RESEARCH REPORT

Images of God in Adolescence

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God images of Dutch youngsters were investigated in two research projects. Because previous studies, which applied precoded questions, did not seem to elucidate the way people construct their image of God, a combination of precoded and open questions was used. On the basis of content analysis, a hierarchical model was developed in which the attributes of God were distinguished from the acts of God in various domains. Most respondents did not seem to have any common (Christian) language available to describe God and often made use of abstract concepts. Some implications are discussed in a broader cultural context.

Psychological research into the images and representations of God has resulted in an intricate and ambiguous discussion. Two main concerns, sometimes studied simultaneously, can be discerned. Some researchers have tried to picture the image of God by constructing scales based on factor analysis, cluster analysis, and/or the semantic differential rating technique (Gorsuch, 1967, 1968; Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls, & Frease, 1986; W. Roof & J. Roof, 1984; Spilka, Armatas, & Nussbaum, 1964; Vercruysse, 1972; Vergote & Tamayo, 1981). The results of these studies are primarily descriptive. They are conducted on the basis of long, multidimensional lists of God's qualities and properties. Even after the application of factor analysis, the lists remain long and confusing.

A second line of research, sometimes also employing factor analysis, starts from Freud's dictum that representations of God are based on the early

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childhood experience of an exalted, omnipotent father figure. Faced with the problems of life, people are said to regress to the infantile experience of an all-controlling father. Wulff (1991) concluded that, although research shows the importance of early experience (Spiro & D’Andrade, 1958), the results are, on the whole, inconclusive and confusing (cf. Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985, p. 82). Strunk (1959) found that the mother figure, not the father figure, seems to play the most important role (cf. Nelson, 1971; Nelson & Jones, 1957; Vergote & Tamayo, 1981). There is some evidence that the God image, as Wulff put it, is derived not only from the symbolic parent but also from the real parent and the wished-for parent (Rizzuto, 1974, 1979). In such cases, God images bear a stronger resemblance to the mother than to the father (Nicholson & Edwards, 1979; Vergote & Tamayo, 1981; Vogel, 1936). On the basis of the review studies of Nicholson and Edwards (1979) and Spilka, Addison, and Rosensohn (1975), authors Spilka et al. (1982) concluded that, in general, the most admired or the same-sex parent is more closely related to the concept of God.

One can ask whether these contradictory and confusing results reflect either the methodological weakness of the research designs involved or the changes, uncertainties, and contradictions in today’s culture. Indeed, the traditional role of the father has changed, as has that of the mother. The roles of man and woman are merging rapidly and are unstable. It seems rather clear that, if parental relations are important in the conceptualization of God, changes in the parental images have important consequences for the representation of God. At the same time, we may expect that in a pluralistic, individualized society, people have to make their own representations and can no longer just copy tradition. As people become more active and creative in developing their own conceptions of the world, the overall view of these conceptions will naturally become more complicated and contradictory.

THE PROBLEM

Although the image of God may be ambiguous and subject to constant reconstruction, the idea of a God seems nevertheless central to western religious thinking, even today. In research into praying practices of adolescents, using a content analysis of open-ended questions, we found (a) that the number of respondents who pray exceeds by far the number of respondents who call themselves members of a church; (b) that, in describing the meaning of prayer, the most commonly used word is God; and (c) that the latter not only applies to church members, but also to adolescents with no affiliation (Janssen, De Hart, & Den Draak, 1990). So, when people say they are praying and they describe what they are doing, it appears almost inevitable that they will specify an indirect object, which they generally call “God.”
It seems worthwhile to study a concept that is so important in religious thinking, even though we know from the outset that the omnipresence of God in the religious thinking of people is not expressed in a common stock of words. Previous research, as mentioned before, has shown the limitations of traditional theories and methods. We have to search for new ways, without ignoring the old ones.

The use of open-ended questions provides an opportunity to rephrase the central issues. If the concept of God has any psychological meaning at all, it will appear in the utterances of the subjects themselves, in their own language. There are some recent examples of studies (Dahlin, 1988; Hutsebaut, 1990; Hutsebaut & Verhoeven, 1989, 1991; Nipkow, 1988) in which texts were analyzed to define the God images of young people. However, the problems of the study of texts are the problems of content analysis. They are well-known and abundant. It is difficult to develop reliable analytical tools. The results often show discouragingly long lists with all sorts of contents, each category having been mentioned by few people. The analysis of open-ended questions can also be used as a phase in the construction of item scales (Gorsuch, 1967, 1968; Hammersla et al., 1986; W. Roof & J. Roof, 1984; Spilka et al., 1964; Vercruyssse, 1972; Vergote & Tamayo, 1981). Such scales have the advantage that the items are gathered from real-life thinking and are not derived from theological debates.

Nevertheless, we did not follow this procedure because, as we argued before, it did not lead to conclusive results in the past. If one wants to study the way adolescents think about God, one has to study the content of their thoughts, not just their precoded reaction to fixed lists of stimuli. As Spilka et al. (1985, p. 69) put it, modes of thinking can be researched only by examining thinking processes, not the conclusions of these processes. We have to study the texts of our respondents closely and seriously. We have to study them as such, not merely to construct item lists. Such lists reduce thinking to some sweeping statements, obscuring the complex and idiosyncratic reasoning about God. We show that the analysis of texts can yield new and interesting results. We are aware of the difficulties in the analysis of texts. Impressionistic, unreliable interpretations are often the result. We have tried to avoid these pitfalls by using a computerized technique called Text-Table (Janssen, 1990) and by applying the advice given by Mayring (1988) for content analysis.

METHOD

We studied two sample groups. In Sample Group 1 (the 1985 sample), we used the Semantic Differential Parental Scale (SDPS) as developed by Vergote and Tamayo (1981) and some open-ended questions. The sample group consisted of 288 respondents (mean age = 18.7) from all over the Nether-
lands—42% males and 58% females. At the time of the survey, one third were in the two highest forms of secondary school, whereas almost all the other respondents were in the first 2 years of university. Sixty-three percent lived with their parents, and the rest lived on their own or with peers, outside the parental family.

In Sample Group 2 (the 1990 sample), primarily open-ended questions were asked to study the language that adolescents use in thinking about God. This sample consisted of 209 secondary school pupils (average age = 15.1 years; 45% boys, 55% girls), with almost all the respondents still living with their parents. After mentioning some results from the 1985 sample, we focus on the 1990 study.1

The results of the 1985 sample were used to formulate the research strategy followed in 1990. We did not discard the traditional way of analyzing God images offhand. We began by studying the usefulness of the SDPS2 (Vergote & Tamayo, 1981). The SDPS items were submitted to factor analysis (principal components, varimax rotation; no limitation was set to the number of factors to be extracted). In correspondence with the results of Vergote and Tamayo, we could construe 3 two-dimensional factor structures, showing separate paternal and maternal factors for father, mother, and God. If we analyze all answers simultaneously, two factors appear: one for father and mother, and one for God. We further established, in line with the findings of Vergote and Tamayo, that the maternal component formed the dominant factor in the mother image as well as in the image of God. However, contrary to the findings of Vergote and Tamayo, this component was also dominant in our respondents’ father image.

We had to conclude, however, that the SDPS was unsuitable for our respondents. The designers of this scale proceed from a Christian background and emphasize the relation to a personal God as a central dimension in Christian religion. About 55% of our respondents did not believe in the existence of a personal God and for them, the SDPS items were meaningless. Nevertheless, some of them did use the word God and did so in all earnestness. In studying praying practices of Dutch adolescents, we argued that even in the case of petitionary prayer, the belief in a personal God is no condictio sine qua non (Janssen et al., 1990). The basic element of prayer is the (re)construction of the mind. It can be done by communicating to a (personal) being. It can also be done otherwise (e.g., by meditation). The fading of Christian tradition in Western Europe underlines the need for more general methods of measuring religion. But even those respondents who said they believe in a personal God had severe problems in answering the SDPS. Almost 40% of them stated that they felt that the SDPS items did not apply

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1Sample Group 1 was gathered in 1985 by Joep De Hart (1990) and Sample Group 2 in 1990 by Kersti Mischke and Maaike Wittenberg (1991).

2We used a slightly restyled version of the SDPS, avoiding archaic and Flemish expressions, thus trying to maximize the applicability of the scale to Dutch adolescents.
to God. To these adolescents, the item list by Vergote and Tamayo seemed rather useless in studying God images.

This finding could be interpreted as a result of the general indistinctness of parental images in today’s culture. Spiegel (1981) already pointed out the problematic worldly position of the traditional “Father in heaven” in a fatherless society. If the signifié of the parents is not clear anymore, it can hardly function as a “signifiant” to symbolize God. Our results do not testify to a general indistinctness of the parental images. We could construct separate factors, so the respondents had been able to distinguish the father and mother items. But we also found that the correlation between the two factors is substantially higher in the image of God ($r = .54$) than in the image of the father ($r = .11$), or the mother ($r = .05$). In the image of God, the parental images are confluent. But this does not imply that the new father–mother compound cannot function as a signifiant for God. Birky and Ball (1988) already found that the parental composite is significantly closer to the image of God than the singular parent representations. However, the question, Why do so many respondents not recognize themselves in the presumed archetypical paternal and maternal characteristics of God? is left unanswered. The demonstrable fading of the God image of adolescents is not just a result of the changing images of father and mother roles in our culture. There is more to it.

Confronted with these problems, we decided to concentrate on the analysis of texts in the 1990 study. We asked our respondents to describe their image of God in a number of open-ended questions. In addition, we asked some precoded questions to establish (a) whether adolescents see God as a father, mother, both, or neither; (b) whether they see God as a man, woman, both, or neither; (c) whether they believe in God or not, or doubt God’s existence; and (d) whether they are religiously affiliated or not. By analyzing texts, specifying the qualities and activities of God as defined and explained by our respondents, we hoped to discover the way they constructed an image of God.

**RESULTS**

**No Common Words**

As mentioned earlier, we used a computerized technique called Text-Table (Janssen, 1990) to analyze the texts. After all texts have been entered into the computer, Text-Table offers several ways of handling the data. For instance, one can study the words used in the texts, but one can also construct categories to quantify the content of the texts. Text-Table is primarily constructed to combine quantitative and qualitative research designs. It records all steps taken in a qualitative procedure. Because experiments in social research can seldom be repeated, other researchers should at least be enabled to check them.
The word analysis showed an important characteristic. It turned out that in describing God, Dutch adolescents use many different words and that the distribution of words differs in one important aspect from the distribution we find with other topics. When we asked respondents to describe praying for example, we found a list of words used by many of the adolescents, who share a common stock of words. But, in describing God, there is no such common language. Every respondent makes his or her own description, using his or her own words.

All analytic procedures discussed here are based on an amalgam of the texts obtained in response to the following questions: (a) “Do you have any thoughts about what or who God is?”; (b) “What, in your view, are the qualities of God?”; (c) “Do you think God has an influence upon the world? If so, give an example”; and (d) “Do you think that God has any influence on your personal life? If so, give an example.”

This finding corroborates a result mentioned by Hutsebaut and Verhoeven (1989). In a Belgium panel study aimed at establishing the development of God images of children between the ages of 12 and 15, they found that there is no correlation at all. The $p$ value for the chi-square of a $7 \times 8$ table turned out to be 0.918. This result was rather embarrassing, for it “abruptly excluded all possible speculation about individual religious development” (Hutsebaut & Verhoeven, 1989, p. 154). The results of a study of God images of children between ages 12 and 18 showed some correlation, but in general the results were the same (Hutsebaut & Verhoeven, 1991).

We think these results are interesting and important. Apparently, to describe God, Dutch and Belgian adolescents constantly have to start afresh. There is neither a common stock of words nor a common stock of signiftants. This does not only mean that the image of God is indistinct. If that were the case, common language might have been available to describe God’s indistinctness. Like Hutsebaut and Verhoeven, we found that such a common language to describe God is not available. Different individuals use different terms; the same individuals use different terms at different moments. The image of God is shrouded in mist: There is no vocabulary of formulas or common poetry to lift that shroud.

No Common Concepts Either?

**General structure.** Perhaps our conclusion is premature. When common words fail, it does not follow that common concepts fail. We tried to

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3 At the beginning of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to choose the term by which they preferred to designate “that which transcends ordinary reality.” Fifty-four percent of the respondents preferred the term the supernatural, 34% preferred the term God, and 12% preferred other terms (like cosmos). The respondents were asked to replace the word God in several questions with the term they preferred.
arrange the answers of the respondents by making strings of similar words and synonyms. By making hierarchical strings, it is possible to summarize the texts of the respondents in a meaningful structure. Mayring (1988) recommended the use of this strategy to prevent endless lists of disparate categories. A hierarchical structure can be analyzed at different levels of abstraction. The most general structure we constructed distinguishes between acts and attributes of God (see Figure 1\(^4\)). In 32% of the answers to the open-ended questions, the respondents used the verb *to be* to describe qualities or attributes of God; 75% used all kinds of verbs to describe acts. In 54% of these texts, these acts were specified for a specific field (e.g., God created the world). In 46% of the texts, conditions were added for example by saying that, in fact, a genuine representation of God is really not possible.

God was mostly described as a form of activity (75%); only 32% described God as a being that has certain qualities. In most texts, the difference is clear but sometimes subtle: Some acts can also be described as attributes. In any case, the difference is important. The respondents did not describe God as a being that can be seen or heard and thus qualified, but as acting and noticeable by its effects. The effects are specified in different fields (e.g., humanity or nature). Finally, the activity of God was conditioned in 46% of the texts, in which the activity of God is specified in some field (e.g., by stating that one believes in God’s affectivity). We describe next the content of each category.

**Attributes of God.** As Figure 2 shows, God’s attributes were defined as exterior in about 9% of all texts (\(0.32 \times 0.30 = 9\%\)). In these cases, our respondents mostly referred to the place where God lives (e.g., “in heaven”). More generally, God’s interior qualities were mentioned, sometimes ethical (“God is good”; “God is honest, good for people, helpful”), sometimes mystical (“God is vague and mysterious”).

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\(^4\)The percentages in all figures are based on the preceding link. For example, 85 respondents (\(0.54 \times 0.75 \times 209\)) specify a field (1.3).
Acts of God. First, a distinction was made between passive and active doings of God (see Figure 3). Sometimes, the acts of God have no perceptible effect: God is watching, knows us or knows everything, and tries to help us. As far as God’s watching and knowing, we might speak of the classical Deus absconditus: a God that does not interfere with our world. By saying that God is trying to help us, for example, the respondents mostly highlighted God’s goodness and mankind’s weakness and responsibility: “God is someone who can change people and wants to help them, but people have to cooperate.”

The most commonly mentioned act of God is the wielding of power, mostly to correct people (“He puts you on the right track when you have digressed”) or to help and support them. These two forms of activity bear a resemblance to the two factors that are found in the research reported by Vergote and Tamayo (1981): Authority and Tenderness. In the first sample, these two factors were also discerned by factor analysis. It can be hypothesized in the line of previous research that boys will prefer to see God as
wielding power and that girls will describe God primarily as helping and supporting.

In both cases, content analysis yielded the same result: The results are presented in Table 1. As predicted, girls preferred words that indicate support, and boys preferred words that indicate creation and power. In addition, it was found that girls used ethical words more often. These results are in line with the research of Vergote and Tamayo (1981). God primarily influences the behavior of people, their life and death, their thinking and acting (see Figure 4).

Without having been asked to do so, several respondents added conditions to their description of God, mostly stating that they did not believe in God (see Figure 5). Others stipulated that it is impossible to give a real representation of God or to explicitly stress the psychological nature of God (God is someone or something people believe in).

References to Symbolic and Real Parents

The images of God as seen by Dutch adolescents can hardly be specified in paternal terms or gender. There are indications that some qualifications are parental, based on experience with father and mother figures; there are also indications that some qualifications are preferred by boys (as masculine) and others by girls (as feminine). The respondents were asked directly to say whether they could see any correspondence among the image of God, symbolic parents, and their own parents, and they were also asked whether God's gender could be specified.5

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5 The questions were as follows: (a) "Do you picture God as a father or a mother?"; (b) "Does God resemble your own father/mother in some respects?"; and (c) "Do you see God as: a man, a woman, neutral, neither man nor woman, a combination of man and woman, or otherwise?"
Most respondents (56%) saw no resemblance to either father or mother figures (see Figure 6). If a resemblance was mentioned, the mother was hardly ever referred to. The classical picture of God as a father clearly dominated. When references were made to the subject’s parents, more often both parents were mentioned (59%).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closed Question&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Content Analysis of Texts</th>
<th>Reference&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>A man</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Somebody</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Something</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Ghost/Thought</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supernatural</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>N = 207.  <sup>b</sup>N = 153.

References to Gender

God is also described in terms of gender. Not only were the texts analyzed for gender references, respondents were also asked to answer a pre-coded question on the subject.

When explicitly asked to define the gender of God, most references clearly pictured God as a man (see Table 2). When asked to give arguments for this choice, many respondents explicitly referred to traditional images of God in language, pictures, and the Bible. The textual analysis showed many implicitly masculine references in the use of pronouns such as "he" and "him," but only a few texts explicitly named God as a man. The terms *somebody* and *something* (both indefinite pronouns) prevailed. When speaking in their own words about God, Dutch adolescents primarily used indefinite, impersonal, and abstract terms: God is someone or something exercising some kind of power on people.

Results for Church Members

Up to this point, the answers of all respondents were analyzed. When the analysis was limited to those respondents who said they are a member of a church (Catholic or Protestant), all results remain the same. Church membership did not differentiate the results. In a society with a tradition of pillarization like the Netherlands, it is quite amazing that church affiliation appeared no longer to be a significant variable among the younger generation, when it comes to belief in God. The rather abstract and rather impersonal view of God, as reported before, also held good for adolescents who defined themselves as members of a church. It even turned out that believing in God<sup>6</sup> and church membership were only weakly correlated, as Table 3 shows.

<sup>6</sup>The question read, "Do you believe in God?"
Table 3
Percentage of Believers by Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Protestants</th>
<th>Catholics</th>
<th>Nonaffiliated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believers</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubters</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbelievers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (62)</td>
<td>100% (97)</td>
<td>100% (41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( N = 200 \). \( \chi^2(4, N = 200) = 3.386, p = .50. \)

The differences came out as expected, but they were small indeed and insignificant. The creed of most Dutch adolescents is obscure, highly individualistic, and difficult to summarize. Many of them believe in God and do not define themselves as members of churches; many others are church members and do not believe in God. Research among Dutch adults resulted in much clearer pictures (Felling, Peters, & Schreuder, 1981). Previous research among adolescents in the Netherlands (De Hart, 1990) and Belgium (Hutsebaut, 1986) already indicated that adolescents are rather free-floating in their religious beliefs. Fuchs (1985) came to the same conclusion for Germany: “Denomination was without structuring force in nearly every behavioral domain investigated” (p. 268).

Attitude Toward the God Image of the Churches

Finally, there were some indications from which one can deduce the adolescents’ reasons for disagreeing with the God image offered by the churches.⁷ Some arguments were short and barely contentious, merely stating that God does not exist (see Figure 7). Others referred to scientific insights (“I have never experienced the existence of God and there is no scientific evidence for it”) or said that the problems and the suffering of people would not exist if God exists. Finally, some adolescents stipulated their own responsibility (“We do not need God to know what is right or wrong”).

DISCUSSION

Today’s Dutch adolescents show a multidimensional and even contradictory picture of belief and disbelief. Their image of God is complex and can hardly be summarized. Thus, the first conclusion that may be drawn is that, at least

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⁷The question read, “Do you agree with it (the image of God in the churches)?” The answers were: “1. Yes; 2. No. If not, can you illustrate your answer?”
disagreement (53 %)  god does not exist (16 %)
contra-indications, found in:
- human suffering (11 %)
- humanistic concepts (20 %):
  1. man no less than god (35 %)
  2. man is responsible (65 %)
- empirical/scientific evidence (19 %)

FIGURE 7 Arguments for not agreeing with God image of the churches. (N = 110)

in the Netherlands, there is no easy way to measure religion anymore, apart from the question of whether there ever really was an easy way. When it comes to God, we could not detect a common language to use to talk about the subject.

Second, at a conceptual level, God is primarily described as acting. Most respondents cannot say who God is, but define God in relation to the effects God produces. Leuba (1900–1901) already argued that “God is not known, he is not understood, he is used” (p. 571). Pratt (1920/1946) concluded that the idea of God contains “a large pragmatic element” (p. 207). The ideas of Leuba and Pratt seem promising in understanding actual trends in the religious beliefs of adolescents. However, they are hardly ever mentioned in textbooks. In this respect, Wulff’s (1991) recent book is a notable exception.

Third, a rather small and diminishing number of the young people we investigated believe in a traditional way. Meanwhile, most of their peers are construing their own kind of religion. The culture of modern youth has been characterized as a bricolage or a “do-it-yourself” culture (Janssen & Prins, 1991). The religion of the young is integrated in this way of being. The God of Dutch adolescents is an individual expression of an individual emotion.

Fourth, there is neither a need among these adolescents for severe criticism of (traditional) religion nor a tendency to ridicule the beliefs of others. Our respondents acknowledge religion as a working force for whoever believes in it. They define God in a pragmatic way as a force that changes people. They are rather sophisticated skeptics, understanding everything but nevertheless doing things their own way.

Fifth, young people are interested in religion. Religion does matter. Marketing specialists recently welcomed a new phenomenon: the “reli-youth.” In their view, religion will be the most influential topic in a few years. This may be an exaggeration in an effort to control the market, but it does not contradict our findings. However, our respondents show no special interest
in Christian religion, so the traditional churches will hardly profit from this new trend. The young are interested in their own religion, not in the religion of the churches. They prefer a rather abstract version of religion: a religion without content. Contrary to Pascal’s famous memorial in 1654 (Pensées de Pascal, 1925, p. 63), they seem to prefer the God of the philosophers and scholars to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Finally, there is substantial agreement in terminology and opinion among people of different denominations and between believers and unbelievers. The abstract, impersonal, self-made, philosophical way of thinking seems to originate in a common youth culture.

Our conclusions can be validated with the findings and conclusions of other studies. In a study of a national Dutch sample of youths between 12 and 21 years of age, Van der Linden (1990) concluded:

The terminology (of the young without belief) strongly agrees with what believers say about giving meaning to life. The world of belief and religion is not strange or unfamiliar but quite accessible to the young people who are not religious themselves. But, they add immediately, that they do not have a need for religion. Many answers are a mixture of tolerance and superiority with regard to the believers. (pp. 119–120)

Cousin, Boutinet, and Morfin (1985) reported comparable results for French adolescents.

Hutsebaut (1991) asked whether the abstract image of God has a developmental correlate. He departed from Deconchey’s (1964) stage theory. According to Deconchey, the rather abstract typifications of God should prevail from age 15 to 16. This appears to be corroborated by the facts that Hutsebaut presented as well as by our results. However, there are no indications to prove that this is the result of a development. Hutsebaut (1991) did not find them either, but tried to save Deconchey’s model as “a useful tool for predicting the representation of God in a given age group” (p. 70). It seems that both contentions cannot be true simultaneously. Hutsebaut’s interpretation that his results are “a sign of a changing culture” (p. 70) looks more promising. Young people have to construct and reconstruct their culture and religion over and over again. They have to do it themselves.

Elsewhere, Hutsebaut (1986) cogently summarized the religious situation of today’s youth in analyzing the meaning of belief. His conclusions run parallel to ours. Belief is not a matter of indifference to the young, he says, but they describe it as an inner-worldly affair. If belief is associated with the supernatural, it is described as a vague force. Only few refer to a personal God. Hutsebaut concluded that the religion of the young can, anthropologically, be characterized as a primitive belief, a basic trust. The content of belief is unimportant. Belief is primarily rooted in personal experience. It is defined by its functions, its effects. As concluded before, the religion of young people is a pragmatic religion. It can be characterized as “experimen-
tal” and “experiential” (Cousin et al. 1985, p. 132). Perhaps we may say that they have learned to think about religion in psychological terms. At least, they argue according to the psychology of religion formulated by James Henry Leuba and James Bisset Pratt.

Our interpretation is supported, but is it a sound interpretation? Previous researchers concentrated on the theological content of belief. Today, psychologists stress the process of belief construction (Van der Lans, 1992). Is there more than a change in the interests of psychologists, perhaps returning to an old tradition in the psychology of religion?

Some researchers do conclude that religion is simply disappearing (Van der Ploeg, 1985; Wilson, 1976). Abstract religion is the last phase. It might just as well be argued that it is the first phase of a new beginning. Durkheim (1912/1960) saw the beginning of religion in vague and hardly-conscious group processes. Primitive people have words like wakenda and mana for these anonymous forces. Modern anthropologists (Van Baal & Van Beek, 1985) follow up on these ideas. In the beginning, religion is vague and formless. “It is important,” they add, “that mana is known primarily because of its effects” (pp. 64–66).

But will the abstract, pragmatic religion of modern Dutch youth take on a more defined character (losing its abstractness) or will it disappear in the long run? There is room for doubt. In an analysis of art appreciation, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979) studied preferences for abstract or figurative art. He concluded that people who have greater cultural capital (have attended more and better schools) tend to prefer abstract art. This preference is connected to all kinds of other preferences with regard to lifestyles, eating and dressing habits, and so forth. Why should we not add religion? A preference for abstract art would have been unthinkable, and indeed absurd, 100 years ago. Today, it is a hallmark of civilization—it is an “opinion chique.” It can be criticized as such, but it cannot be avoided. If Lucien Febvre (1942) was right in stating that Rabelais could not be an unbeliever—in spite of his harsh criticism and relativism, as he had to think in the terms and the language of his time—it can be hypothesized that today’s young people have to construct rather abstract self-made images of God because our culture dictates them.

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