



## Original Paper

**Communication as magic: An ethnographic study on child-God communication in Northern Italy**

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**Abstract.** *The research in children's mental health and religion is a developing field. Most of the studies examine the religious developmental process either from a psychological, or from a religious point of view. The purpose of this research is to combine these two areas in order to understand more comprehensively the relationship between the child and God. The results are personal insights of this relationship, here conceived as determined by the encounter of inner and external forces and dynamics. Six common themes have been identified through the systematic analysis of the interviews and can be considered as shared features in the various personal relationships. The most interesting findings, obtained from the analysis of these themes, are related to child-God communication, defined by a child as the "magic action process", an interaction activated by the child when asking for God's help. As described in Elkind's work (1970), in children's hands the image of God becomes a tool used to solve problematic situations; this paper aims to analyse this interaction and its effects on the child's life. Finally, the findings can also be interpreted as material to critically analyse psychologically informed theories on religious development in children.*

**Keywords:** Religion, children, religious development, God, mental health.

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**INTRODUCTION** This study is the result of a series of analyses and considerations on the connection between children's mental health and religion. The origin of the interest in this area of research can be found in the study of Freud's works on the religious sense of guilt as a symptom of neurosis. While researching on the existing literature, the urgent need to leave the classic theme of guilt and to concentrate on a more basic topic became quite evident: the image of God and how the child relates to it. The reader is invited to approach this project not as a static study, but as a work in progress that can be enriched by the reader's personal experiences and by his/her will to enter the children's world.

**THE CHILD MEETS GOD** In order to study the complicated relationship between children and God it is necessary to present an overview of different positions concerning the origin of religious feelings and beliefs.

**Functionalism** At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Pierre Bovet suggested that the origin of religious feelings is "daughterly love". According to Bovet's theory (1928), the idea of God derives from the need for a figure that can contain the powers and the abilities that the child thought only parents

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could have. This is to be contrasted with Freud's idea that sexual feelings are the basis of religious ones. More recently, Elkind (1970) proposed that every social institution, including religion, could be understood as a construction/projection of the needs of both society and the individual. His work has been extremely influential to this research since, by describing religion as the solution to some of the fundamental needs of childhood, it delineates the first feature of the interaction between the child and God. Starting from the assumption that the image of God is the answer to specific needs or issues, the interviews have been shaped in order to determine the circumstances and the modality in which children seek this kind of help. Though this position has been adopted as ground theory in the research, it is relevant to also consider its counterpart.

**Innatism** Cavalletti's (1983) theory promotes a different perspective on the origin of religion in children. The author's main interest is to demonstrate whether religion is a natural feeling. The fact that her body of research has been mostly conducted in a Montessorian school/ambience, where children are considered competent beings and learn mainly through experiencing and absorbing, may limit the validity of her findings in another kind of context. Cavalletti demonstrates through various stories that religion is innate and that even a child who did not receive a religious education, or has not been exposed to religious ideas, possesses an idea of God.

Vergote's (1969) contribution to the debate regarding the innatism of religion in children introduces a new point of view in the discussion and a new element to the aims of the research: the necessity to consider social and cultural background and in particular life events as fundamental to shaping the child's beliefs about God. The French psychoanalyst/priest states that the idea of an innate image of God is not possible in the child since cultural background, context and interaction always shape and define the child's reality and personality: «the idea of God does not grow up in his mind by spontaneous generation» (Vergote, 1969). The origin of religious concepts is thus facilitated by the psychological abilities of the child in the context of early education and leads to the child's religious development.

**Developmental Psychology** J. Piaget (1896-1980) offers important ideas concerning the thinking processes activated by children when relating to God. Just as Piaget demonstrated that the mind is built on increasingly sophisticated structures, Goldman (1964) also indicates that children usually gain the meaning of things progressively by considering and using what they have learnt through previous experiences, hence through a process of integration. The analysis of previous actions allows the child to develop a sense of "rules" that help him understand society's taboos. On the contrary, the development of non-logical areas, such as the ones related to religious feelings, occurs through substitution, the formulation of new theories deriving from the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, instead of integration. Goldman (1964) adds that substitution is the process performed not only in areas involving "cultural, social or educational forces" but also in the growth of the concept of nature. The implication of unusual psychological mechanisms in religious development have been considered in the analysis of the data collected in the interviews and has been fundamental to the delineation of the concept of "magic-action process", as will be seen in the discussion.

Another aspect of Piaget's theories that has informed this study is cultural specificity and the connection between moral and religious development in children: «The importance of social learning emphasized in moral learning is certainly important in religious learning, as also is its lack of insistence on a rigid application of stage theory» (Goldman, 1964). Goldman recognizes the relevance of the child's ability to absorb from the various aspects of the context he lives in, and decreases the importance of strictly correlate such ability with the development of cognitive skills in the child. However Goldman's attempt to lose the rigidity of this "hierarchical series of cognitive stages" (Levine, 1999) in spiritual development have not been considered sufficient in more recent studies. For instance, Woolley (1997) and Levine (1999) are critical of Piagetian developmental theories and their work reveals correlations and similarities between child and adult thinking processes and cognitive abilities.

**Psychoanalysis** The flexibility in the delineation of stages in religious development has been extensively valued in psychoanalytically informed theories, to the point that the most influential of these theories eschew the use of stages and delineate, instead, an “ideal developmental sequence” in the representation of God.

The ideal developmental sequence refers to Erikson’s theory of the seven stages of life and describes not only the representation of God, but also the personal image of the self in relation to the figure of God. According to Erikson (1959) a healthy person goes through various stages, characterised by always new challenges to be confronted. The passage from one stage to another happens with the completion of the task set by the previous challenge; however a person can easily move from a stage to another and if some aspects of a stage are left unresolved, these will come back as possible problems in the person’s future. The conclusion of Rizzuto’s (1991) analysis outlines the three factors that concur in shaping the image of God throughout the development of an individual:

- Ability of representation, consequent to lived experiences
- Defensive mechanisms available and adopted by the child
- Incorporation and integration of the representation of God with the representation of the self.

Cox (2005) denies a strict connection between spiritual and psychological development too. The only aspect of religiosity that he recognizes as correlated with cognition is morality, since it is based on reasoning. Therefore this author, like Rizzuto, does not present any kind of division in stages or phases, but points out a list of factors that have been recognized as affecting and being affected by religious development.

Considering the child’s beliefs and religious development as informed by, related to, not limited by and consequential to cognitive development, this author supports Woolley’s idea that magical thinking is not limited to children and can be seen in adult thinking processes, emphasizing the relation between what is considered magic or religion. Boyer’s clarifications on the difference between magic and religion is relevant and useful to the aims of this paper. The author points out the presence of «a conceptual slot... ready for the “counterintuitive + real”» (Boyer, 1997) and underlines the presence of these conceptual representations in religions, emphasizing the absence of a clear distinction between magic and religion and between magic and reality. The lack of boundaries between real and magic becomes particularly relevant in the attempt to explain the role of God. Rizzuto (1991) explains God as an “illusory transitional object” that originates from parental representation; God is both reality (parents) and magic (supernatural features).

This aspect of God as a helper «to whom all the solutions are known» (Jung, 1951) has been shown to have positive effects on children’s mental health. If, for adults, God represent a way to cope with difficult situations, in children the benefits are increased by their higher level of acceptance of magical beliefs. A study on attribution demonstrates that young people turn to God for help especially in seriously negative medical situations (Spilka, 1983). Medical situations are indeed a good example of how children utilize their idea of a powerful God to formulate an answer or a solution to complicated situations that lie outside their control. The non-human powers of God are a recurrent theme in children’s conversation about the deity. In his interviews with children for his book *The Children’s God*, Heller (1986) found this to be a common theme. Special attention is given to the fact that children see God as someone who can actually take care of the world through His powers. God cares, God can heal or eliminate the suffering, God loves and therefore helps. These kinds of statements are also very common in many of the interviews discussed in the second part of this paper.

Given these theoretical approaches and ideas, this study aims to investigate the modality of the interaction between the child and God and to analyse whether and how the psychological development of the child influences his/her religious ideas and beliefs.

**METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY** The first relevant observation when considering research conducted on the image of God in children, is that many of the studies do not involve children directly, but adolescents or adult participants. As Dickie and colleagues (1997) define it, this

“retrospective bias” fails to consider many relevant aspects concerning the image-concept of God such as the influence of children’s age and cognitive development in the formulation of the idea of God. The participation of children in studies looking at the perception of God is not to be taken for granted, and must also be understood as a resource for much variation (age, family composition, school frequented, etc.).

After having considered the various instruments used in children’s research, it has been decided that the most suitable tool for this study would be semi structured face-to-face interviews (**Note 1**) with simple drawing tasks. This method has been adapted as the main intention of this research is to try to understand the image of God and its role in life through the eyes and the stories of children, avoiding as much as possible non-natural biases. On the contrary, the data provided by other tools, such as structured instruments (test batteries and questionnaires) and projective tests belong to the apparent objectivity that, denying the researcher’s active role played throughout every moment of the study, can originate misunderstandings and misinterpretations and can limit the possibility to consider social and cultural elements of influence. The interview scheme has been developed from an analysis of the existing literature on the broader topic of the child-God relationship; in particular the work of Rizzuto and Heller. The questions have been framed in order to investigate the image of God in various aspects and have been organized into four general categories:

1. description/conceptualization of the deity; area of interest deriving from the discussion on the child’s ability to represent God (mainly in Goldman, Piaget and Rizzuto)
2. activities of the deity; to investigate Elkind’s theory of God as answer to specific needs and to evaluate the presence of God in everyday life
3. relationship/communication with the deity: interest originated in the analysis of various points of view of religious development and its correlation with psychological development in the child
4. existence and beliefs on other deities/other religions: to investigate possible original beliefs in the child on deities.

The scheme has been used flexibly, in order to facilitate and follow the child’s argumentations.

**Box 1** Interview scheme

- 1. Description/conceptualization of the deity**
  - a. Could you describe God to me?
  - b. How do you imagine God?
  - c. Would you be able to draw your image of God?
- 2. Activities of the deity**
  - a. Could you tell me what does God do in the everyday life?
  - b. Is he involved in our lives?
  - c. Can He see us? Our actions?
  - d. Does He care about what we do?
- 3. Relationship/communication with the deity**
  - a. Can you communicate with God? Can He?
  - b. How?
  - c. How do you feel about God?
  - d. What would you like the most about God?/What would you change about God?
- 4. Other deities/other religions**
  - a. How and where did you learn everything you know about God?
  - b. Would you like to change something?
  - c. What do you think about people from other religions? (How does it work for them?)

The participants have all been recruited from the Sunday school of a Roman Catholic community in the North East of Italy. The age of the subjects varied from 6 to 9 years old. The age has been chosen according to Piaget’s theory on the modification of child’s relation with reality from the age of 7 to the age of 9. The ambition behind this choice was to operate on different levels of the understandings of reality, in order to investigate the correlation between religious and psychological development in the child. All of them live in a Roman Catholic environment and regularly attend

Sunday school and Mass. This feature was a requirement to take part in the study in order to conduct the research on a sample with similar contextual situations and similar biases. This choice has been influenced by Spilka's words «the choice of Catholic Sunday School attendance was premised on the desire to minimize both theological variation and degree of religious commitment both of which may conceivably influence findings» (Spilka, 1975). Once the parents had agreed for their children to take part in the study, the focus moved on to the children. According to Scott (2000) «context is especially important in interviewing children because the expression of child's personality, in terms of behaviour and attitudinal preferences, is often so context dependent». Therefore all participants have been asked about their feelings towards taking part in the study and then they have been asked to choose the place in which they would like to be interviewed.

In order to gain a wider understanding of the child's view, parents and Sunday school teachers have been asked to talk about the participants. The aim was to have a wider knowledge and understanding of the child's life experience and family background. This aim was also pursued by spending some time with the participants outside the context of the interviews: playing with them and discussing other topics such as school, friends and holiday (**Note 2**).

Every child has been interviewed twice. Firstly the children have been asked to answer to a simple semi structured interview and to complete a drawing task (the children have been asked to draw God, but were allowed to refuse this task). The drawings have been used as an additional source of information on the child's belief of God, for once completed, the child was asked to explain the drawing and its meaning. The aim of the study had not been fully disclosed at this stage; the researcher explained the interest in discussing religion with them but did not fully disclose the objectives of the research. In the second part of the study, after a revision of the adopted method, it was decided to expose the aims of the questions of the semi structured interview in order to promote the children from a situation of "object" of the study to "subject" and "researcher".

Greene's statement quoted by Christensen and James (2000) can be considered one of the starting points for the development of this new methodology: «for too long psychologists have seen as objects the people who were the focus of their observations or experiments –although in a strange inversion of meaning they have referred to them as "subjects"» (1998). Children are not victims of the consequences of the world, they are humans provided with agency. Therefore the child can be an active member, a guided participant, a collaborative learner, a peer supporter, and a working child as pointed out by the authors of the enlightening book *Research with Children* (Christensen & James, 2000). These new attitudes could then «provoke developmental psychologists to adopt a more reflexive relationship to their subject, and become more explicit about the assumptions being made, and power relationships being played out through the research process» (*ibid.*). The new methodology consisted in a conversation divided in two different parts. In the first part the researcher (F.Z.) explained to the child the purposes of the study, but during the semi-structured interviews the aims had not been disclosed completely (since it was thought that that information might have influenced the answers). In the second part, analysed in this chapter, the child has been asked to answer some new direct questions regarding his/her experiences rather than ideas. The researcher then asked the child to discuss and give an interpretation of other children's answers obtained in the first set of interviews. This is based on the fact that the child could be a better interpreter of other children's thoughts and lives rather than adults.

For these reasons the data collected in this second part of the study have been extensively used as a tool to gain a better understanding of the material deriving from the first set of interviews.

Once the interviews have been transcribed and translated, the researchers initiated the process of data analysis. The methodology chosen to develop the study enabled the researchers to analyse the themes emerging from the interviews as contextualised information. In fact the themes have been understood as related to children's life and experiences. It is then essential to underline, particularly in these areas of investigation, the need to not forget that the provided interpretation is biased and shaped by the researchers.

**RESULTS: THEMES AND EXTRACTS** The six themes obtained through the analysis of the interviews are:

1. *Identity – Identification*: the interconnection between God and the child's identity. Similar to Rizzuto's (1991) theories on the deity as an internal object, the children demonstrated a tendency to either identify the deity as a part of themselves or let the deity shape their identity.
2. *Abstract and practical*: God and Jesus, i.e. the differentiation between the images of Jesus and God, described as two separate figures having completely different roles and impacts on children's life. On one side Jesus as the concrete friend belonging to a world of actions, on the other side the terrifying God belonging to a world of abilities and powers that can hardly connect with the child's real world.
3. *God's family*: the discussion on the relationship between God and Jesus, and its contextualization in an idea of family.
4. *I doubt it*: religion is seen as a recollection of memories transmitted from person to person (Boyer, 2001); in this section the researchers individuate the memories that have been rejected/not accepted by the interviewed children and the reasons behind this choice.
5. *Book/stories*: various origins of religious information for children.
6. *Mind/Heart*: including the discussion of the "magic action process" and of different ways of communicating with God.

**Mind/Heart** The relationship between the terms head/heart is usually interpreted as a dichotomy. However in the interviews these words have been utilized with the same meaning: as tools by which the child relates to God. The final outcome is more or less the same, the choice between head and heart depends on the child (and on his/her interpretation of God). The psychological relevance of this theme lies in the reason behind the choice of the preferred tool. This choice could be considered as an indicator of the quality of other important relationships in the child's life and by a possible preference to use the mind (ration) rather than the heart (feeling).

These two words are used not just in the description of the communication child-God, but also in the functioning of God's "magic actions".

In the analysis of the interviews two patterns of communication between the child and God are evident. In the first case the communication happens through the child's heart; in the second through the head/mind. However the main difference is not the tool used to approach God, but the way the communication is perceived, and if it is perceived.

**Box 2**

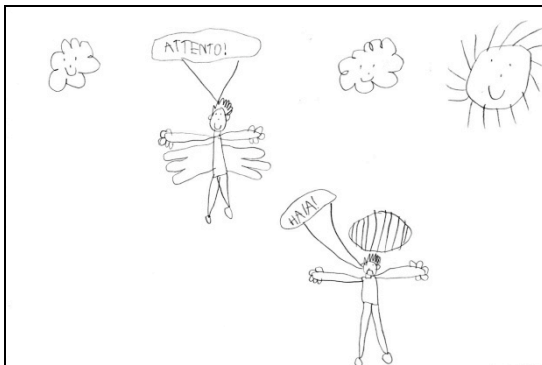
**Interviewer:** Can you communicate with God?  
**Stefano:** I do not know. I never thought of communicating with God.  
**Interviewer:** Can He communicate to you then?  
**Stefano:** God tells us when we are doing things we should not do. He tells us we cannot do those things.  
**Riccardo:** He tells this to us in our hearts.  
**Interviewer:** What about when you pray?  
**Stefano:** I pray by myself. All alone. And I say everything to Him in my mind.  
**Interviewer:** Can you communicate with God?  
**Leonardo:** I do not know.  
**Interviewer:** Can He communicate with you then?  
**Leonardo:** I can talk to Him through my heart.

In these first two examples it seems that God communicates through the heart, while children use the mind to answer back. In another example the communication can take place because Jesus and God are actually situated in the child's heart.

**Box 3**

**Interviewer:** How do you communicate with God?  
**Federico:** Because they [God and Jesus] are in our heart.  
**Interviewer:** Why is that?  
**Federico:** Because He created us. This is the reason why He can know everything.

The communication from the child to God is the most problematic, as sadly explained by Emanuele who stated that he has no way to talk to God or Jesus. Again in order to understand this statement it is useful to consider the child's story.



**Figure 1** Emanuele's exemplification of his communication with God (Angel: <Watch out!> Kid: <Ouch>)

Emanuele is a quiet and polite but lonely child, scared by the outside world and extremely bonded to his mother. During the various meetings I found out about his complicated situation at school, where teachers, as he describes them, are very serious and not very nice to him and classmates ignore him and never ask him to play. The mother was very worried about this circumstance, since she had been recently called by the head teacher who described to her the gravity of the situation. The lack of interaction during the lessons and of positive relationships with classmates has negatively affected his performance in school.

**Box 4**

**Interviewer:** Can you communicate with Jesus then? [In the previous lines the topic was the content of his prayers]  
**Emanuele:** No, I cannot. [Sad expression on his face]  
**Interviewer:** Can they talk to you?  
**Emanuele:** Yes, they can. They talk to me and I think what they told me.  
**Interviewer:** How does this work?  
**Emanuele:** I think what they tell me. They tell me what I think only when it is something important.  
**Interviewer:** And do you know it is them [talking to you]?  
**Emanuele:** Well, maybe I know when it is God because I see that the things [I think] are important.

Arianna's point of view is opposite to Emanuele:

**Box 5**

**Interviewer:** What if you want to talk to Him?  
**Arianna:** [I can do it] through the heart  
**Interviewer:** What if Jesus wants to answer back?  
**Arianna:** He talks to you but you cannot hear him. You are not aware of it.

Another particular case is represented by the little twins Giacomo and Massimo. As can be seen in Giacomo's drawing the theme of death pervades their relationship with God. Originally their mother

was expecting a triplet, but one of the babies died a few weeks after she delivered them. The children are aware of this story and have talked about it even during the interview. They wanted to be interviewed together, an event that helped the researchers understand the extreme difference between the two. In the couple Massimo is the strong one, he takes the decision for both of them and takes good care of his younger brother (according to their narratives he was born first).



**Figure 2** Giacomo's relationship with God is informed by death and the need for suffering. He is the only child referring to the use of prayers and external tools (angel) in the communication with God.

Giacomo probably has some health issues, since the mother checks on him every ten minutes, speaks very quietly and seems to be insecure and also sometimes a little scared. In explaining the communicative process between them and God, they suddenly refer to the lost brother as a tool of God, ignoring both the head/mind and the heart. For the first time this introduces an external entity, an angel. In this specific case it seems that the understanding of the children is that their brother died in order for them to have their personal angel. The angel then becomes someone who is not just interceding with God, but also a way to enable communication between the children and God and viceversa. The need for an external tool can be simply explained through the personal experience of these two little brothers.

#### Box 6

**Interviewer:** And if you wanted to, could you communicate with God?

**Massimo:** Just talking

**Giacomo:** Praying

**Interviewer:** What would you say?

**Both:** Oh Angel of God, my custodian, enlighten me, care for me, keep me safe, and govern on me since I have been recommended to you from the Holy mercy.

**Interviewer:** How does He [God] help you and talk to you?

**Giacomo:** It is very easy. Our angel is dead. We were three and his name was Francesco.

**Massimo:** Now he is dead because Jesus needs people to help him in looking after us.

**DISCUSSION** In all the examples, apart from Giacomo's, the communication happens directly between God and the child, either through the head/mind or the heart. In both ways God instils his message in the child's heart or head, demonstrating his greatest power: the ability to get inside our minds and control it. This specific power is discussed in Boyer's theory of God as supernatural agent. In the passage in which the author analyses God's powers, comparing these to the ancestral powers, he explains the reason for the emphasis on God's ability to control minds: «People have a "theologically correct" notion of God as omnipotent, but they also use their intuitive expectation, that is easier for a person to change people's minds than to correct or reorient physical and biological process» (Boyer, 2001). This last point is extremely influential in the child's understanding of God's ability to be helpful in everyday life issues. According to the results of the analysis of this theme, it seems that children limit



God's abilities in the area of mind-control. However many studies, and the analysis of other themes, demonstrate that children actually believe in God's magical abilities. Especially in their requests for better health, they demonstrate a belief in God's ability to govern biology.

According to children's interviews, the idea that God interacts with humans controlling their minds seems to be related to the fact that all His powers originate with, and are controlled by, His own mind. God as a mind-controller can be found also in the accounts of the last stage of the "magic action process", which can be divided in three stages:

1. **Complicated/problematic situation or need.** In this first stage the person experiences a situation considered solvable only through God's intervention. The discussion at this stage is about the need to request God's help.

**Box 7**

**Interviewer:** If you need help what do you do? Do you think of God?

**Emanuele:** No, He comes to me.

**Chiara:** He is always with us, if you have a problem He is there and He helps everyone.

**Interviewer:** What about the people who do not believe in God?

**Chiara:** Of course, God believes in them and He does not mind if they do not believe. He does this [helps] with everybody.

**Interviewer:** What if you need help?

**Federico:** I pray.

**Interviewer:** Can God help you every time you pray?

**Federico:** No, I do not think so.

**Tommaso:** He performs magic actions for others, but also for himself. The biggest magic action ever is that He can make everyone pray.

**Interviewer:** Are God's powers an answer to everyone's prayers?

**Tommaso:** Yes, they are. He does that [magic action] only if you ask for it.

**Interviewer:** What if you do not believe in God?

**Tommaso:** Then you cannot be helped by Him. You have to ask.

2. **Divine intervention.** God's powers are usually mind-controlled, which means that God just has to think about something to make it happen. Most of the children were fairly sure about the fact that God just needed to think about something and then that something will happen, but some seemed not sure whether these actions were conscious. This story adds two new features to God's powers: he might not be aware of his magic actions, and this could be because of the power diffusion to his body and all his belongings.

**Box 8**

**Interviewer:** Are God's powers the same as those of a wizard?

**Tommaso:** Yes, they are the same.

**Interviewer:** Do they work in the same way as well?

**Tommaso:** Yes!

**Interviewer:** How does this work?

**Tommaso:** He [God] just has to point at something and He will transform that something in everything He wants to. Well, He has to think first, and then while He points the object he has already thought the thing He wants.

**Arianna:** It just happens. Once we were in the mountain and I wanted it to snow, so I prayed and it happened.

**Box 8** (continue)

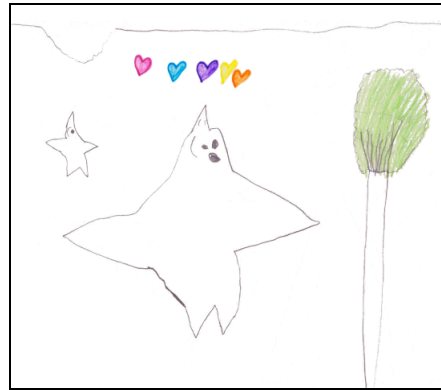
**Federico:** So, there was a lady and she was ill and was going to die but she touched Jesus' cloak and she was healed.

**Interviewer:** How could that happen?

**Federico:** Because he is God. Then the lady was happy but she did not tell anyone. And He did not know He had healed her.



**Figure 3** Tommaso's description of God is very close to that of a wizard. Though he points out that, unlike wizards, God can really be everywhere, as he is in everything. When asked to draw a picture of God, he decided to draw his representation of nature, as God is nature and is everywhere



**Figure 4:** After having drawn a picture of a personified God, Nicola has drawn this picture of a wizard/ghost (he named both). Although most of the children denied a correlation or minimized the similarities between God and wizards, supernatural figures, in their descriptions of their interaction with God and of God, they frequently refer to magic.

3. **Outcomes.** The consequences of God's power are usually positive. Since God is omnipotent He should not fail. He heals people, He transforms things just through his thought, and He can help children against nightmares (according to Emanuele's account). Unfortunately God has some limits and cannot always help everyone. This limit sometimes causes a sort of sadness in the child.

However God seems to have failed just few times, therefore the majority of the children still hold the belief that God can do everything He wants. He just has to think it.

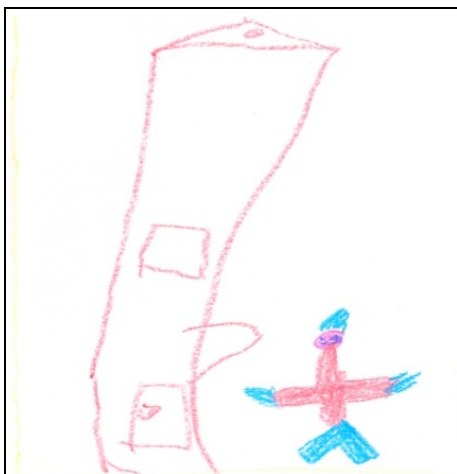
**Emanuele:** God cannot always help everyone, He chooses the most important prayer and then He listens to that one. [...] He observes each one of us and he knows...for example he knows at what time I pray before sleeping. So when He is done with another child, He realizes it is my turn and then He comes and listens to me.

**Interviewer:** Would you like to change anything about God if you could?

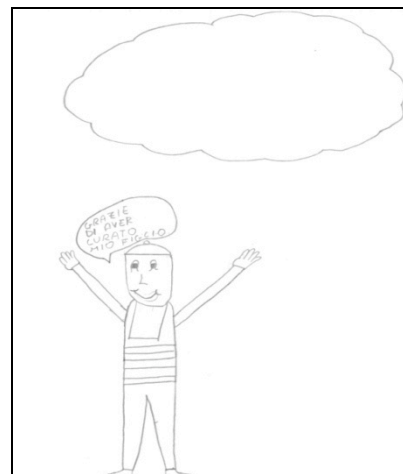
**Chiara:** He is fine. Well, except from when I pray and He does not do what I asked. And I really want that thing I asked for to happen, otherwise I become sad. I tried so many times for that thing. It never worked.

As previously mentioned the consequences of the understanding of God's powers as mind-controlling could be found in children's attributions to God. As seen in Spilka's study on event-character attributions to God, children tend to consider God as more influential in personal circumstances, rather than in impersonal circumstances. Surprisingly the type of event in which God's influence is rated as higher is in the medical context.

The contraposition of these two God abilities, controlling minds and healing bodies, recall the discussion on Piagetian theorisation of magical causality. Woolley (2000) challenges Piaget's theory stating that «infants are aware of the sorts of direct causal relations that exist between one physical object and another one». Then Woolley indicates clearly the nature of cause-effect processes related to the mental area. If there is a physical change the mental change can happen both inter-individually and intra-individually; while if a mental change occurs there are no possibilities for an interindividual change, but only for intraindividual ones (Woolley, 2000). Woolley's study, based on practical situations, disproved Piaget's suggestion that children believe reality can be changed simply by a thought. In this study the researchers changed this apparently small detail in contextualising the study. Children were told to imagine an object in a box, and then a stranger would have entered the room looking for that specific object. The child was then supposed to decide whether to give the box to the person or not. In most of the cases the child did not hand the box to the stranger. This behaviour has been used as stronger evidence against the answers given during a non applied questionnaire. The author concludes that «although young children at times may indulge in the possibility that imagination can directly alter physical reality, when there are real-world costs or consequences of their actions, they do not» (Woolley, 2000). Even if not contextualised in a practical situation, the outcomes of the analysed interviews have to be considered. Religious circumstances introduce the understanding of children's causality in a more complicate situation. Children's answers, especially in reference to God's magic action process, seem to prove the possibility of magical causality in children's minds.



**Figure 5** In this picture Riccardo has represented a difficult moment in which God told him what to do (he was going to play at a friend's house but as he got worried while in the street God told him to go back home).



**Figure 6** Stefano: This father is thanking God for healing his son [*Thank you for healing my son*]

Is this specific circumstance to be considered as a regression of the cognitive abilities? As suggested by Woolley, this kind of cognitive process could be found in other forms, related to other topics. For example, superstition could be understood as deriving from magical causality. Another example could be what Dein has named the “manipulation of words”, a common practice of Lubavitcher Hasidism, in which «the manipulation of words can effect change in the physical world» (Dein, 2002). Dein's (2002) reference to Malinowski's ideas on the use of religion as solution to critical situations, perfectly explains the need and the use of the magic action process. Is religion to be then considered as a particular circumstance in which humans, not just children, feel free to allow their mind to develop thoughts otherwise considered unthinkable? Is this possibility to be considered as positive or dangerous

for the human mind? As in every other issue related to individual mental health, this specific question has to be answered according to the specificity of the case.

**CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS** In the first place it is necessary to underline that this project has never aimed to produce a generalisation of the results. All the pieces of information obtained through the analyses of the interviews have to be understood in the context of the study. The image of God is an extremely personal experience, determined by the encounter of inner and external forces and dynamics. The purpose of this paper is simply to investigate the communication between God and the participants. It would be an act of speculation to discuss how the concept of God will affect their future lives and their development. To obtain that kind of data it would be necessary to follow up with the participants in few years. What can be pointed out from the analysis of the data is the detachment of religious beliefs from the cognitive development of the child. Even if aged differently and belonging to different developmental stages (according to the Piagetian definition) all the children demonstrated the operation of suspension of rational causality in favour of magical causality. This point could be related to both Elkind's theory on God as answer to otherwise irresolvable needs and Rizzuto's (1979) theory on God as an "illusory transitional object" that cannot be repressed in the child and to which the child has to adapt to.

The consequences of magical causality have not been explored in depth: only few children referred to the emotional state felt after God's intervention as a reply to their requests for help. A more specific and detailed study would provide data on the impact of God's actions (or non-actions) on the child's mental wellbeing. Moreover it would be interesting to conduct a similar study in the adult population to investigate the presence/absence of patterns similar or related to the magic action process. This would also enable a comparison on magical thinking in adults and children and could also provide more data on possible consequences on the use of this process.

Regarding the tool used to communicate with God, it would be interesting to analyse the reasons behind the choice of head/heart and possible links with the child's relationship with primary figures in his/her life.

Throughout all the six themes obtained from the analysis of the interviews the great influence of the image of God onto the child's life on different levels has been underlined: from the creation of a sense of identity and belonging, to the implications on thinking processes (discussed in this paper). More studies on the topic are much needed in order to be able to delineate psychological implications of such a great element as religion in children's lives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This feature has to be considered since it «might enhance or reduce the likelihood of different response biases such as social desirability or response contamination» (Scott, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> In alignment with this paragraph the authors have included ethnographical information about the children quoted in this paper (in alphabetical order):

*Arianna, 8 years old.* A very nice girl, shadowed everywhere by a younger sister who adores her. She attends the private school run by nuns and she engaged a conversation with the interviewer (F.Z.) about nuns' punishments for not eating all the food in her dish. Before the interview, Arianna specifically asked her mother to leave the room and not to listen behind the door. At that time she had recently recovered from chicken pox, and she narrated the illness to the researcher, repeating also the prayers she performed while ill. She was very sweet with her little sister and allowed her to talk sometimes during the interview.

*Chiara and Federica, twins 9 years old.* As in the previous case of twins, these two sisters have very different attitudes. On one side Chiara is extremely bright and communicative. During the interview she questioned the interviewer with many short but complicated questions. At one point she also admitted she finds it hard to believe in everything the teacher told them during Sunday school. She is the masculine one, has short hair and she dresses more like a boy, even if she keep talking about her hate towards men. On the other side Federica is girly, nice and definitely not as loud as Chiara. Her interview was very quick since her most frequent answer was "I do not know". Both of them complained about the fact that they rarely see their father

because of his job. They have both been interviewed in their friend's house, Chung Li. After the three interviews the girls started discussing about the questions and created a kind of focus group that the researcher (F.Z.) recorded and facilitated.

*Emanuele, 7 years old.* Emanuele is a quiet and polite but lonely child, a little scared by the outside world and extremely bonded to the mother. Before starting the interview he asked the researcher a few questions not only about the study, but also about private matters. He then illustrated his complicated situation at school, where teachers are very serious and not very nice to him and class mates ignore him and never ask him to play. The mother appears very worried about this circumstance, since she has been recently called by the head teacher who described to her the gravity of the situation. The child does not interact during the lessons and has developed no positive relationships within the school. The lack of interaction in the class negatively affects his results. Emanuele seems to be an old fashioned boy, the way he is dressed and his general attitude towards the world are very different to contemporary seven years old.

*Federico, 7 years old.* While with his mother Federico seems very quiet and shy. Only when left alone with the interviewer and few little friends, he revealed his true nature. He was absolutely full of life, a team leader in the games and very protective towards his younger brother, who is five years old and who follows him in his every step. The mother is a part-time worker therefore she can spend a lot of quality time with the two children, who benefit from her presence. Federico demonstrated no problem at all in relating to the interviewer, he was actually quite curious and very keen on answering the questions. In his house lives also the old grandmother, who has a few health issues and who spends most of the time lying on a bed. Both the children avoid her room and if they really have to pass through the room they tend to ignore the old woman.

*Leonardo, 7 years old* (as he specified very close to be 8). One of Stefano's best friends and, while the researcher was interviewing Stefano, Leonardo waited in another room to be interviewed only after having asked his friend if the questions were hard. He did not demonstrate a great religious commitment. It almost seemed that his interest in God has been influenced by the fact that many of his favourite football players are religious. During the interview he talked for a quiet long time about the relationship with his father, which appeared very close. He refused to draw a picture of God since it was a feminine activity.

*Giacomo and Massimo, twins 8 years old.* These two brothers were also interviewed at the Sunday school and not at home. The researcher interviewed them at the end of the class, since during the week days they were always busy with many different activities (piano, swim, basketball, French, etc.). These two young boys belong to a wealthy middle class family, attend the local private school run by nuns and are Federico's neighbours. Before the interview the priest wanted to explain to the researcher their delicate story. When the mother gave birth to them there were 3 triplets but one of them died after few weeks. The children are aware of this story and talked about it even during the interview. They wanted to be interviewed together, an event that helped the researcher understand the extreme difference between the two. In the couple Massimo is the strong one, he takes the decision for both of them and takes good care of his younger brother (according to their narratives he was born first). Giacomo has probably some health issues, since the mother checks on him every ten minutes, speaks very quietly and seems to be insecure and sometimes also a little scared. In fact while playing with a ball he was afraid of being hurt. The mother spends most of her time taking them to their various activities and checking on them, making sure they feel good. They did not demonstrate a particular religious commitment, but they both questioned the researcher about many religious issues. They are both very bright, even if Giacomo demonstrated some problems in writing and reading.

*Riccardo, 6 years old.* Extremely quiet and shy, Riccardo decided not to be interviewed alone but with his older brother, Stefano 7 years old. He did not answer all the questions but a number sufficient to be considered in the study. During the interview he had his illustrated Bible close by and he used it to give a better explanation to his answers. While his brother Stefano was interviewed, he answered some more questions, most of the time to disagree with his brother. While talking about magic and God's powers became very scared. He then explained that he believes in witches and he is terrified by the idea of having an encounter with a witch. However he then felt bad since he was not supposed to reveal such a thing, especially in front of his younger brother, since his father told him that the topic was forbidden. After drawing the picture of God Stefano decided to keep it in order to complete the colouring, and during the second visit of the researcher refused to donate it for the study.

*Tommaso, almost 7 years old.* He did not want to be interviewed at the beginning but, after a friend of his did it, he changed his mind and very shyly answered the questions. He seems very bright and as soon as he had the possibility, he corrected an answer given by the friend. In fact he was in the same room as the interviewee, and even if he seemed busy playing he then demonstrated he paid a lot of attention to every question. He is probably the most doubtful amongst the children. Most of the time he could not answer or he was taking a long period of silence before answering. Even if he is a lonely child, he does not demonstrate a closer bond to the mother, he is pretty confident and secure. As he stated, he is not really interested in Sunday school, since it is boring and is mostly a repetition of the R.E. lessons.

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