Children's Views of God: Theoretical and Empirical Insights

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This lecture asks how we can obtain knowledge about children's views of God. I will first of all introduce and discuss the classical models of religious development. Afterwards, I will report on recent empirical research and its results and implications for religious education.

1.   Classical models in psycho-analysis and developmental psychology.

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the founder of psychoanalysis and a critic of religion expressed the following view: "However, psychoanalytic investigation of the individual teaches [...] that for everybody the God is modeled after the father and that our personal relation to God is dependent upon our relation to our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him, and that God at bottom is nothing but an exalted father." [1]

Two aspects are important here: First, it is Freud's view that religion can be traced back to the overpowerful father of childhood. The other aspect is that religion is childish and, therefore, an immature aspect of being human. [2] Religion is infantilism, according to Freud.

How did the development of a belief in gods even come about? It came from the "childish helplessness which wakened the need for protection" – the (physical) father remedied this. This "recognition of the continuation of this helplessness throughout one's whole life was the reason for the adherence to the existence of a father which was now more powerful." [3] This is how belief in a God comes about. Man must detach himself from the idea that he would not be able to bear life's difficulties and ghastly reality: "Man cannot remain a

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1   S. Freud, Totem und Tabu. Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker [1912], in: S. Freud, Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 9, 6. Aufl. Frankfurt a. M. 1978, 177.
2   F. Schweitzer, Lebensgeschichte und Religion. Religiöse Entwicklung und Erziehung im Kindes- und Jugendalter, 3., durchges. Aufl. 1994, 61.
3   S. Freud, Zukunft einer Illusion, in: S. Freud, GW Bd. 14, 3. Aufl. Frankfurt a. M. 1963, 352.

child for ever: He must ultimately get out into the 'hostile life'. One could call it 'education to reality'." [4]

Freud could not find anything positive to say about religion. He regarded it as close to neurosis or emotional suffering. Freud indicates the important aspect of the connections beween our ideas of God and our parents, perhaps even that our religious ideas are influenced by our parents who, in the first years of our lives, may appear to be as powerful as gods. However, the single track in Freud's argument weakens the whole model: It is as if there were no other people, places or experiences which would shape our religious development. On top of that, he did not keep in mind any possible change in one's ideas of God in the course of one's life. For him there was no such thing as an enlightened faith or even a faith which enables people to have a life-affirming attitude. That is why he promoted overcoming religion.

James Fowler

James Fowler conceived a development of faith as taking place in stages. In this he understands "faith" in line with Paul Tillich's definition of religion as "those things which ultimately concern us", broadly understood as trust in ultimate values providing meaning: "faith is ...a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere ...an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions". [5]

Fowler developed his theory of stages based on narrative interviews with children, young people and adults whom he asked about their life stories, key experiences and relationships, values and convictions and, finally, religious experiences, religious practice and faith.

His stages remind us of the developmental psychological model provided by Jean Piaget. Here, too, is the core thought that a person's ideas are dependent on the developmental psychological and cognitive state.

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4   Freud, Zukunft einer Illusion 373.
5   Fowler 2000, 35f.

The following three stages of this familiar model are relevant for our context of religious education:

"Mythic-Literal faith" (elementary school age): stories, such as Bible stories, provide meaning for the child so that she can orientate herself in the world. In line with the concrete operational thinking, she understands myths literally, does not recognise symbolic language and regards God as a human being (anthropomorphism). One thing that is special is her openness to the stories, although they are only understood to a limited extent. [6]

"Synthetic-Conventional faith" (aged 12 and over): the second part of the term, "conventional", demonstrates that faith has not yet been personally adopted but is inherited from and dependent upon others. This gives it its synthetic character: the individual matters are not kept together or examined to see if they make sense as a whole. There is no individual critical judgement: other people's opinions are necessary. [7]

"Individuative-Reflective faith" (from late adolescences up to middle age): This is where a "clear, almost exaggerated consciousness of one's own individualness and autonomy" is demonstrated.[8] "Even when I was a small child, I was told that the dear God in heaven was watching over me. [That] is naturally utter nonsense [...]. God is for me, as it were, my conscience. [...] God is among us human beings and not in heaven. He doesn't make decisions in heaven: we make them ourselves, more or less." [9]

How does this theory affect religious education in theory and practice? First, it demonstrates that children and young people have, depending on their developmental stage, their own ideas of God which are different from those of adults and which we need to recognise, understand and respect. Secondly, the conclusions, particularly those drawn from the aforementioned stages, make it plain how school students approach things and the topics which are relevant to them. They also indicate potential hurdles which might crop up in the coverage of religious or Christian matters in religious education, such as understanding things literally and non-symbolically. However more recent research shows that a symbolic

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6   Fowler 2000, 166f.
7   Schweitzer 1994, 146.
8   Schweitzer 1994, 148.
9   Schweitzer 1994, 149.

understanding is possible for children, too, or can be stimulated and practiced in the religious educational context.[10]

An important byproduct of Fowler's model for religious education is that content cannot simply be "saved" in the students' brains, but that it needs to be adapted in an appropriate manner. The manner in which the term "faith" is open to interpretation does indeed underline the important issue that we are not only dealing with knowledge of the subject matter but with developing an attitude; however it is not clear whether Fowler distinguishes at all between the development of faith and the general development of the personality. In religious education however, we are dealing with reference to a particular Christian understanding of God. At the same time, the idea of a staged (evaluatively) hierarchy of faith is foreign to protestant theology which trusts in the justification of human beings by God who accepts unconditionally. Of course it is true that "growth" in faith is not excluded. After all, there are limitations even in the how dated the model is: We expect nowadays that children think and behave in a more self-determining manner than in the past.[11]

Fritz Oser/Paul Gmünder

Oser and Gmünder have studied how people's religious judgement develops: in other words, how people process experiences in their lives in a religious manner. The various ways of overcoming contingencies provide information about the "subjective pattern of the relationship of human beings to an ultimate being (God)". Oser and Gmünder have applied Piaget's cognitive-structural model of stages and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development to religion.

Methodologically, they draw on Kohlberg's clinical individual interviews regarding a particular dilemma, in this instance with a religious topic: a young doctor, Paul, is in an airplane which is crashing and promises God that, if he is rescued, he will dedicate his life to the Third World and not marry his fiancée, should she not want to accompany him. After a

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10   R. Oberthür, Kinder und die großen Fragen, Ein Praxisbuch für den Religionsunterricht, München 1995, 89.

11   H. Neuhäuser, Autorität und Partnerschaft. Wie Kinder ihre Eltern sehen, Weinheim 1993.

miraculous rescue, in which he is the only passenger who survives, and a lucrative offer of work in a private clinic, he considers whether he should keep his promise.

Oser and Gmünder deliberately create an artificial situation involving two conflicting values. In order to have a religious dilemma, they regard it as necessary "to incorporate formulations with religious content into the dilemmas" because test subjects "only give religious judgements if there are either elements involving religion in the dilemma situation or if afterwards, the semi-standarized questions point to the religious reality." [12]

Should Paul keep his promise? A 9-year-old answers: "Yes, he must. God also rescued him. Perhaps he rescued Paul because he was always nice to him. He did not do too much that was wrong. If we are good to God, then maybe God will also help us some time [...] He can do miracles. But he doesn't always do them. It depends how you behave towards him." [13]

Using the test subjects' answers, Oser and Gmünder compile five stages of religious judgement. Here, too, the middle three are relevant:

Stage 2 sees God as omnipotent, although as manipulable: using ritual practices, religious efforts and prayers. An "exchange relationship" arises: "Do ut des" ("I give, so that you give to me"). In the words of the 9-year-old: "If we are good to God, then maybe God will also help us some time". The opposite also applies: unlucky or lucky events are understood as God's actions in the sense that people have sacrificed, prayed, and so on, either too little or sufficiently. [14] An initial subjectivitiy in faith comes into being.

Stage 3 is called "deism" or "autonomy of the person". Both terms allude historically to the Enlightenment: The existence of God is not denied but his effect on mankind is. "Dealing" with God is rejected and instead the independent actions of human beings come into play. "The mistake is already there when Paul makes a deal with the good Lord. I find that childish in a situation like that."; "If one goes to Africa, one should do it if it is an 'inner need' but not because one has 'promised the good Lord'." [15]

Stage 4 is "Autonomy and plan of salvation": a human being regards himself as someone who is free and who is responsible for his own actions. He asks what the condition is for freedom and recognises that this is not a contradiction but rather a basic requirement for

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12   F. Oser/P. Gmünder, Der Mensch – Stufen seiner religiösen Entwicklung. Ein strukturgenetischer Ansatz, 2., überarb. Aufl. Gütersloh 1988, 117.
13   Oser/Gmünder 1988, 148.
14   Oser/Gmünder 1988, 84.
15   Oser/Gmünder 1988, 155.

true religious action. This ability to reflect which has been developed means that God, the world and human beings can be regarded as connected to each other in a universal plan, within the framework of which people are able to act freely. [16]

For discussion: Oser and Gmünder's theory is conducive to a better understanding of how people (of any age) argue religiously and gives insights into why a particular concrete subject will be regarded completely differently at each stage. To what extent a teacher can use stimuli to encourage students "successfully" to go on to the next stage as postulated by Oser and Gmünder is questionable, it is true. In the long run, the theory can help each person retrospectively reconstruct their own story of how they found their religious identity. Because it is so tangible, the model has been given high regard in the theory of religious pedagogics. At the same time there are the following points of criticism to be made:

The hierarchical structuring and standardizing of the stages with the demand of irreversibility, sequentialism, and universal validity cannot be proved empirically. Human beings, in their overall religious experience and action are at home in different stages at the same time.

The multifaceted phenomen of religion or religious development is inappropriately restricted to a borderline situation (a dilemma story) which is remote from everyday life; and the relationship between God and humans is reduced to a moral relationship.

The goal of a universally valid theory which is independent of historical religious forms can only be achieved at the price of removing its content. Religion, at least in its Christian form, always deals with a unity of cognitive, emotional and motivational dimensions. It is never merely about an individual's theoretical overcoming of contingencies but rather concerns the *praxis pietatis* of a community. Religious learning is sensual and symbolic learning; perception; experience; practicing of rituals; becoming familiar with prayer, silence, hymns, grappling with and becoming acquainted with biblical texts; playing; discussions; community and much, much more.

The attempt to align religion or faith with vows is questionable – the biblical tradition itself is extremely critical of vows (e.g. "Before making a vow, prepare yourself; do not be like one who puts the Lord to the test", Sir 18,23) as well as the Jewish Tradition (cf. the Yom Kippur Prayer "May God pardon us for the empty promises, which we have foolishly made to

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16   Schweitzer 1994, 129f.

God. May God guard us from their consequences."[17]) – and thereby gives a skewed impression of religion. It is particularly problematic that the dilemma itself represents the stage of *do ut des* and therefore is close to particular answers (that is to say, those in Stage 2). Oser and Gmünder have not succeeded in collecting religious judgements without directly asking or presenting a religious dilemma. [18]

However, the model is helpful inasmuch as it shows the breadth of possible religious arguments.

2. Methods and results of recent empirical studies of views of God.

In which direction has research in recent years developed? Children and young people have continued to be asked or requested to visualize and to express their ideas of God in certain ways. At the same time, however, there has been a growth in the insight that one must differentiate between the oral, written and creative expressions of the interview subjects and the meanings which are attached to these expressions afterwards.

Does one do the individuals justice when one forces their expressions into a theoretical model? Can there even be a theory which can cover the variety of expressions? Does the theory not reduce the reality far more than it perceives it?

There are no easy answers to these questions. What is certain is that the naive faith in the universal validity of developmental theories is broken. The consciousness of the problem has increased not least because *I* as researcher *induce* answers in the survey. I observe children and young people not, as it were, "in the wild" and wait for them on their own initiative to utter a thought at some point about God – a thought that I will then record. All the answers which we receive from children and young people are rather *reactive*. The extent to which we as researchers distort the reality is not something we can know for certain. Perhaps the young person would never had said anything about the subject "God" because it does not interest him, or because he did not feel like talking about a personal subject with a (strange) researcher? And: What do I get "out" of the evaluation? Is it really all the same which view of God I, as researcher, have myself? To what extent to I project my idea of God in the

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[17] Das jüdische Gebetbuch, hg. v. J. Magonet, Bd. 2, Gütersloh 1997, 289.
18 Schweitzer 1994, 133.

evaluation of the answers? The Frenchman Georges Devereux said in his book, "From anxiety to method in the behavioral sciences", "The academic study of people is handicapped because of the overlap of object and observer." [19] The following two examples demonstrate how we can deal with this perception and still continue to carry out research.

Arnold/Hanisch/Orth

In the middle of the 1990s Ursula Arnold, Helmut Hanisch and Gottfired Orth carried out a study on the topic "What children believe". [20] They asked 56 children in the 5th class (Gymnasium) in the towns of Aachen, Leipzig and Mödling (Austria) in individual interviews and used an outline – similar to Fowler – with the themes view, experience and understanding of God; experience with religious education classes; the meaning of Jesus, prayer and experience of prayer. Finally the children were to comment on the "Story of Beppo": A boy from a poor family writes a letter to God asking him for baby things for his new baby brother. He ties it to a red balloon which floats up into the sky. After days of anxious waiting, a package with baby things arrives, with no return address. [21]

The authors do not classify the children's comments in developmental psychological models of stages (Fowler, Oser) but limit themselves to their *documentation*. Thus the readers can draw their own conclusions about the narrative possibilities, the symbolic and metaphorical language and the religious and theological knowledge of the children.

Part of the survey incorporated the explicit request that the subjects should "draw God". [22] This is something which one hears repeatedly in religous education. The children are thereby required to render their faith visible. The more I see pictures of this, the more I can only advise against such an instruction. It puts the children in a difficult situation and is counterproductive both in terms of understanding the biblical idea of God, when we think of the revelation of the name JHWH in Exodus 3 and for theological learning as a whole.

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19   G. Devereux, Angst und Methode in den Verhaltenswissenschaften, 4. Aufl. Frankfurt a. M. 1998, 17.
20   U. Arnold et al, Was Kinder glauben. 24 Gespräche über Gott und die Welt, Stuttgart 1997.
21   Arnold 1997, 350.
22   Arnold 1997, 29, 57, 71, 85, 104, 118, 322.

But let's look at pictures by children from the 5th grade, which represent particular types of views of God:

Joachim draws this and says: "So, here he has a maths exercise book: perhaps he is checking up on the work [...]. And perhaps he is putting books onto the shelf which say how the people down below on earth are getting along with each other or if they are not getting along so well. Yes, perhaps he can't keep everything in his head very well, so he just writes it down."[23]   This detailed anthropomorphic view of God corresponds precisely to Fowler's cliché.

Barbara draws a similar picture: "... I think of him as an old man with curly hair and a long beard." At the same time, she speaks metaphorically: "God is the sun in the sky."[24]

We must pause here for a second and ask where such ideas come from. They do not just fall from heaven. They are a part of our collective consciousness.

Many illustrated Bibles, including the first complete Luther Bible from 1534, show the creator God as a bearded man (Genesis 1). [25]

These types of illustrations continued until well into the 19th century. The pictures of God in the "Nazarene" style in Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld's "Pictorial Bible" are particularly distinctive. [26] They made a lasting impression on many generations.   Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer was brought up on this picture Bible by his mother. As a young theologian he "simply copied his mother when he began to teach. It was only much later that he recognised in these prettified

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23   Arnold 1997, 15f.
24   Arnold 1997, 298.
25   Biblia, das ist, die gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudsch, Mart. Luth. Wittemberg, vollst. Nachdr. der Ausg. Wittenberg, Lufft, 1534, hg. v. Stephan Füssel, Bd. 1., Das Alte Testament, Köln 2002, gegenüber Blatt 1.

26   Die Bibel in Bildern. 240 Darstellungen, erfunden und auf Holz gezeichnet von Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Nachdruck der Ausgabe von 1860, Zürich 1972.

pictures a dangerous preoccupation with the childish depiction of the biblical stories." [27]

Having indicated the problem, we return to the children's pictures of God.

Franziska: "Well, I think, he's got to look like this, because I can't imagine him. I don't imagine him to be an old man. It says in the Bible, too, that he won't get old. So, there isn't any time in Heaven. And that's why I drew him like this. So, not old." Later she reconsidered the question question where God lives: "God doesn't live up there. He lives here somewhere, where we don't know. We can't know the name for where he lives." [28] Here, too, we are dealing with the breaking of an anthropomorphic idea. The cliché of an old man who "lives" in heaven is rejected. God's place is without a name and God is not subject to time. Franziska reflects the problematic of anthropomorphic attribution and the limits of human ability of expression; and at the same time is able to find strong words of expression.
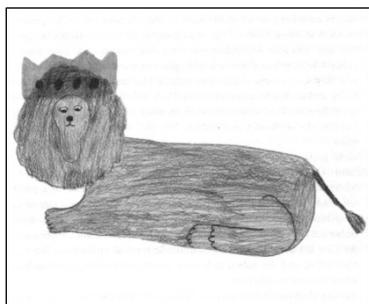
Melanie: "[...] God- I've drawn him as a lion because he actually seems really powerful to me. [...]I've somehow remembered a film – in it there was also a powerful ruler and his emblem was a lion, and he had also just ruled like that. [...] And that's why I have drawn a lion as God, not a white man with white grey hair, who just sits there and smiles [...] that would be [...] not my thing. [...] He is a bit like a king, who looks. One who perhaps only tries to make sure that war does not spread too far or people get to bad." [29] It's the opposite thesis to "the good Lord". Melanie's God rules, is powerful, acts, now and then does something bad, carries responsibility as king and curtails war – one is reminded of Isaiah 45:7, "I bring prosperity and create disaster".

Bettina uses a symbolic depiction: "Well, it's not exactly how I imagine God. [...] I imagine that he is like a candle which gives light to the whole word and that all human beings should be happy. And well, that the one with the candle, that he brings light into the world." [30] In contrast to the developmental psychological theory that children can only think

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27   E. Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologe – Christ – Zeitgenosse, eine Biographie, 6. Aufl. München 1986, 59f.
28   Arnold 1997, 238.
29   Arnold 1997, 247f.
30   Arnold 1997, 192f.

concretely and not symbolically, the school student employs a comparison and puts not God himself, but, rather, his effect into the picture.

Corinna leaves the sheet of paper blank and notes: "I have no picture of the shape of God, because it is enough for me to know that he exists." [I: Can you tell me why you cannot draw God?] "It is for me somehow too high. I mean, there is after all also a commandment, you should not [...] make therefore an image of God for yourself, that means no picture of God. And anyway, like I wrote there, it's enough for me to know that he exists." [31] As an adult reader, one is astonished at this biblically justified and theologically reflected frugality and self-restraint.
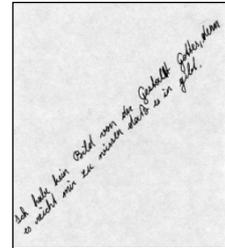
Children do not necessarily depict their image of God anthropomorphically. They also choose depictions which show something abstract: God as love, as relationship, as being there for one another. Here is Edith's example: "Yes, the man there, well, he has fallen down; and the woman there has tried to help him up. So... that you help each other." I: "So God is for you that you help each other." Edith: "That you are just there for each other." I: "And where is God there?" Edith: "In your thoughts."[32]

To summarize: Children deal very differently with the assignment, "drawing God". We learn not only how children can think in a differentiated way, but we can also draw conclusions for views of God in general:

Childish pictures of God show God as a *person*. Sometimes they are explicitly anthorpomorphic and show God with human attributes. At the same time they express God's otherness.: Children draw, for instance, a robe (nowadays hardly anyone wears one); God is transparent (invisibility is given expression); God floats in the air (distance from earth); avoidance of physical details. To what extent is it appropriate to call these depictions "anthropomorphic"? We could speak of "personal" views and pictures of God.

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31   Arnold 1997, 274f.
32   Arnold 1997, 71.

In contrast to this, there are non-personal views and pictures of God. We can think of the girl Bettina with the candle or Melanie and the lion. In the biblical-Christian tradition this corresponds to referring to God as light, fortress, protection or refuge.

Is the decision of a child (or an adult) to see God as personal or as impersonal a sufficient criterion with which to classify the artist in a particular developmental-psychological stage? In the theory of stages, the abstract is higher than the concrete: Anthropomorphic depictions of God are therefore typically childish ("mythic-literal" faith); adolescents and adults in contrast deployed symbols (such as the triangle with an eye in the middle). The drawing, however, does not say anything about the "developmental stage". One easily forgets that the motif "triangle" is just as much a symbolic depiction as the motif of the "old man on a cloud".

Because God is unavailable, a pictorial depiction can never be anything other than *symbolic*, regardless of whether one chooses a personal (anthropomorphic) or impersonal shape. What applies to the physical depiction should be applied to the idea in imagination. Even ideas cannot sum up God. They reflect the impression which God leaves behind in humans. The personal idea of God has become accepted in the Christian tradition because it expresses the relationship of God to human beings better than an impersonal one.

There is a conclusion for study and for practical work: The evaluation of children's pictures is not possible without the representation and evaluation of the frame of reference in which the pictures originated. The frame of reference can be the group in which the pictures originate or a sequence of pictures by a child. An evaluation limited to the picture alone is insufficient and can never be the basis for "classification".

This brings us to the final example:

Anna-Katharina Szagun

Szagun carried out a longterm study over several years (4-7 years) of children and adolescents who are growing up in a "context where the majority do not belong to any Christian church" (Rostock) – in other words, without any Christian "cultural carpet". [33] In this she wanted to trace the "individual religious education processes" over several years; to train the "perceptive abilities" of teaching staff; and to "make visible the richness of

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33 A.-K. Szagun, Dem Sprachlosen Sprache verleihen. Rostocker Langzeitstudie zu Gottesverständnis und Gottesbeziehung von Kindern, die in mehrheitlich konfessionslosem Kontext aufwachsen, Jena 2006, 51.

children's theological thinking".[34] She questions not only the investigative methods and results of Oser and Gmünder and of Fowler, but also criticizes the approach of her predecessors Arnold, Hanisch and Orth: 1. The children were required to draw a picture "of God", not a "metaphor about God"; and that is why the "fairytale-cliché-like" and anthropomorphic pictures resulted.[35] 2. The technique is also to blame for these results: What is very large, infinitely far away and at the same time all around, cannot be depicted on a sheet of paper; instead one must work something out using something like collages.[36] 3. Finally, the production and evaluation of the visualisations must be connected with a conversation in which the authors have something to say. Szagun incorporates not only the context of the learning group ("What was dealt with before?") but also the social and biographical context of the individual school students.[37]

These are the details of the method: The task was to create a metaphor for God by means of a collage made of materials: "God to me today is like..." The introduction to this was: "We cannot see, hear, calculate or measure God: We say in pictures, in names what he is to us. We compare him with something that is visible. We need many pictures, many names in order to describe God."[38] The materials available were clay, plasticine, stones, twigs, fruits, blossoms, broken toys and household objects (keys, scissors, clocks), wire, nails, cardboard and plastic waste, scraps of wool and material, coloured paper, glue, scissors. The strength of the material collage lies in its ability to be processed to the end and in the playing with polyvalent objects. The conversation was decisive for interpreting the productions: "Let's discover together what has been produced here... How is what you have built similar to God for you?... If you were to give your picture a title, what might it be?"[39]

Aaron (4th grade; 10 years old) produced a metaphor for God after completing the lesson module on "God": a green island with a volcano and sunset. "He himself is the volcano, which sometimes erupts from anger. There is a whole lot of anger living in him. The sun – '*that* is God.' He watches 'how I erupt'. God looks kindly upon the volcano. [...] So that nothing bad emerges during it [the eruption], it is good, 'to talk to God about it'."[40]

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34   Szagun 2006, 43.
35   Szagun 2006, 34f.
36   Szagun 2006, 57.
37   Szagun 2006, 39.
38   Szagun 2006, 67f.
39   Szagun 2006, 71–74.
40   Szagun 2006, 121.

Another meaningful example for the expressive powers of the material collages and the conversations comes from Hella. The first time she created her metaphor for God as a bridge which carries a subdued figure: "Sometimes I am terribly desperate about something or other; and then it appears to me as if God were a bridge which then holds me." (4th grade; 11 years old). [41]

Two years later, she takes clay and presses it hard with both hands, so that one can see the impressions of her fingers: "I thought, I'll make something that one can hold onto tight to", - "I cannot fall into emptiness." "Even if somebody has a car crash, he can still go on living! Or if he loses his job, he can try to find a new one! To have this strength to carry on..." [42]

Szagun's study brings into the equation the original approach of producing a "God metaphor" using material collage as a real alternative to drawing. She demonstrates how important it is to approach the productions of the children openly, respectfully and patiently and to listen without prematurely classifying into religious models of stages and thereby "checking off"; indeed she gives encouragement right there with that background of the "churchless context" in scrutinizing the usual religious development theories about children and young people in their claims about universal validity. The investigation shows clearly how it is possible for children's views of God to be varied, rich in images, and personal *during* religious education classes; and how it is possible for them to develop (positively) *because of* religious education classes.

To sum up:

The classical concepts of Freud, and even more those of Fowler and Oser are significant when dealing with the question of what views of God children and young people possess. They demonstrate the idiosyncracies of children and adolescents in understanding

41   Szagun 2006, 331.
42   Szagun, 2006, 340.

and thinking. The reception of these models is fundamental in religious pedagogics. On the other hand, the models which have been put forward have great weaknesses both at the theoretical level and at the empirical-methodical level. For this reason, a further development of the empirical tools, as well as reflection on the theory which lies behind them, is indispensible.

Born from of a mature consciousness of the problems in research, recent studies have produced creative methods and a new sensitivity towards the views of God of children and young people. They no longer regard the interview subjects as objects, but as partners in an open process from which one can also learn something as a researcher. These new approaches are full of promise both for the religous pedagogics and for religious education in the classroom.

These thoughts will be further developed in the following lecture: "Doing Theology with Children".