The Image of God in Children’s Compositions

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Abstract:

Though there is a great deal of research on children’s religion and spirituality, only a very few studies directly treat Turkey or children in Muslim families. It is therefore important to understand the spiritual lives of children in Turkey, and particularly how they imagine God. Literate, pre-adolescent children ages 8 to 11 were selected for the research group in this study. Children were asked to write an essay on what they think about God, and these essays were subjected to a content analysis. The results are displayed, with frequency and percentage, in tables and charts. This study concludes that children imagine God primarily as a creator, and that 26% of children also have an anthropomorphic image of God. Children ages 8-9 described God as a human with a mouth and eyes who wrote the Qur’an together with the prophet Mohammad, whereas children ages 10-11 placed greater emphasis on his supremacy and the difference between him and his creations. This study also finds that while young children had a fearful image of God, older children’s image focused more on God’s expectations. The findings in this study are interpreted in comparison to the findings of other studies in the field.

Key Words: Image of God, content analysis, anthropomorphic

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I. INTRODUCTION

People’s perceptions of religious terms, events, and most importantly of God, develop from childhood onward according to their knowledge and experience. An individual’s upbringing, way of thinking, and the religious tradition to which he or she adheres all may affect that individual’s religious imagination. The most important element of this religious imagination is the image of God, and in order to analyze this one must first address the question of defining the being that people refer to when they speak of God. When people say the word “God,” what do they understand that word to mean? How do they describe God?1

Contemporary research on religion and spirituality in children dates back to the mid-1970s, but actually has far older historical roots. In 1891 G. Stanley Hall called for more detailed study of religion in childhood in the journal *Pedagogical Seminary*, which first entered circulation in that same year. In 1892 Earl Barnes wrote the first research-based article on the religious thoughts of children in his article, “Theological Life of the Californian Child.”2

In his 1944 study Harms, unsatisfied with their verbal responses on the question of religion, asked children to articulate their ideas about religion by means of drawings and paintings. Based on this research, Harms determined that there were three stages regarding religious experience during the period from childhood to the beginning of adolescence: the fairy tale stage, the realistic stage, and the individualistic stage.3

Piaget analyzed childhood development by dividing it into four stages: the sensory-motor stage (ages 0-2), the pre-operational stage (ages 2-7), the concrete operations stage (ages 7-11), and the formal (abstract) operations stage (ages 11-15). Each period of childhood development partially explains the one that follows it. 1) The sensory-motor stage (ages 0-2): one of the most prominent features of this stage is the absence of language. Because babies lack any symbol to describe the absence of a person or object they lack any symbolic faculty, thus lending this stage to be described in terms of the other faculties that a baby has: sensory-motor. A baby’s sensory-motor structures lay the foundation for subsequent periods of cognitive development.4 2) The pre-operational stage (ages 2-7): in this stage, children select symbols that

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represent objects and events. 3) The concrete operations stage (ages 7-11): in this stage, children obtain definite logical structures which enable them to carry out various convertible internalized mental operations on their own. Concrete operations are a transition between action schemes and general logical structures. 4) The formal operations stage (11-15 years): logical operations are no longer limited to concrete objects but may also be applied with verbal or logical expressions to the outside world, and to both present and future.

Another author who worked on cognitive development was Elkind. Elkind used Piaget’s semi-clinical interview technique for examining how children understand religious concepts. He asked questions to Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant children and examined their answers, according to which he laid out three phases that roughly correspond to the second, third, and fourth stages of cognitive development proposed by Piaget.

American researcher Fowler examined the development of faith in adults, adolescents, and children in his book *Stages of Faith*. He divided the development of faith into six stages: intuitive-projective faith, mythic-literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith.

Yavuz (1987) examined the religious sentiments and thoughts of 588 primary school students. He compared the answers of students ages 7-9 with those of ages 10-12.

Hanisch (1996) examined pictures of God drawn by 1,471 children between the ages of 7 and 16 in order to identify their concrete and abstract images of God. Hanisch’s study attempted to assess how children drew God and to track the way ideas of God developed as children grew older.

Köylü (2004) examined Turkish and foreign studies on the question of people’s idea of God and categorized them as descriptive, developmental, or pedagogical.

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7 Miller, *Gelişim Psikolojisi Kuramları*, p.50.
Öcal (2004) studied 363 children between the ages of four and 10 to determine their thoughts and ideas of God. He identified a correlation between children’s age and sex and their comments about God and interpreted the children’s comments accordingly.13


Yıldız (2006) conducted a study in which he asked 1,047 children between the ages of seven and 15 a total of 18 open-ended questions and analyzed the results according to Piaget’s theory.14

Zengin (2010) conducted a study on the development of the concept of God in Muslim children in Germany. She told the story of Adam and Eve to a group of children between the ages of seven and 12 who were taking a class on religious culture, asked them to draw pictures about the story, and then divided the pictures into different groups based on their central themes.15 She found that Muslim students were unpracticed at describing their image of God by means of art, and therefore devoted some space in her article to the opinions of experts on the subject of Islam’s hostility to painting.16

It is important to note at this point that very little research has been conducted in Turkey on the spiritual life of children. Accordingly, the books prepared for the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge classes in the Turkish school system are suffer from certain deficiencies. In order to rectify this situation and prepare a more effective educational program, research similar to that which has been conducted on children of other religions must be conducted on the children of Muslim families. It is within this context that this study, analyzing how children in Turkey conceive of God, hopes to be of service to researchers, educators, and ultimately families.

The purpose of this study is, first, to determine how children describe their image of God and, second, to determine the effect of a child’s age on the way they articulate their image of God.

This study attempts to answer the following four questions.

1- What comes to children’s minds when they think of God?
2- What do children feel when they think of God?
3- Does a child’s age have an effect on the way they think or feel about God?
4- What qualities do children attribute to God?

I.1. Method

In this study children were asked to write a short composition about their image of God, and content analysis was employed to assess these compositions. The main category used for the content analysis was the image of God, and the three subcategories used were anthropomorphic, non-anthropomorphic, and other.

a- Anthropomorphic: God is imagined as having the qualities of a human being.
b- Non-anthropomorphic: God is imagined as having supernatural qualities like uniqueness, omnipotence, or omniscience that make him unlike human beings.
c- Other: God is imagined as having other attributes like being protective, frightening, shining, or being a creator.

I.2. Working Group

The population for this study consisted of Muslim children between the ages of eight and 11 enrolled in Turkish elementary schools during the 2010-2011 academic year. The sample for this study consisted of 253 randomly selected students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

This section will detail the research model and the collection of data and its analysis.

I.3. Research Model

In this research, content analysis method was used. Children’s written compositions were used as the research material. The compositions were analyzed by means of categorical analysis and frequency analysis techniques, which are included in content analysis techniques.

I.4. Data Collection

First, a category guide was made in light of information gained from the literature in order make categories to obtain from during the data collection process. The categories for determining the image of God were made by the researcher. The obtained categories were submitted to experts for having
their opinion about the categories. The categories were shaped according to the opinions of experts and the compositions written about the image of God were analyzed thereafter. Reading the compositions, the researcher told them a co-researcher about research process and about what the categories mean and he/she asked the co-researcher to read the compositions and keep tally. At the end of the two processes of keeping tally, the frequencies were counted and put into consistency formula.

Consistency percentage = (Number of Agreements: 244) / (Number of Agreements + Number of Non-Agreements: 244+9) = 0.96

The obtained value of 0.96 assessed as the consistency of categories.

I.5. Data Analysis
The sentence was selected as the context unit and it was determined whether sub-categories (anthropomorphic, non-anthropomorphic, or other) exist in the composition or not. During the counting process, both clear content and the covered content were considered. To be more accurate, the words, expressions in the sentences which were considered as the context unit were deemed to correspond to the subcategories. To assure assessment reliability and validity, and categories were classified according to their attribute and it was decided that quantitative was more appropriate to be used. The frequency of the image of God, through which children explained themselves were counted accordingly. The sub-categories of the accounted frequencies were taken. Calculator and Microsoft Office Excel program were used for calculation of frequencies and percentages.

II. FINDINGS

Table: 1
The number of children participating in the research and their age distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>36</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>95</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

253 children of 8- to 11-year-old age groups participated in the research in this study. About 13% of them were eight years old, 14% of them were nine years old, 34% of them were ten years old and 38% of them were eleven years old.
II.1. ANTHROPOMORPHIC GOD IMAGE

Table: 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<th></th>
<th>9</th>
<th></th>
<th>10</th>
<th></th>
<th>11</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 10 - 11</td>
<td>285</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Color of God</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of God</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God in the Clouds</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II.1.a. Anthropomorphic God (N=26)

Some of the children explained God with such human qualities as “He has eyes, a mouth, and a nose, and he can see everything (10),” “He and the Prophet Muhammad wrote the Qur’an (9),” “He is a creator. He has such huge hands that he can reach everywhere (10).” However, there were also students who explained God as a huge, omnipotent creature, as in the sentences “He is an abstract One who created everything (10),” and “He is the greatest (8).” Most children are inclined to consider God as an extraordinary thing and they explained his almightiness as hugeness. We can see that the expressions were affected by the age difference of students. While a 9-year-old child imagined God as one who has eyes, a mouth, and a nose like human beings, and who wrote Qur’an together with the Prophet Muhammad, an 11-year-old student explained him as “A great person with high mercy.” 11-year-old children seem more inclined to imagine God as extraordinary and supernatural. 2 of 15 children who defined God as “Huge” were 11 years old. The children of 10-year-old age group and younger ones explained his greatness as hugeness. 11-year-old age group definitely separated from the others in terms of explaining abstract opinions. In his research Yavuz (1977) obtained the information that compared with the children of 10- to 12-year-old age group, the children of 7- to 9-year-old children are more inclined to imagine God as an object similar to human being or something else and that those who resembled God to human beings confused the “great one” with “huge one.”

17 Yavuz, Çocukta Dinî Duygu ve Dişîncenin Gelişmesi, p.175.
In the research he conducted on 233 8- to 11-year-old Christian children, Bucher (1991) determined that 184 respondents children, meaning 78.9% of the respondents, imagined God as a human being.\textsuperscript{18}

As a result of the research he conducted on Protestant, Catholic, and Jew children, Kousoulas (1973) determined that Jew children imagined God as more abstract.\textsuperscript{19} Pitts (1976) asked children aged six to ten to draw a Picture of God. Significant denominational differences were found, so that the Catholic children used the most religious symbolism and Mormon children more than all others represented God in terms of robed figure, often accompanied by a wife and children. A lesser degree of anthropomorphism was found in Lutheran children, then Mennonite, Methodist, Catholic, Unitarian, and finally Jewish children, which indicated the theological characteristics of their denominations\textsuperscript{20}

Coles determined that Jewish and Muslim children hesitate to draw God and the prophet. A Jewish boy of ten told Coles: “Of course Christian will draw a picture of God; they see his picture all the time in their churches, our God hasn’t come here. He has spoken to us, but He’s not appeared.”\textsuperscript{21}

II.1.b. Color of God (N=16)

Their expressions about the color of God as “He is one fully white (10)”, “He seems to be good hearted, powerful, brave, conscious. His color is fully white, shining, muscular, wide faced, similar to human beings (9)”, “bearded, with blond hair and tall, handsome, 128 m.40 cm, his color is purple, white, black (11)” have drawn the attention. The color attributed to God is mostly white. 14 of 16 children who attributed color to God selected white. In a similar research, Zengin (2010) determined that God is imagined yellow or white colors and he draws attention to the fact that white and yellow color of their imagines corresponds to the invisibility and transparency of God.\textsuperscript{22} In a research conducted by Öcal (2004), children defined God “As white and clean as snow”.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{18} Anton A. Butcher, Gottesbilder Von Kindern, Praxis, Katechetisches Arbeitsblatt vol. 6, 1991, p.16, by Helmut Hanisch, Die Zeichnerische Entwicklung Does Gottesbildes Bei Kindern und Jungendlichen, Stuttgart: Calver Verlag, 1996, p.27.
\textsuperscript{20} Hyde, Religion in Childhood and Adolescence, p.74.
\textsuperscript{22} Zengin, Almanya’dağı Müslüman Çocuklarda Allah Kavramının Gelişimi, p.234.
\textsuperscript{23} Öcal, Okul Öncesi ve İlköğretim Çağı Çocuklarının Allah Tasavvurları Üzerine Bir Araştırma, p.59-80.
\end{flushright}

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II.1.c. Gender of God (N=12)

Such sentences as “An old, long and white bearded, almighty man, he knows everyone, with white hair (10)”, “I imagine him to be like a long bearded old man (10)” explicitly show that children attribute a gender to God. It was determined that 11 of 12 children who attributed a gender to God considered Him to be male. Only a girl imagined God to be female. The God is generally explained as an old man with long beard. 4.7 % percent of respondent children attributed a gender to God.

“In the research conducted by Ladd, McIntosh, Spilka (1998), they wanted 968 Christian children of 3 to 18-year-old age group to make picture of God. It was determined that 55.7 % of the respondent imagined God as male, and 37.5 of the respondent children imagined God as female and that 6.8 % of the respondent children did not attribute any gender to God. It was concluded that male God image is still common in Christian children.” 24

II.1.d. God in Clouds (N=4)

Such expressions as “A huge cloud is coming; it has eyes and nose, it can see whatever happening, it is good-hearted and understanding.”, “A male looking over half clouds up to his waist (11)”, “A smiling man made of clouds (actually I know that he is not like that)” clearly explain that children imagine God to be in clouds. The percentage of respondents who imagined God to be in clouds was 1.5 %.

In the research conducted by Hanisch on Christian children of the same age group with those in the previous one, 41.2 % of respondent imagined God to be in clouds. 25 Piaget stated that children, in their anthropomorphic stage, imagine God to be similar to an ordinary person, living in clouds, not different from other people. 26

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25 Hanisch, Die Zeichnerische Entwicklung Does Gottesbildes Bei Kindern und Jugendlichen, p.43.
II.2. NON-ANTHROPOMORPHIC IMAGINE OF GOD

Table: 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God who is not similar to those whom He created</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omnipotence God</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-seeing/All-hearing/Omniscient God</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding God</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close God</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God, who accepts prays</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving God</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II.2.a. God who is not similar to those whom He created (N=64)

Such expressions as “He does not have beginning or an end. He is not similar to those whom He created. His cannot be thought to be inexistent (11),” “He is the creator, he has created all creatures, He has no end (10,)” are frequently repeated in the compositions written by children. The children who stated that God is not similar to those he created also stated that he is neither begot nor begotten, He has not an end. 25.2% of children stated that God is not similar to those He created.

II.2.b. Omnipotence God (N=52)

Children used such expressions as “He created the world out of nothing, He is the ruler of the universe and He is the only power in the universe (11),” “He is our Creator, who created human beings, animals, plants, the world, universe and in short he created everything, and He is the most powerful (10),” “He is powerful. He has endless power (11),” so as to explain the power of God. 20.5% of the children imagined God as the sign of power and stated in their compositions that God is the ruler of world and universe. Barnes (1982), presented that many of children perceive God as a being who is Omnipresent (he can move through key hole or make himself small as a pencil); Omniscient (he writes everything); and Omnipotent (he can create an earthquake whenever he wants)27.

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II.2.c. All-seeing, All-hearing and Omniscient God (N=38)

Children frequently used these expressions: “God does not have a definite shape, he is everywhere. He is everywhere and He can see us. He can do whatever he wants (10),” “He knows everything. He knows everything, hears everything, sees everything, and He is the greatest (11),” “He knows everything (8),” “He knows and sees everybody. He is the greatest (10).”

God’s knowing, seeing, and hearing everything are expressed in the same sentence. However, His knowing everything is more repeated than the others. The percentage of those who imagined God as all-seeing, all-hearing, and omniscient is 15%. These opinions increase in parallel with the increase of age.

The findings of this research are consistent with the findings of Vianello about children’s image of God, which was “omniscient,” “omnipotent,” and “omnipresent.”28 In a similar research Barrett (2001) made an experiment on 3- to 8-year-old children with a box painted in black. 92% of the children stated that God knows about the inner of the closed box.29

II.2.d. Guiding God (N=13)

As understood from their expressions such as “He is sacred One who created us. He is one, he knows everything. He understand to us. We cannot see Him. He sent us messengers to guide us about which religion to believe in (11),” children associated God’s guiding with His sending prophet and revealing holy books. While it was stressed that prophet guide us to the true path, they did not write the name of any prophet. The portion of children who imagine God as a guiding one is 5.1%. In the research conducted by Yapıcı, the portion of adult imagined God as a guiding one is 0.79%.30

II.2.e. Close God (N=16)

Children’s such expressions as “He loves us more than our parents, he is always with us (10),” “He is closer us than our own main vain (11),” draw

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28 “Vianello (1980) studies (N=10.000) indicate that children age six and seven think of God as a giant, a magician, or an invisible man. Starting from age eight there is an increasing understanding of God’s spirituality, seen in such comments as “(he) is sort of transparent,” “you can’t see him, but he is present in many places,” and “he is enormous...when he is here he may also be at school.” Ten-and eleven-year-olds use fewer anthropomorphic descriptions of God, affirming that God is invisible, that he is in us or in our souls, or that he is always near us. The omniscience of God surfaces first at about age six or seven, the omnipotence of God is affirmed by age eight, and finally the omnipresence of God and his fundamental spiritual nature are described by age eleven to twelve.” Vianello, *Religious Concept of Children*, p.58.


attention. 6% of children stated that they feel God close to themselves. In the research conducted by Mehmetoğlu, a five-year-old child stated that “God is always with us. When you open your hand to pray, you feel that he is with you.” Similarly, in the research conducted by Mountain (2005) in Australia on students from various religions, a Muslim student from class B1 wrote that she “felt approaching God when he prayed.” Elkind (1962) indicates that children often felt close to God were described as: church, solitude, anxiety, fear, worry, prayer, moral action. Heller (1986) indicated that the girls present a God of least relative emotional intimacy, in contrast to the more distant God the boys describe. While occasionally the girls stress a physical closeness, most often they refer to the exchange of feelings between God and human beings.

II.2.f. God, who accepts prayers (N=11)

Such expressions of children as, “He responds to our prayers every time. If we want to thank to him, it is sufficient if we pray Him (11),” “We pray him for our family, He protects us from bad things (11),” “He created everything, and he gives use the things which we don’t have. When we pray, he accepts our prayers (9),” explain children’s opinion about prayer. The portion of the students who imagine God as one, who accepts prayers is 4.3%. However, in the research conducted by Yapıcı, the portion of children who though that God accepts their prayers was 1.8%. According to another research conducted by Yapıcı, 11% of children pray because they believe that their prayers are accepted by God.

Elkind (1968) and Brueggemann (1986) determined that children’s prayers are associated with their image of God.

II.2.g. Forgiving God (N=10)

Children’s expressions such as “He always forgives us, He is omnipotent and He loves us (10),” “He is a creator who is magnificent, protects, and loves (11),” have been determined. The portion of children who think that

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31 Mehmetoğlu, Okul Öncesi Çocuklarda Dini Duyguğun Gelişimi ve Eğitimi, p.72.
35 Yapıcı, Allah ve Kutsal Kavramların Çağrısı ve Anlamlarını Sosyo-Psikolojik Bir Bakış, p.10.
36 Yapıcı, Güdü ve İçerik Açısından Çocuk Duaları ve Bu Dualara Yansıyan Sorunlar, p.70.
37 Mountain, “Prayer is a Positive Activity for Children –A Report on Recent Research,” p.301.
God is forgiving is 3.9%. It has been determined that children did not highly associate God with forgiving, punishing, singing, and good deeds (n=10). The number of children who stated that God will put people into either paradise or hell is only (n=4). The number of children who stressed life after death and doomsday is only (n=6). In the research conducted by Yapıcı for the reason of children’s praying, the portion of children pray “to ask God to forgive them because of their sins and to be happy in the afterlife” is 9.4%. In the ordering according to the frequency, it was in the in the 9th order. In the research conducted by Bacanlı (1995) on adults about how they understand from the concept of God, the highest proportion (n=31) stated that God is forgiving, the second highest (n=28) number of respondents stated that God is a creator. In the research conducted on adolescents by Kuşat (2006), the highest proportion of respondents (average 18.08) stated that God is creator, the second highest (average 15.42) portion stated that God is forgiving. In this research which was made on children, it is seen that the highest proportion of respondents consider God to be forgiving, they do not think that He is forgiving at such a high proportion and that the imagine about the forgiveness of God develops in parallel with their age.

II.3. OTHER ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Table: 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Creator God</th>
<th>Loving/Protecting/Watching God</th>
<th>Frightening God</th>
<th>God. who has expectations</th>
<th>God as Soul/Ghost</th>
<th>God as Light</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>8.5</td>
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38 Yapıcı, Gündü ve İçerik Açısından Çocuk Duaları ve Bu Dualara Yansıyan Sorunlar, p.70.
40 Ali Kuşat, Dindarlığın Sosyo-Psikolojisi, ed. Ünver Günay, Celalettin Çelik, Adana: Karahan Kitapevi, 2006, p.139
II.3.a. Creator God (N=122)

Children wrote the following expressions: “He is the greatest one who created this universe and let me know this world (11),” “He is the creator of everything (11),” “I remember that He is the creator of everything and there is nothing greater than Him (11).” 48.2 (N=122) of the children respondents defined God as a great creator. The creator has the highest point in the frequency.

These results accord with the studies of Deconchy (1964), Braido and Sarti (1967), and Sarti (1968, 1970), which examined Catholic and Muslim children and found that the attribute they most commonly associated with God was that of being a creator.41

II.3.b. Loving, Protecting, Watching God (N=36)

Children frequently used the following expressions: “He protects us and when we fall down He protects us (11),” “He reminds of One who is the creator of everything in the universe, assures the life for all livings. He who loves and protects the creatures he created (11),” “One who protects us against bad things, whom I can take refuge in when I want, the noble One who created us (10).” 14.2 of the respondents stated that they imagine God to be loving, protecting, and watching. Although there were (n=12) who stated “He every time protects me” and the average of their age was 9.5, the number of those who stated “He loves me very much” is (n=9) and the average of their age is 10.3. Their image of a protecting God becomes prominent in parallel with decreasing age, and the image of a loving God increases in parallel with the increase of their age.

In the research conducted by Vianello (1980), 76% of children studying in the third grade of primary school and 72% of children studying in the fourth grade of primary school stated that they accept God as the “God of Love” while 6% of the students studying the same classes described as him as “merciless.” 42 Mehmetoğlu found, in his research, that 88.63% of children of 5- to 6-year-olds stated that they think God loves them. 43 Seigenthaler (1980) found, through the research he conducted, that children of the 5- to 8-year-old age group dominantly made the picture of God as a creative, protecting, and watching one.44

41 Vianello, Religious Concept of Children, p.60.
42 Vianello, Religious Concept of Children, p.64.
43 Mehmetoğlu, Okul Öncesi Çocuklarda Dini Duygunun Gelişimi ve Eğitimi, p.53.
44 Hanisch, Die Zeichnerische Entwicklung Does Gottesbildes Bei Kindern und Jungendlchen, p.25.
In his research on university students, Özdoğan (2005) determined that the image of a loving God makes people energetic and positive.\(^{45}\)

**II.3.c. Frightening God (N=32)**

The following sentences which were written by children indicate their fear of God: “He reminds me of paradise, hell, prayer, Qur’an, prophet, infidels, animals, trees; in short, livings and fears (8),” “He reminds of paradise and hell. I get frightened, I become sad, I don’t know what kind of a creature He is. He is not a human being, not a creature. I know only these (9),” “He reminds of fear.” It is obviously seen that there is a linear association between the age and the fear from God. The younger children are, the more frightened of God they are. The older the children are, the less frightened of God they are. In a similar research, Yıldız (2007) determined that little children (7-11) imagined God as a punishing one (60%) but older children (12-16) imagined Him as a forgiving (37%) one.\(^{46}\)

Mehmetoğlu stated that the majority of children between the ages of five and six, preschool age do not fear God.\(^{47}\) In another study, the co-author came across a five-year-old child explaining why he or she did not feel fear from God: “Adults get frightened from God. If they mistakenly say something to Him that they shouldn’t have said, they repent to God. It means, I would not say it, my tongue twisted.”\(^{48}\)

As in Vianello’s research, “Finnish children also see God as primarily gentle, secure, and loving, while only a few see God as stern, frightening, or punishing.”\(^{49}\) On the other hand, for most Jewish children, “God is not depicted as a being who desires them to suffer. Usually, they ambivalently suggest, God maintains a purpose for suffering, helps them with suffering, or alleviates their suffering.”\(^{50}\)

**II.3.d. God, who has expectations (N=16)**

The following expressions were come across in the compositions by children: “God who forgives our wrong deeds when we read Qur’an, who loves the reading and hard-working ones. He, who helps when we make good deeds (9),” “If we pray (perform salah) and do good things, it means we have met his expectations (11),” “He loves his servants who pray, perform...”\(^{51}\)

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\(^{46}\) Yıldız, Čocuklarda Tanrı Tasavvurunun Gelişimi, p.155.

\(^{47}\) Mehmetoğlu, *Okul Öncesi Çocuklarda Dinî Duyguların Gelişimi ve Eğitimi*, p.79.


\(^{49}\) Vianello, *Religious Concept of Children*, p.63.

salaah meet the requirements of faith and perform the pillars of Islam (11).” 6% of children imagine a God who has expectations. Similarly, in the research conducted by Mehmetoğlu, a five-year-old child expressed God’s expectation as follows: “He loves me because I do not do wrong deeds.”

II.3.e. God as Soul or Ghost (N=16)

The children wrote the following expressions: “I think He is a very powerful land big soul with wings. (10),” “He has long hair and he has not eyes, ear, nose etc. in his face; He does not have foot; a big female soul with hands (9).” The children who imagine God as soul or a ghost, described him as a creature which has wings, good-intentioned but does not have a definite shape.” 6.4% of children imagine God as a soul or a ghost. It has been determined that the children having such imagine of God are 10-year-olds. Hanisch has determined that 16% of Christian children and youth imagine God as a soul or a ghost and this imagine comes into being at the age of 11.52

Tamminen (1991) found out that children start talking of God as a soul when they are 9-10 years old, these expressions increase when they reach 10- to 13-year-old age group and they abandon such expressions when they are 13-years old.53 To Zengin, a child’s imagining God as soul indicates that that child is inclined to imagine God abstractly. In Islamic religion, when the existence of God is thought to children, it is also thought that God has not shape and He does not need any place to live in. Therefore, God is everywhere. Children imagine that “A creature which is everywhere must be a ghost.” Children imagining God as a ghost also indicates that they are highly affected by cartoons.54

II.3.f. God as Light (N=3)

In such expressions as the followings “He is something like moon or star (10),” “He is something like light or Sun.” Children imagined God as something lightening like the Sun. 1.1% of children stated that they imagined God as light or a source of light. Hanisch found out that 12.1% of children imagine God as the Sun and 4.5% of children imagine God as a light.55 Yavuz suggested that, in the studies conducted in Western countries, children imagine God as a “big and strong man,” “our father,” “an old man with white beard,” or “a man sitting down on a golden throne and shining his around.”

52 Hanisch, Die Zeichnerische Entwicklung Does Gottesbildes Bei Kindern und Jungendlichen, p.57.
55 Hanisch, Die Zeichnerische Entwicklung Does Gottesbildes Bei Kindern und Jungendlichen, pp.69-76.
However, this situation is hardly seen in Muslim children. His suggestion is supported by both this study and Hanisch’s study.

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning more about the religious and spiritual lives of children in Muslim families will make it possible to provide them with more effective and efficient services on these issues. Therefore, findings about how children imagine God should be collected and understood. With this study we have tried to define the kind of image children have of God through their own statements and the distribution of said images across age groups. Gender has not been handled as a variable. The results of the research are as follows:

Most children (48.2%) imagine God as a “Creator.” Similar findings have been arrived at through studies conducted on children from different points of the world. It has also been found that defining God as a creator increases in parallel with the increase of age of children.

26% of children imagine God as anthropomorphic. Of these children, those of the 8- to 9-year-old age groups imagine Him as a human with mouth and eyes, while children of the 10- to 11-year-old age group imagine God as a human with superficial qualifications. Compared to Christian children, the number of Muslim children in Turkey imagining God as anthropomorphic is small.

25% of respondent children imagine God as one who is not similar to those He created. Children, in general, stressed that God does not have parents or children. In this study, the portion of children who imagined God as an unequalled one is 38.9% in 11-year-old children while this proportion is 5.5% for 9-year-old children. Only 12.6% of 11-year-old children imagine God as anthropomorphic, the smallest proportion, but 50.6% of 9-year-old children, the highest proportion, imagine God as anthropomorphic. In the research conducted by Anton A. Butcher with the children of the 8- to 11-year-old age group, he found out that the highest proportion of children imagining God as anthropomorphic are 9 years old and the least proportion of children imagining God as anthropomorphic are 11-year-old children. Therefore, it has been understood that age is very determinant for children.

It has also been found out that 8- to 9-year-old children dominantly imagine God to be frightening and punishing, whereas 10- to 11-year-old children imagine God to be loving, protecting, and watching. In other studies conducted in Turkey, it was also been found out that little children imagine God to be frightening but relatively older children imagine God to be forgiving.

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57 Hanisch, Die Zeichnerische Entwicklung Des Gottesbildes Bei Kindern und Jugendlichen, pp.28-33.
Considering their age, children imagine God to be punishing probably by the effect of their environment. Relatively older children, however, imagine God to be forgiving and protective probably with the effect of the education they are given at school.

Most of those who attribute a color to God imagine Him to be white, and most of those who attribute a gender to God imagine him to be male. The number of children attributing a gender to God is fewer compared with the number of children of Christian families in Europe.

The fact that children regularly imagine God as someone who accepts prayers, and given that similar results from the studies conducted on adults have been received, indicate that the education given in school and by families with regard to prayer is not sufficient. An independent unit can be put in Religion and Ethics Course books at school, and families as well as teachers can be supported for training children to make habit of praying.

While all children who imagine God as a soul or a ghost are under the age of 11 here, they are children of the 11-year-old age group and above in Europe. As Tamminen also stated, while European children’s image of God as soul inclined to be an abstract image, Turkish children’s image of God as soul or ghost seems to be affected by cartoons because in these images God has wings, long hair, and is shapeless.

Most children who imagine God as omnipotent, as a guide, as close, as accepting prayers, and as having expectations are of the 11-year-old age group.

Therefore, the results of the study are in consistency with Piaget’s cognitive development stages.

It has also been determined that not many children imagined God to be a source of light living in the clouds. It has been found that God is imagined as a creator by relatively smaller children, and he is imagined as a forgiving one as they are relatively older. This is probably because smaller children do not have to worship and they feel guilty when they get relatively older.

Both school and social environment contribute to the image children have of God. Only one of 32 units of current course book of Religion and Ethics Course for elementary school grades 4, 5, 6, and 7 concerns faith in God. This unit is the first unit of grade 5. Maybe all of these children do not reach the formal operations stage. Moreover, thousands of children of farming families in rural areas are likely not at school when this unit is studied. Therefore, the number of units explaining the existence of God and His attributes must be increased, and these units should be studied in months when most of students are at school.


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The Image of God is a concept and theological doctrine in Judaism, Christianity, and Sufism of Islam, which asserts that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Philosophers and theologians have debated the exact meaning of the phrase for millennia. Following Jewish tradition, scholars such as Saadia Gaon and Philo argued that being made in the Image of God does not mean that God possesses human-like features, but rather that the statement is figurative language for God bestowing