

Fatima Nazar

Kuwait University

and

Kamiar Kouzekanani

University of Texas

A Cross-Cultural Study of Children's Perceptions of Selected Religious Concepts

This study was undertaken to explore perceptions of religious concepts in a sample of preschool children from three cultural settings, namely, Kuwait, the United States, and India. Participants were 219 children from one Kuwaiti public kindergarten, one private American kindergarten, and one private Indian preschool in the State of Kuwait. Several questions on general religious concepts such as God, angels, heaven, hell, the devil, and death were asked; responses were coded and analyzed to discuss the selected religious concepts with reference to the sociocultural factors in the three cultures.

Cette étude porte sur les perceptions de concepts religieux d'un échantillon d'enfants de la maternelle, dans trois milieux culturels différents, soit le Koweït, les États-Unis et l'Inde. Les participants, 219 enfants, provenaient d'une maternelle publique au Koweït, une maternelle privée aux États-Unis et une maternelle indienne et privée dans l'État du Koweït. On a posé aux enfants plusieurs questions générales touchant des concepts religieux tels Dieu, les anges, le ciel, l'enfer, le diable et la mort. Les réponses ont été codées et analysées pour pouvoir en discuter par rapport à des facteurs socioculturels pertinents aux trois cultures.

Children by nature are curious and tend to ask many questions of their parents, peers, teachers, and caregivers. Some of their questions are related to God and religion. For example, they may ask, "Where is God?" "Who is God?" "Who made us?" Finding convincing answers to such questions is certainly not an easy task. For example, the child may ask, "Where do I come from?" And parents may say, "The white swan brought you to us," or "We found you in a mosque." Of course, such answers are not true.

During the early childhood years, young children increasingly depend on social circumstances to develop their critical thinking skills about religious concepts. They do not learn about God and/or religion simply by thinking about these concepts in isolation. Rather, they learn either directly or indirectly from adults or more experienced peers through the use of developmentally appropriate materials in an early childhood environment. Children need to do more than merely memorize words or passively absorb information related to God and/or religion (Myers, 1997). They require resources that will help them grasp deeper meaning, reflect on their own alternative views, and keep an

Fatima Nazar is a specialist in early childhood education and the Cultural Attaché in the Embassy of the State of Kuwait, Washington.

Kamiar Kouzekanani is a quantitative methodologist in the Center for Reading and Language Arts.

open mind about different approaches and perspectives. For this reason religion-based literary resources are most effective when they are sensitive to the developmentally experiential and cultural requirements of young listeners and readers. Children who are formulating their ideas about God and/or religion often seek a wide range of facts. Through looking in-depth at the major ancient religions, investigating the dynamic faiths observed by most of the world and exploring some of the newest religious beliefs, children are provided with the tools to think and learn about religion in a variety of ways (Ganeri, 1997).

Although major religious faiths in the world such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have different beliefs and teach different ways to worship, they all seek to bring comfort to their followers. They all offer thanks for the world's greatness and beauty. They all express awe and humility before the mysteries of the universe. In this sense they are all wise and enduring (Osborne, 1996). Religious resources merely provide ways for children to extend the conversations they are already having with each other and to expand their thinking. Myers and Martin (1993) reminded us that in nonsectarian early childhood settings, the words of any formalized religion are not used to name the experiences that children have.

Review of the Literature

The subject of children's spirituality has become of great interest in recent years. A number of studies suggest that children's spirituality not only transcends the idea of particular religious denomination or tradition, but also goes beyond religion itself, as evidenced by the spiritual concerns of children, and people in general, who are defined as "not religious."

Coles (1990) noted that regardless of their cultural and religious backgrounds, children feel profound desire to understand the universe and their place in it, and this desire is articulated through words, gestures, songs, and drawings. Commenting on his conversations with two 8-year-old girls with different backgrounds (Hopi and Irish Americans), Coles noted that the girls, despite the differences in their religious backgrounds, had similar spiritual concerns and aspirations. According to Coles, both girls found in themselves a human strength, striving every once in a while to break the confines of self, of society, of time and space, and even of faith. Although Coles' young interlocutors used different sets of symbols to express their spirituality, the Catholic girl's dreaming about Christ's return and her Hopi counterpart's contemplating a joyful reunion of all humankind reflected a deep desire to live in harmony with the universe.

As researchers have observed, the phenomenon of children's spirituality eludes the traditional conceptual and methodological apparatus of psychology or theology. Questions about life, death, birth, rebirth, and the universe in all its immensity, which are all spiritual concerns, do not, it seems, directly depend on cognitive and verbal development. Indeed, it is possible to trace the development of children's religious consciousness, as Elkind (1978) has done, noting how, for example, as children mature, their prayers shift from being self-centered to altruistic. But spirituality, undefinable as a process, defies the theoretical strictures of child development. Thus children often wonder about God without any intellectual or historical understanding of the concept. They

do have the ability to tackle difficult philosophical and theological questions unknowingly, focusing on the idea itself while sidestepping the logical sequences prescribed by rational discourse.

A number of studies have investigated the issue of religious concepts in children from various cultures with the purpose of exploring the effect of educational environment on the young children. In a comparative study of educational environments of 540 preschool children in Japan and Israel, Ishigaki (1986) investigated certain aspects of culture and religion and their influence on young children. He reported that based on his findings, Israeli Jewish children appeared to receive more enrichment than did Israeli Arab children; that most Japanese children and many Israeli Kibbutz residents were nonreligious, whereas most Arabs were quite religious; and that those Japanese parents who sent their children to Christian kindergartens wanted to ensure a good education at reputable schools, but did not want their children to become Christians.

Anwana (1987) carried out an investigation on the preprimary school system in Nigeria in an attempt to ensure a standardized curriculum of religion, moral instruction, social norms, and English. The study recommended the inclusion of some religious concepts in the curriculum. Collaboration was necessary between Nigerian parents, preprimary schools, and the government to ensure consistency and balance in the instruction of religion, character formation, and intellectual and physical skills.

Miller (1989), in a study about the problem of evil and religious education, argued that children needed assistance in dealing with the fundamental questions concerning evil and good. He discussed kinds of evil and God's omnipotence. He also urged that the relationship of God or evil should be dealt with in religious education, so that both children and adults could be adequately prepared to deal with suffering and death.

O'Brien (1988) showed that religious programs would help people grow in faith into mature adult Christians and assist parents in their role as those primarily and principally responsible for the education of their children. He concluded that the main purpose of religious education is to communicate sound doctrine to children and youth.

Finally, a study by Myers and Martin (1993) provided a framework that early childhood professionals may use to think and talk about faith and institutionalized religion in terms of the social contexts of young children. The study was based on conversations between a small group of 4-year-old children and their teacher. It was established that the foundation of adult faith is formed in the early years of life. It is necessary for early childhood professionals to have a guideline and provide a framework when addressing and establishing religion in the context of young lives and how issues concerning religion are appropriately addressed in nonsectarian early childhood programs. They also suggested how issues related to faith may be appropriately addressed in nonsectarian early childhood programs.

The present study was designed to investigate children's perceptions of selected religious concepts in an attempt to explore the social and cultural effect on their thoughts concerning concepts such as God, angels, the devil, heaven, hell, and death. These particular concepts were selected because they

were deemed related to spirituality and also represented familiar concepts in some of the world's major religions.

Methods

Subject Selection

Three groups of children were included in this cross-cultural investigation. The first group consisted of 92 Kuwaiti children, 45 boys aged 5 years ($n=21$) and 6 years ($n=24$); and 47 girls aged 5 years ($n=31$) and 6 years ($n=16$). They were all Muslims and were recruited from a public kindergarten school.

The second group consisted of 53 American children who had been selected from a private American kindergarten in the State of Kuwait. They were 25 boys aged 5 years ($n=7$) and 6 years ($n=18$); and 28 girls aged 5 years ($n=10$) and 6 years ($n=18$). Although they were all Christians, their school was not a mission school and offered neither religious education nor any kind of worship.

The third group consisted of 74 Indian children from a private Indian kindergarten school in the State of Kuwait. They were 37 boys aged 5 years ($n=16$) and 6 years ($n=21$); and 37 girls aged 5 years ($n=27$) and 6 years ($n=10$). They were all Hindus.

There were no statistically significant differences among the three samples on the basis of gender, $\chi^2(1, N=219) = 0.10, p=.95$. Age differences were statistically significant and showed that the American sample was older than were the samples of Kuwaiti and Indian kindergartners, $\chi^2(1, N=219) = 10.21, p<.01$.

Instrumentation

The Children's Image of Religious Concept Questionnaire (CIRCQ) was developed by the principal investigator to assess the children's image on a number of religious concepts. The CIRCQ consists of several yes/no, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions related to God, angels, the devil, heaven, hell, and death. A pilot study was conducted to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire. Specifically, the instrument was tested and retested two weeks later. The average test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.76.

Procedure

All children were individually interviewed by their teachers after the children's parents consented that they could participate in the study. Before the interviews, the principal investigator instructed the teachers about the interview procedures to ensure consistency throughout the interviews. It was decided that the teachers should conduct the interviews because of a more comfortable child-teacher relationship. The answers were reported verbatim by the interviewers and were then coded according to the coding scheme (e.g., yes/no) or according to the common salient patterns of the responses provided by the children.

Results

Because all data were categorical in nature, nonparametric statistics were employed for the purpose of data analysis. The Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit test was used for the situations involving only one variable. The sample consisted of 42% Kuwaitis, 34% Indians, and 24% Americans. Thus 42:34:24 was used as the standard ratio in all goodness-of-fit analyses. The Chi-Square Test of Independence was used when two variables were investigated. The Statisti-

cal Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed for the purpose of data entry, manipulation, and analysis. All analyses were conducted at the .05 level of significance.

Question 1: Do you know God?

The overwhelming majority of the children in the three samples (96% Kuwaitis, 98% Americans, and 92% Indians) indicated that they knew God. The goodness-of-fit test showed that the differences were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=208) = 0.20, p=.91$. This may be because although different views of religion may appear contradictory, they are all views of one reality and one attainable vision of that reality that is reflected in God. In addition, the overwhelming majority of the children (97% Indians, 96% Americans, and 90% Kuwaitis) believed that God made them. The group differences were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=256) = 0.20, p=.88$, and suggested that despite widely diverse concepts of God, there is a characteristic conviction of a personal relationship with some external, transcendent power (i.e., God). Whereas 79% of the Kuwaitis and 62% of the Americans indicated that they prayed to God, the prevalence of this response among the Indians was only 32%, and the differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=130) = 15.54, p<.001$. Only 4% of all children indicated that they did not know the whereabouts of God. The most prominent response was "in the sky," which was reported by 129 children (59%). The majority were Kuwaiti ($n=76, 59\%$), followed by the Indian ($n=38, 29.4\%$), and American ($n=15, 11.6\%$) children. The goodness-of-fit test showed that these differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=129) = 17.80, p<.001$. The most popular response by the American and Indian children were "everywhere" and "in heaven" respectively.

Question 2: Can you see God?

Whereas 53% of the Kuwaitis and 36% of the Indians responded positively to this question, only 2% of the Americans believed that they could see God. The differences according to the goodness-of-fit test were statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=77) = 25.14, p<.001$. This finding may reflect the notion that many Muslims believe that God can be seen through his creation and creatures (e.g., nature, mountains, seas, sky).

Question 3: Can God see you?

The majority of the children in all three samples (97% Kuwaitis, 91% Americans, and 96% Indians) indicated that indeed God could see them. The goodness-of-fit test showed that the differences were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=192) = 1.30, p=.52$.

Question 4: Do you know what angels do?

Whereas the majority of the American (70%) and Kuwaiti (53%) children indicated that they knew what angels did, the majority of the Indian children (58%) responded negatively. The test of independence showed that the association was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=219) = 9.68, p<.01$. Nearly 80% of all children indicated that they knew what the angels looked like. The most popular response was that "angels have wings" and can fly (24%), followed by "someone who wears white" (17%).

Question 5: Do you know what the devil does?

Whereas the majority of the American (70%) and Indian (68%) children indicated that they knew what the devil did, the majority of the Kuwaiti children (79%) responded negatively to this question. The association as examined by the test of independence was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=219) = 48.98$, $p < .001$. This finding may be related to the influence of sociocultural environment on Kuwaiti children. That is, they may not have as much opportunity as American and Indian children to discuss a religious concept such as the devil, at home or school. The children were also asked about the devil's appearance. The common response to this question reflected the commercial image of the devil as shown all over the world, that is, the devil is ugly, has two horns and a tail, with a stick that looks like a fork.

Question 6: Why do people die?

The most common response to this question, given by 71 (32%) of all children, was that people die because they get sick and go to the hospital. Nearly one half of the children who provided the above answer were Americans (48%), followed by Kuwaitis (27%), and Indians (25%). The goodness-of-fit test showed that the differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=71) = 22.37$, $p < .001$. This finding may suggest that getting sick and going to the hospital seems to be a common explanation in breaking news about death in the three cultures. Whereas nearly 15% of Indian and 11% of Kuwaiti children attributed death to poverty and hunger, this was not reported by any of the American children. Nearly 11% of the Kuwaitis associated death with the Gulf war. Interestingly, about 5% of Kuwaitis said that people may die because of the rain, which was not surprising because some Kuwaiti parents warn their children to protect themselves from the rain because it may kill them. In short, a variety of responses given to this question showed that socioeconomic and cultural factors might have influenced the pattern of answers in the three cultures.

Question 7: Where do people go when they die?

The most common answer to this question was that people go to heaven after death. Specifically, nearly 60% of the Americans, 42% of the Indians, and 16% of the Kuwaitis provided the above answer. The goodness-of-fit test showed that the differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=78) = 19.81$, $p < .001$. Whereas approximately 26% of the American and 22% of Kuwaiti children believed that people die and go in the grave, such response was provided by only 7% of the Indian children, which could have been due to their custom of cremation. The discrepancy of answers among the three groups was salient and showed that American children tended to use more conventional religious responses than did the other children.

Question 8: Who goes to heaven?

The majority of the American (60.4%) and Indian (52.7%) children said that good and nice people go to heaven, whereas only 23.9% of Kuwaiti children said so. The goodness-of-fit test showed that the differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=93) = 13.37$, $p < .01$. The reader might have been surprised by the low percentage of Kuwaiti children who had said that good people go to heaven. One possible explanation might be the Muslims' belief that good deeds are not enough to ensure a place in heaven, as it is only with the compassion of

God that people may go to heaven. Another response was that God (Indians, 12%), the prophet Mohammed (Kuwaitis, 12%), and Jesus (Americans, 4%) go to heaven. The synthesis of responses to this open-ended questions suggests that children's common sense led them to believe that good people go to heaven and that God, the prophet Mohammed, and Jesus are the best models for these good people.

Question 9: Who goes to hell?

The most common response to this question was that "bad, naughty children" go to hell (Indians, 50%, Americans, 47%, and Kuwaitis, 14%). This finding may reflect a rather common parenting practice in the three cultures, that is, warning children that they may go to hell if they are naughty. However, the goodness-of-fit test showed that the differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=75) = 18.77, p < .001$. Therefore, it was concluded that such practice was less prevalent among the Kuwaitis than it was in the other two cultures. Another salient answer to this question was that "the devil goes to hell" (Americans 26%, Indians 19%, and Kuwaitis 16%). The differences as examined by the goodness-of-fit test were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=42) = 1.25, p = .54$, suggesting that there is a common knowledge among the three cultures regarding the association between the hell and the devil.

Question 10: What is there in heaven? In hell?

Nearly 31% of all children said that God, the prophet Mohammed, and Jesus are in heaven, followed by good people (14%), and good things (13%). The association between these three responses and children's cultural background was statistically significant, $\chi^2(4, N=127) = 16.85, p < .01$. Specifically, God, the prophet Mohammed, and Jesus constituted the most prominent response given by the Indian children. Nearly 54% of the children who said that good things are in heaven were Kuwaitis, and 42% who indicated that good people are in heaven were Americans.

Nearly 30% of all children said that there is fire in hell, followed by bad people or stuff (22.4%), and the devil (11.4%). This association was also statistically significant, $\chi^2(4, N=139) = 17.61, p < .01$, and showed that whereas the majority of the children who said that there is fire in hell were Americans and Indians, nearly 50% of those who believed that bad people or stuff are in hell were Kuwaitis.

Concluding Remarks

The synthesis of the results of this investigation suggests that most of the common responses provided by the children from three different cultures to the many questions related to religious concepts share one common notion. That is, although different views of Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism may appear contradictory, they are all views of one reality and of one attainable vision of that reality; and although different cultures have different ways of approaching God, it is perhaps best that each individual follows the path prescribed by his or her own culture. Ramakrishna might have been right when he stated that awareness of the goodness and truth of all religious traditions is the highest wisdom. They all seek to bring comfort to their followers, offer thanks for this world's greatness and beauty, and express awe and humility before the mysteries of the universe. Children should be taught to develop

tolerance for religion-based differences and should be provided with tools to think and learn about religion in a variety of ways.

References

- Anwana, U.I. (1987). The preprimary school system and the child in the Nigerian environment. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 14(1), 19-21.
- Coles, R. (1990). *The spiritual life of children*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Elkind, D. (1978). *The child's reality: Three developmental themes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ganeri, A. (1997). *Religion explained: A beginner's guide to world faiths*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Ishigaki, E.H. (1986). *A comparative study of educational environments of preschool children in Japan and Israel*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 279414)
- Miller, R.C. (1989). The problem of evil and religious education. *Religious Education*, 84(1), 49-55.
- Myers, B.K. (1997). *Young children and spirituality*. New York: Routledge.
- Myers, B.K., & Martin, M.P. (1993). Faith foundations for all of our children. *Young Children*, 48(2), 49-55.
- O'Brien, J.S. (1988). *An urgent task: What bishops and priests say about religious education programs*. Washington, D.C. National Catholic Educational Association.
- Osborne, M. (1996). *One world, many religions: The ways we worship*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.