age can comprehend an abstract God image and can differentiate God's features from humans. Therefore, this article will attempt to clarify how children's God concepts have been explained in the developmental psychology of religion and how these theories illuminate the children's abstract God concepts. To achieve this goal, the pastoral cycle was used as a method, which is a common one in pastoral and practical theology and consists of 4 stages: experience, analysis, theological reflections, and action. As a conclusion, regardless of their religion or cultural background, children's minds may have the ability of receiving and comprehending the abstract God concept since birth. God can be understood as an all-present, formless, all-knowing, and all-powerful being by children. This illustrates that the religious thinking development of children has different explanations along with the stage theories including Piaget's one, when the issue comes to the abstract religious entities and religious thinking.

Keywords: Psychology of Religion, Religious Thinking Development, Cognitive Stage Theories, God Concept, God Image, Child.

ÖZ

Gelişim psikolojisi alanındaki bazı bilim adamları, çocukların belirli bir yaşa kadar Tanrı'yı Tanrı sıfatlarıyla kavrayamadıklarını, bunun yerine Tanrı'yı insanüstü bir biçimde (antropomorfik) somutlaştırabildiklerini belirtmişlerdir. Ancak çocuklarla yapılan bazı araştırmalar, küçük yaşta çocukların çoğunun soyut bir Tanrı imgesini kavrayabildiklerini ve Tanrı'nın özelliklerini insanlardan ayırt edebildiklerini göstermiştir. Bu makale, dinin gelişim psikolojisinde çocukların Tanrı kavramlarının nasıl açıklandığını ve bu kuramların çocukların soyut Tanrı kavramlarını nasıl aydınlattığını açıklamaya çalışmıştır. Bu amaca ulaşmak için, pastoral ve pratik teolojide yaygın olarak kullanılan ve 4 aşamadan oluşan 'pastoral döngü' (deneyim, analiz, teolojik yansımalar ve eylem) yöntem olarak kullanılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, çocukların zihinleri, dinleri veya kültürel geçmişleri ne olursa olsun, doğumdan itibaren soyut Tanrı kavramını algılama ve kavrama yeteneğine sahip olabilecekleri bu makalede yapılan çalışma analizleri ile değerlendirilmiştir. Son yapılan çalışmalar, Tanrının çocuklar tarafından her yerde var olan, biçimsiz, her şeyi bilen ve her şeye gücü yeten bir varlık olarak anlaşılabilir olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu da soyut dinî varlıklar ve dinî düşünme sözü konusu olduğunda, çocukların dinî düşünme gelişiminin yalnızca bilişsel evre teorileri ile değil aynı zamanda farklı teorik yaklaşımlarla açıklanabileceğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Psikolojisi, Dini Düşünce Gelişimi, Bilişsel Gelişim, Evre Teorileri, Tanrı Algısı, Tanrı İmgesi, Çocuk.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, to understand how human cognitive mechanism works in religion, the God concept and its appearance journey in the human understanding has been a significant issue. Human cognition has a limit to understanding abstract entities at the first years of life of human, according to widely

accepted psychological theories.¹ Therefore, the scholars in the area of psychology of religion state that children until a certain age, cannot comprehend God but instead they can concrete God in a superhuman format (anthropomorphic). However, some studies conducted with children have shown that most of the children at a young age in the studies can comprehend an abstract God image and can differentiate God's features from humans.² Therefore, this article will attempt to clarify how children's God concepts have developed according to Piagetian stage theories and discuss the ability to comprehend abstract entities like God in early childhood with the help of recent studies.

To achieve this goal, the pastoral cycle was used as a method. Thus, this article will start with the question of how children see God in normal life, which will be extended by experiences. During the analyses, cognitive stage theories will be a focal point, as according to general acceptance of the religious development in childhood, children's understanding of God is subject to cognitive stages. After analyzing both the experiences and theories, this article will move on to explore the religious literature on the subject in order to gain a better understanding through theological reflection. The reflections will be limited to Islamic theology. The issue will be finalized with the new approaches and theories as a new way of thinking on the cognitive development of children in understanding of abstract God concept.

1. METHOD

To establish this structure, the pastoral cycle was used as a method. The pastoral cycle is a popular method in practical and pastoral theology as it is a widely accepted method in the field.³ It mainly consists of 4 phases: experience, analysis, reflection, and action, but some researchers have added different stages like celebration phase at the end or named the stages differently like "exploration" instead of "reflection."⁴ Osmer has summarized the aim of these stages without emphasizing the names of them but tasks as descriptive-empirical task, interpretive task, normative task, and pragmatic task.⁵ These stages and tasks answer these 4 questions: What is going on? (experience-empirical task), Why is this going on? (analysis-interpretive task), What ought to be going on? (reflection- normative task), and How might we respond? (action-pragmatic task).⁶

2. EXPERIENCE

I used to work as a teacher at a state primary school in Ankara/Turkey for a while. One day, at school's ordinary teacher-parents meeting, one of the parents shared their experience with his son. They observed that their son had become nervous in the last few weeks, moreover, he avoided staying alone in his room and had some sleep problems. When they tried to figure out what was wrong with him, he recounted the story of what happened to his grandfather. He asked his grandfather "where is God? I would like to see him!" and grandfather answered this enthusiastic question "God is everywhere, He can see you every time and feel your love everywhere." With this answer, the child starts to feel fear and explained the situation to his parents as "I could not sleep because I am scared, feel like God's eyes on me every second." With this stunning experience, as a religion teacher, I realized how significant the God concept is for a child's well-being. To emphasize the issue's value, I shared this experience with my colleagues and a more striking experience came from one of them, Kubra. When she was a child, she got the same question in her mind and asked her parents "where is Allah?" her parents answered, "He is in our heart." With this answer, she said "I thought my heart beats were Allah's voice and some nights I just stopped breathing and checked if God was still alive or not. Sometimes I'm nervous that he's dead inside of me since I can't hear my heartbeat." This issue attracted my attention, so I tried to remember what my god image in my childhood was, but I failed. Instead of mine, I remember one of my friend's God image. He said "when I was a child, I thought the minaret (a high and narrow structure near the mosques like a bell tower but higher than it and it is a significant religious symbol in Islam) was God because my dad said to me "God is above and always watches us." For this reason, whenever I saw a minaret, I thought that "it has to be God because it is the highest."

In Islam, there is an abstract God concept and anthropomorphic God images are not acceptable. But in the above examples, children seem to understand and accept God anthropomorphically. In the beginning, I connected these God concepts of children to Islam's abstract God concept. However, they are not related to religion as Parker's son's experience has proven that.⁷ She explained to her son in one of the mother-son conversations that no one can see God, one day her son said that he knows someone who can see God: his doctor. She wondered where this unexpected thought came from and asked her son what he meant. Her son believed that because God was present inside his heart, doctors could see God. After asking the following question, she understands that her son's grandmother answered his "where is God?" question with "God is here, right inside." With this example, the issue has become more complex than I had anticipated because God's image in childhood is not only a problem of Islam's intangible God thought, but also it has a problematic position in Christian thought. When the subject was dug up, it seemed obvious that despite the different religions, there was a common process in the understanding of God.

- 1 Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation*, 1950; J. P. Deconchy, "The Idea of God: Its Emergence between 7 and 16 Years", *Lumen Vitae* 19 (1965), 284-296; J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and Quest for Meaning* (Harper Collins, 1995); D. I. Heller, *The Children's God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986); P. J. Lawrence, "Children's Thinking about Religion: A Study of Concrete Operational Thinking", *Religious Education* 60 (1965), 111-116; W. C. Nye - J. S. Carlson, "The Development of the Concept of God in Children", *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 145/1 (1984), 137-142; P. V. Concept Development Pitts, *And the Development of the God Concept in the Child: A Bibliography* (Schenectady, NY: Character Research Press, 1977); W. W. The Discovery Sloan, *And Measurement of the Religious Ideas of Children. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis)* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1936); L. E. Sohn, *God Concepts in Children: Beliefs About the Attributes of God and Implications for Lutheran Curriculum and Instruction. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis)* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, 1985); Kerim Yavuz, *Çocukta Dini Duygu ve Düşüncenin Gelişimi* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1983); R. J. Goldman, "Researches in Religious Thinking. Educational Research", 6/2 (1964), 139-155; Jean Piaget, *The Child Conception of the World* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929).
- 2 Melanie A. Nyhof - Carl N. Johnson, "Is God Just a Big Person? Children's Conceptions of God across Cultures and Religious Traditions", *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 35/1 (2017), 60-75; Justin L. Barrett - Rebekah Richert, "Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts", *Review of Religious Research* 44/3 (2003), 300-312.
- 3 Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: A Pastoral Cycle Resource Book* (London: Mowbrays, 1990); James. Woodward, *Practical Theology In Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society, Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997).
- 4 Glenn Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come: Exploring Christian Hope in Contemporary Worship (Dynamics of Christian Worship)* (InterVarsity Press, 2020).
- 5 Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).
- 6 Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come: Exploring Christian Hope in Contemporary Worship (Dynamics of Christian Worship)*.
- 7 Monica Parker, *OMG! How Children See God* (Florida: Health Communications Inc, 2016).

3. ANALYSIS

Childhood religious development is mainly seemed as a subtitle of cognitive development of a child, since understanding the God and religion's intangible concepts requires a mature cognition, according to some researchers.⁸ In developmental psychology, Piaget is the pioneer of cognitive stage theories.⁹ According to Piaget, there are some stages in the development of human mind,¹⁰ which are sensorimotor stage (0-2 age), preoperational stage (2-7 ages), concrete operational stage (7-12 ages), and formal operational stage (12 and up). The main argument of Piaget and the supporters of Piagetian stage theories is that children until their cognition become mature enough to comprehend God and other abstract entities, they see God as a superhuman who lives in the sky.¹¹ Piaget insists that children's God concepts are anthropomorphic until they pass to the stage of concrete operations, sometime in early adolescence.¹² These human-like imaginations are derived from interviews with children or results of children's God drawings. Harms investigated hundreds of children's God drawings and suggested a different stage theory, which consists of 3 stages: fairy tale (3-6), realistic (7-12), and individualistic (12 and up) stages.¹³ Children in fairy tale stages can describe their God experience with the help of their imagination like a king on the enormous golden throne or a cloud in the form of nothing. At the realistic stage, the image of God is changing to anthropomorphic version as God-Father, angels, saints or priests.¹⁴ Harms investigated the issue of Jewish children in his studies. Judaism has an abstract God concept, as in Islam. Jewish children draw God as a priest or a Jewish star, thus symbols have taken place in children's mind to think about God.¹⁵ Likely, Loomba developed a three-stage theory, which comprises the religion of pure externals (up to 6), realistic (7-12), and religion of the inner life (12 and up).¹⁶ On this point, Goldman's study should be emphasized. He applied Piaget's cognitive stages to religious thinking and development, as a result, he supposes "religious thinking is no different in mode and method from non-religious thinking."¹⁷ However, Goldman has established his study on the biblical narratives and asked children about these stories.¹⁸ His widely accepted theory on the development of religious thinking is based on Christianity, where anthropomorphic God image already existed in its theology. Moreover, he draws the lines between stages according to children's ability to understand the story (cognition).¹⁹ This is another problem where children may have not a developed language ability to comprehend the story; however, they may have a level of understanding of God in an abstract way or vice versa.

All these theories suppose that children's ability to think about invisible entities is limited because of their undeveloped cognitions. For this reason, according to them, children can understand God as anthropomorphic, so as a superhuman or human-like creature. Murphy²⁰ criticized the focus of these theories as they only concentrated on cognition, but religious development or God concepts are firmly related to language development too.²¹

At this point, Fowler's stages of faith development as an important stage theory should be mentioned. Fowler uses the word "faith" and describes it as "it is an active mode of being and committing, a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life."²² Using this term in the explanation of the religious development is obviously more inclusive than other terms. Moreover, it is suitable for a combination of cognitive development and religious development under one title. Fowler's ideas about children's God images are similar to the other researchers', as he assumes that children's minds can comprehend God anthropomorphically until they reach stage 3. As a rare example, Karaca's model²³ should be mentioned since he established a religious development stage theory for Muslims with an emphasis on Islamic theology. His religious development theory also depends on Piaget's cognitive development theory, but he establishes his theory in accordance with the norms and values of Turkish Muslim culture. His theory is comprised of 3 phases with 2 sub-stages for each phase. Like other Piagetian theories, he supposes that until the age of 7 (concrete operational thinking), thinking God as a separate entity from human beings is not possible and an almighty, omnipotent God image cannot be understood until the age of 13 (formal operational thinking).²⁴

Almost all stage theories have the same approach to the issue and their research methods are almost the same as they conducted a semi-structured interview or gave a drawing task to children. In these studies, children were forced to think that God physically exists with the questions like "What does God look like?" or "where does God live?" or with the requested task (drawing the God).²⁵ Thus, the anthropomorphic God image appeared in the answers of younger ages, as expected. Studies with these oriented results concluded that children's cognition is assumed to not be prepared to comprehend "god" concept until early adolescence. Establishing a comprehensive theory on the development of religious thinking in children requires more rigorous methods to investigate. As a way of investigating children's God concepts without directing them an anthropomorphic thinking of God, asking questions on the origin of plant life or

8 K. Helmut Reich, "The Psychology of Religion. An Empirical Approach", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 8/4 (1998), 275-281.

9 John E. Greer, "Stages in the Development of Religious Thinking", *British Journal of Religious Education* 3/1 (1980), 24-29.

10 Bärbel Inhelder - Jean Piaget, *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence: An Essay on the Construction of Formal Operational Structures, The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence: An Essay on the Construction of Formal Operational Structures* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

11 Lawrence, "Children's Thinking about Religion: A Study of Concrete Operational Thinking"; Piaget, *The Child Conception of the World*; Deconchy, "The Idea of God: Its Emergence between 7 and 16 Years"; James W. Fowler, *The Psychology of Human Development and Quest for Meaning* (Harper Collins, 1995); Heller, *The Children's God*; Allport, *The Individual and His Religion; A Psychological Interpretation*; Nye - Carlson, "The Development of the Concept of God in Children"; Ted Slater, *The Development of Children's Concept of God, 1991*; Sloan, *The Discovery and Measurement of the Religious Ideas of Children. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.*; Yavuz, *Çocukta Dini Duygu ve Düşüncenin Gelişimi*; Goldman, "Researches in Religious Thinking".

12 Barrett - Richert, "Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts".

13 Ernest Harms, "The Development of Religious Experience in Children", *American Journal of Sociology* 50/2 (1944), 112-122.

14 Harms, "The Development of Religious Experience in Children".

15 Harms, "The Development of Religious Experience in Children".

16 Greer, "Stages in the Development of Religious Thinking".

17 Goldman, "Researches in Religious Thinking", 140.

18 Njobvu Maligelita Jofter, *Testing Ronald Goldman's Theory of Children's Religious Thinking and Learning At Three Primary Schools in Lusaka District* (University of Zambia, 2015).

19 Roger J. L. Murphy, "A New Approach to the Study of the Development of Religious Thinking in Children", *Educational Studies* 4/1 (1978), 19-22.

20 Murphy, "A New Approach to the Study of the Development of Religious Thinking in Children".

21 Murphy, "A New Approach to the Study of the Development of Religious Thinking in Children".

22 J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 16.

23 Faruk Karaca, *Dini Gelişim Teorileri* (İstanbul: Değerler Eğitimi Merkezi Yayınları, 2007).

24 Karaca, *Dini Gelişim Teorileri*.

25 Greer, "Stages in the Development of Religious Thinking"; Barrett - Richert, "Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts".

animal life, and giving them 3 options: by God, by people, or nobody knows/unknown power as like what Petrovich²⁶ did might be a good example.

4. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

According to Islamic thought, children have the ability to comprehend an abstract concept of God with his unique features like eternal being, all-knowing (omniscient), all-powerful (omnipotent), or supremely good. The Qur'an supports this idea with the stories of the prophets. The most remarkable story belongs to Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), who has the same significance for all monotheistic religions. The following verses in the Qur'an show Ibrahim's deduction at age 7.²⁷

When the night grew dark over him, he saw a star and said, "This is my Lord," but when it set, he said, "I do not like things that set." And when he saw the moon rising, he said, "This is my Lord," but when it too set, he said, "If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be one of those who go astray." Then he saw the sun rising and cried, "This is my Lord! This is greater." But when the sun set, he said, "My people, I disown all that you worship beside God. I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists". (The Qur'an, Al-An'am 6/76-79)²⁸

In the verses, it can be seen that a child at age 7 can receive a mature faith and understanding of God. However, according to the stage theories, a child cannot receive this mature faith level because s/he can understand the religious concepts in literal meanings. S/he is at stages 1-2 (generally called the fairy tale stage, very basic level of believing), and religious concepts can be understood just literally in this stage.²⁹ When we look at the narrative, Ibrahim can designate God's characteristics and differentiate Him from other kinds of beings even if they are more powerful than a human being (Stars, Moon, or Sun).

Some theologians supposed that Ibrahim was a prophet for being more intelligent and finding God himself at this age. In other words, an ordinary child cannot make this kind of deduction.³⁰ Ibrahim's faith stage looks like Fowler's last stage, in which rare people can reach this kind of faith. However, the Qur'an particularly emphasizes in several verses (the Quran, Ali Imran 3/144; Ar-Ra'd 13/38; Ibrahim 14/11; Al-Isra 17/90; Al-Kahf 18/110; Al-Mu'minun 23/32; and so on) that the prophets are normal human beings, and they have no different skills from ordinary people. Thus, according to the Quran, every child can have the ability to comprehend God as a god—not anthropomorphic—if Ibrahim had done this.

There is another point that should be mentioned as the Qur'an did not mention the age of Ibrahim at the time of his attempt to find God. The age of Ibrahim has been mentioned by Ibn Kathir, who is a noteworthy Islamic historian. He had reached out to the other religions' sources to complete his tafsir (Quranic commentary) and got critics from Islamic theologians because of that. Therefore, the age of Ibrahim is ambiguous as stated by some theologians because it is unclear where Ibn Kathir got this piece of knowledge.³¹ The faith stage of Ibrahim may be in line with Fowler's stages if his age was not 7 at the event.

A further example from the period of the prophet Muhammad might be given, as among the first believers there was a child (Ali, 10).³² Ali comprehended God, Islam, and intangible entities in it at the age of 10, thus becoming a Muslim. Children and their deep relationship with religion and their ability to understand religious concepts/images including God seem normal in Islamic thought.

Thus, drawing a faith development stage theory on a different religion's theology could lead to wrong assumptions as Fowler's stage theory is not fitting in Islam and Muslim culture. As even religious thinking is accepted as a subtitle of developmental psychology, it is firmly related to social life as religion is an important part of it in some societies like Muslim communities. As a result, it is necessary to develop culturally tailored theories to explain how religious concepts can be understood by children.

5. ACTION

In some religions like Islam, children are assumed to have the capacity to comprehend God's reality and have an ability to understand God's image as it is, however, the stage theories in developmental psychology asserted the contrary.³³ According to these accounts, children first develop an understanding of human abilities and then adapt these abilities to God.

Barrett and Richert³⁴ suggest a new aspect to the issue, preparedness theory. Children's God concept is attempted to be clarified with cognitive stage theories, because of the idea that children's cognition does not have the required equipment to comprehend God until a certain age. Nevertheless, recent research done by Barrett and Richert³⁵ suggests that the mind may have the required equipment to comprehend God as a God at the early ages of childhood.

Preparedness theory supposed that the human mind may be cognitively prepared to receive religious concepts when s/he was born.³⁶ The theory suggests that the children's thinking defaults lead them to easily understand the abstract God concept.³⁷ Recent

26 Olivera Petrovich, "Understanding of Non-Natural Causality in Children and Adults: A Case Against Artificialism", *Psyche En Geloof* 8 (1997), 151-165.

27 Muhammad Saed Abdul-Rahman, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir Juz'7 (Part 7)* (MSA Publication Limited, 2009).

28 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

29 Reich, "The Psychology of Religion. an Empirical Approach".

30 Bradley Cook, "The 'Book of Abraham' and the Islamic, 'Qisaş Al-Anbiya' (Tales of the Prophets) Extant Literature", *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33/4 (2000), 127-146; Muammer Esen, "Hz. Ibrahim'in İmanı ve Tevhid Mücadelesi", *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 52/2 (2011), 111-128.

31 Nurul Hidayat - Ngainun Naim, "Prophet Ibrahim (as), the Search for God and a Transformative Pedagogy Perspective", *Jurnal Iqra: Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan* 7/1 (2022), 248-258.

32 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, Book (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1983).

33 Yavuz, *Çocukta Dini Duygu ve Düşüncenin Gelişimi*; Barrett - Richert, "Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts".

34 Barrett - Richert, "Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts".

35 Barrett - Richert, "Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts".

36 Rebekah A. Richert - Pehr Granqvist, "Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood", *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2013, 165-182.

37 Rebekah A. Richert - Justin L. Barrett, "Research: Do You See What I See? Young Children's Assumptions about God's Perceptual Abilities", *International Journal of Phytoremediation* 21/1 (2005), 283-295.

investigations in the field demonstrate that children could have the ability to understand God made and human made and they can distinguish successfully them from each other at an early age.³⁸ Petrovich's³⁹ experiment focused on 30 British preschool children (mean age 4.4). He showed them 2 photographs and asked them which one is a human-made thing and 90% of the children gave the true answer.⁴⁰ Additionally, Petrovich⁴¹ in another investigation, interviews children (135 preschooler, main age 4.3) about the origin of the natural world, as a result, receives about 7 times more likely the "God" answer than humans.⁴² Consequently, it could be suggested that children's cognitive ability at a very young age is adequate to understand the origin of natural life and the differences between God made and human one.

An interesting study conducted with children aged 3-5 called cracker boxes experiment to understand their ability to differentiate the mind of humans and the mind of God.⁴³ In the classic cracker boxes experiment, the experimenter shows a classic familiar cracker box with cracker pictures on it and asks children what could be inside of the box, children answer as crackers. Then the experimenter shows children that the box is full of rocks and re-closes the box. He/she asks children "if your mother comes to the room and sees the box, what would she think firstly about things inside the box?" Most of the 3 years olds answer "rocks," but by age 5 the percentages change, they could understand that their mother can have a wrong belief. Barrett, Richert, and Driesenga⁴⁴ use the same experiment to understand children's thoughts on God's mind. Thus, when they asked the children aged 3, 87% of them answer the question about their mothers' knowledge of the box as "rocks," but when the same question is asked to them about God, almost all children's answers as "rocks."⁴⁵ These results illustrate that children can see the differences between the human mind and God's mind. So, when reasoning about beliefs, children can differ between the mother's beliefs and God's beliefs. This experiment has shown that children in the experiment do not think of God as anthropomorphic. Children thought mom as a human can have wrong assumptions but not God.

Second to last, a recent experiment conducted with children from 3 different religious backgrounds (mainstream Christian, Muslim, and Catholic) were made about supernatural mental and immaterial attributes of God, a ghost, a dad, and a bug.⁴⁶ According to the results of this study, children have an ability to distinguish God from humans and regardless of religion, they are attributing more supernatural psychological properties to God than physical ones. The study concluded that "children are not simply anthropomorphic in their God concepts but early on understand supernatural agents as having special mental properties and they continue to learn about differences between agents, influenced by their religious traditions."⁴⁷

Last but not least, Oser and Gmünder's developmental theory of religious judgment has also supported the argument that children may have the ability to comprehend God as a God from very early age. They have established the theory on 8 polar pairs like "sacred vs profane" or "transcendent vs. immanent."⁴⁸ According to the theory, the equilibrium is dynamic between these poles. Five stages have been established on the position of equilibrium between poles and person-God relationships.⁴⁹ As at stage 1, the immanent and the transcendent are seen totally separated, and at the highest stage "the transcendent becomes evident in the immanence of human communication, and vice versa."⁵⁰ Throughout the life course, the God image becomes more abstract and more sophisticated, more reflected, and more outreaching.⁵¹ Although Oser and Gmünder have focused on the human beings' relationship with God, from the first stage to the last, God has been accepted as an almighty and omnipotent God by humans.

In the developmental psychology literature, theories on how God concepts are forming in children's minds can be expanded with Kirkpatrick's⁵² attachment theory and Bandura's⁵³ social learning theory. Both theories have attempted to emphasize that not only the conceptions of God or religious development can be reduced to cognitive development, but also that emotional and social factors are also effective. All these studies illustrate that children's ability to comprehend God or other abstract concepts in different religions might be underestimated by Piagetian researchers. As the investigations showed the great ability of children to attribute characteristics of God to God and to comprehend God like how mature people do. The early studies recruited only Christian children, and from the viewpoint of that religion, the phases of religious thinking have been established. The latest studies using recruited children from different religious backgrounds resulted in different theories on comprehending God.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, regardless of their religion or cultural background, children's minds may have the ability and comprehending the abstract God concept. God can be understood as an all-present, formless, all-knowing, and all-powerful being by children. Recent investigations support this theory, and the cognition of children continues to surprise researchers. This illustrates that the religious thinking development of children has different explanations along with the stage theories including Piaget's one, when the issue comes to the abstract

38 Susan A. Gelman - Kathleen E. Kremer, "Understanding Natural Cause: Children's Explanations of How Objects and Their Properties Originate", *Child Development* 62/2 (1991), 396-414; Petrovich, "Understanding of Non-Natural Causality in Children and Adults: A Case Against Artificialism".

39 Petrovich, "Understanding of Non-Natural Causality in Children and Adults: A Case Against Artificialism".

40 Barrett - Richert, "Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts".

41 Petrovich, "Understanding of Non-Natural Causality in Children and Adults: A Case Against Artificialism".

42 Richert - Granqvist, "Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood".

43 Justin L. Barrett et al., "God's Beliefs versus Mother's: The Development of Nonhuman Agent Concepts", *Child Development* 72/1 (2001), 50-65.

44 Barrett et al., "God's Beliefs versus Mother's: The Development of Nonhuman Agent Concepts".

45 Barrett et al., "God's Beliefs versus Mother's: The Development of Nonhuman Agent Concepts".

46 Nyhof - Johnson, "Is God Just a Big Person? Children's Conceptions of God across Cultures and Religious Traditions".

47 Nyhof - Johnson, "Is God Just a Big Person? Children's Conceptions of God across Cultures and Religious Traditions", 60.

48 K. Helmut Reich, "Invited Essay: The Person-God Relationship: A Dynamic Model", *International Journal of Phytoremediation* 21/1 (2003), 229-247.

49 Reich, "Invited Essay: The Person-God Relationship: A Dynamic Model"; İzzet Albayrak, Fritz K. Oser ve Dini Gelişim Teorisi (Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Marmara Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2020); Merve Cetinkaya, *The Relationship between Spiritual Experience and Happiness among London Muslim Youth* (Ankara: İlahiyat Kitap, 2023).

50 Reich, "Invited Essay: The Person-God Relationship: A Dynamic Model", 27.

51 Reich, "Invited Essay: The Person-God Relationship: A Dynamic Model".

52 Lee Kirkpatrick, *An Attachment-Theory Approach Psychology of Religion*, 1992.

53 Albert Bandura, "Social-Learning Theory of Identificatory Processes", *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research* 1969, 213-262.

religious entities and religious thinking. Doubtlessly, the theories in the area need more investigations and more comprehensive methods to research God's image in unanthropomorphic ways. The investigation revealed that understanding children's ways of thinking about God is an important prerequisite for the developmental psychology of religion. On this basis, future research should examine alternative theories on explaining abstract thinking in children.

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