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Thesis Abstracts

## An Examination of the God Image of Lutheran Religious Education Students

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## I. Introduction, the Background of the Research

The subject of images of God is one of the most intriguing questions at the intersection of psychology and theology. In a broader sense, it touches upon the relationship between the two sciences and their interactions. Curiously, this notion first emerged from the perspective of psychoanalytic criticism of religion, suggesting that the image of God “living” in the human psyche is merely a projection of the human paternal figure. However, this idea has faced numerous challenges from both theology and the psychology of religion, among which Ana-María Rizzuto's theory, based on object relations theory, stands out. Rizzuto refutes Freud's ideas on multiple levels and thoroughly analyzes what she terms the “God representation” in her clinical study. In my research, I have heavily relied on her concept that distinguishes between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the image of God.

While the concept of God tends to be organized on a conscious, cognitive, and verbal basis, the image of God often consists of unconscious, affective elements and non-verbal memory traces originating from early childhood. This definition implies that the concept of God is more accessible to individuals and researchers, whereas the unconscious aspect primarily manifests when confronted with some distorted, pathological image of God.

Another research avenue focusing on the development of the God image/concept is the cognitive psychological approach. Pioneering studies by Jean Piaget that center on children's cognition have spurred investigations into children's religious thinking. Some researchers have placed moral or religious judgment at the core of their studies, while another tradition has aimed to examine the development of God image in children and adolescents using verbal or non-verbal tools. Among the integrative developmental theories, we can categorize the attachment theory approach, which interprets and examines the phenomenon of God image within the framework of the relationship with God as an attachment bond.

## II. Presentation of Empirical Research

### II/1. Hypotheses

1. The conscious, verbalizable part of the concept of God shows characteristic differences by age group.

- a) The older the individual, the richer their concept of God tends to be.

b) The older the individual, the more frequent the appearance and "tolerance" of ambivalence within their concept of God.

c) Religious educators, as experts, have a more complex concept of God compared to their students.

2. The unconscious, non-verbal part of the concept of God can be in tension or contradiction with the conscious elements. (For example, someone may declare a positive concept of God, yet negative elements of the concept may still appear in some projective form).

3. Distorted concepts of God can also be found within the population of students studying religious education. These can be described along the lines of categories already known from the literature.

4. The concept of God held by the religious educator will be related to that of their students, being more pronounced than the verbal elements (idea of God).

5. The image of God influences the reception of biblical narratives even without the mediation of religious education.

## II./2. Methods, Sample

a) Creation of a drawing of God

b) Associative test with the stimulus word "God"; marking the emotional charge of the associations (+/-/0)

c) A letter written to God in response to a biblical story (Genesis 21:9-21; Matthew 21:12-17; Acts 20:7-12)

Sample: 153 students from 9 religious teacher's education groups (not representative). A mix of urban and rural students from the capital city, and smaller towns, attending compulsory religious education (in lutheran institutions) or elective religious and moral education (in state institutions).

## II/3. Results

a) Results of the Associative Test:

The average and standard deviation of the number of associated words increased with age, indicating that the quantitative expansion of the concept of God is not straightforward. The combined interpretation of polarity and neutrality indexes provides insights into the nature of

attitudes toward the concept of God. Among primary school students, 58% have a predominantly positive concept of God (P=+1 and N=-1). In the lower primary sample, there were a total of 5 negatively evaluated and 22 neutrally evaluated words. Young schoolchildren mainly associate adjectives or adjectival phrases.

In the upper primary group, the proportion of those with a predominantly positive concept of God dropped to 17%. This subgroup contains 99 negatively evaluated associations. Love (24) was the most frequently mentioned word about God, receiving positive labels from all but one respondent, who did not indicate polarity. Jesus received positive labels from 21 associates and neutral ones from 2. The Bible got 11 positive, 6 neutral, and 1 negative labels. The term "church" (building) was positively labeled 9 times, neutrally and negatively twice. In the upper primary group, the ratio of word types associated changed, with those primarily associating adjectives/adjectival phrases becoming a minority compared to those associating mostly nouns.

In the high school sample, the proportion of those with a predominantly positive concept of God further decreased. In this sample, the concept of God is emotionally engaging and fundamentally positive; however, this positivity is often nuanced by neutral and negative concepts. The most frequently mentioned concept in the high school sample was faith (mentioned by 16 individuals, accounting for 44.4% of the sample). The assessment of the concept is predominantly positive (14 mentions), with neutral designations received twice and a negative once. The word "love" was associated by fewer individuals, with only 12 (a third of the sample) making this association. The perception of love is uniformly positive in the sample. The word "life" also achieved a top position in terms of mention frequency, having 10 uniformly positive mentions, which accounts for 27.77% of the sample. The words "Bible" (9) and "Jesus" (6) have retreated to the middle range among high school students, and their positive perception has somewhat diminished as well. Among the semi-peripheral related concepts, we find the word "power" (6 mentions: 2 positive, 2 neutral, 1 negative, 1 not designated) and "almighty" (6 mentions: 2 positive /written by the same person twice/, 3 neutral, 1 negative), both of which show a slight ambivalence. The word "hope" was mentioned 6 times, with 5 positive and 1 neutral designation. The words "peace" (5 positive mentions) and "grace" (4 positive mentions) are also uniformly positive, yet they can be regarded as peripheral associations. In the high school sample, 7 youths have at least 50% of adjectives or adjectival phrases in their responses, while the others primarily or exclusively wrote nouns.

## b) Results of God Drawings

Few drawings (5) received a non-figurative code, almost exclusively from high school students or adults. The symbolic code was used in 119 drawings. The most common symbols were: cloud (37 drawings), sun (31), light/light ray (20), halo (14), tree (11), Earth (10), stars (8), heart (7), cross (7), wings (6), flower (6), angel (5), bird (5) + dove (2), hand/hands (5). The anthropomorphic code was associated with 126 drawings, and in some girls' cases, themes of gender appeared in the drawings. The anthropomorphic and symbolic codes are often interlinked. Regarding color usage, there were significant differences between age groups, but no significant difference was found between genders. In a few drawings, aggressive elements could also be identified, but due to the small sample size, it is difficult to establish correlations.

## c) Results from Letters to God

The codes related to tone in the letters did not work reliably. However, interesting differences emerged in terms of reactions to the stories, both by age group and based on the stories themselves. For example, the Eutychus story often elicited a Question/Doubt response from readers, while the story of Ishmael most frequently encountered Rejection (although this data can be refined with the observation that the behavior of human characters was primarily rejected). In contrast, the Jesus story generated an Acceptance response in most letters, despite the fact that this story was not read by lower-grade students. It is common for younger students' letters not to react to the story, but their second most common response is Acceptance. Among upper-grade students, there is no significant difference in the Acceptance, Rejection, and Question/Doubt responses, and the proportion of non-responders has drastically decreased. For high school students, the primary reaction is Question/Doubt, with explorations evident in skeptical and provocative inquiries and existential questions about seeking a connection with God.

## d) Connections: Drawings and Letters of Those with Positive and Negative Concepts of God

In the case of those with a unilaterally positive concept of God, I examined whether the negative pole of the image of God can be detected in their drawings or letters. It seems that the unilaterally positive concept of God mainly correlates with the response of Acceptance in this sample. Instances of Rejection and Questioning/Doubt occurred much less frequently among them, even among high school students. It was common for them, not only in lower grades but also among older students, to either not respond to the story in the letter or not write a letter at all. Their associations often include adjectives, adjectival phrases, verbs, and expressions. It

appears that the unilaterally positive concept of God is associated with viewing God still as a person and an acting individual, interpreting themselves in relation to God. This also means that we must be cautious with the category of distorted image of God referred to by Frielingsdorf as the Gap-Filling God, as the unilaterally positive nature of the concept of God at this life stage may indicate various other things as well.

For those whose attitude towards the concept of God approaches the negative pole, we can detect little originality in their drawings: they mostly created anthropomorphic representations built on schemas, containing either nothing or very few simple symbols. With one exception, they did not use colors either. In letters, those with a more negative concept of God are much bolder in rejecting individual elements of the stories, straightforwardly criticizing even the behavior of Jesus or God. It seems that the polarity of one's attitude towards the concept of God may be a good predictor of how that person interprets a biblical story. However, since there are very few individuals with a negative concept of God in the sample, we should consider the conclusions in this regard as more indicative of trends rather than definitive findings.

### III. Conclusions

#### III/1. Limitations of the research

Among the limitations of the research, I must highlight the following: I was only able to conduct a cross-sectional study, which is not representative and lacks age group differentiation, and the adult subsample had a relatively small size. Due to the unique circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not guarantee standard conditions. For these reasons, the conclusions can only be drawn cautiously; nevertheless, we can observe certain trends.

#### III./2. Conclusions

Based on the results, we can conclude the following:

1. a) According to the results of the associative tests for primary school and adolescent age groups, we can say that the concept of God may become increasingly rich and complex in content. However, the expansion of the meaning field of the concept of God does not automatically correlate with the progression of age; other factors likely influence it as well.
- b) The emergence of ambivalence increased as students entered higher grades. The

proportion of children with a unilaterally positive concept of God has gradually decreased with the age group transition. At the same time, we cannot say that adolescents manage ambivalence easily. Their letters highlighted questions/doubts as well as rejection reactions. Some may be engaged in significant struggles with their doubts and negative feelings.

c) Regarding the concept of God among religious educators, we must be cautious in our formulation due to the small sample size. However, there seem to be more individual associations, and the average number of associations has also increased. It appears that the concept of God for a religious educator has a richer field of meaning, with only two among them expressing a unilaterally positive attitude toward their own concept of God (Hutsebaut refers to this as second naivety). The abstraction of the concept of God, however, is more distinctly characteristic of upper elementary and secondary school students. Among upper grades and high school students with a positive concept of God, as well as teachers, there was a prevalence of adjective/adjectival dominance, suggesting a more concrete notion of God. This phenomenon warrants further investigation.

2. An examination of materials from individuals with a unilaterally positive concept of God reveals that the drawings and letters had visible negative content. Yet, in this sample, this was by no means as common as found by psychoanalytic researchers in their clinical samples. Negative content (e.g., aggression in drawings, rejection reactions in letters) appeared more frequently among children with a negative concept of God, indicating that students do not necessarily respond to negative feelings or thoughts about God with avoidance. Perhaps "God poisoning" manifests more in a toxic theological environment where negative or mixed feelings regarding God cannot be expressed, represented, or processed in any way, as one must "fear and love God."

3. In the sample, only a few individuals exhibited a more or less identifiable distorted image of God. It is important to note in this interpretation that we did not work with an explicitly pathological sample, and furthermore, the sample itself is biased, as participation in religious education in Hungary is largely voluntary and optional. At the same time, it raises concerns that my survey on the occurrence of "black pedagogy" in religion lessons included Lutheran religious education as a potential context.

4. The most frequently mentioned associations related to the concept of God show only a slight overlap between the instructors and their groups. Therefore, we cannot say that the

correlation is a strong one. Certain groups have their peculiarities (e.g., the Holy Spirit is associated more frequently within a particular instructor's group compared to the entire sample).

5. Based on the data, it can be established that the overall image of God influences the reception of biblical narratives. Students with a negative concept of God were more likely to respond with rejection, whereas those with a predominantly positive concept tended toward acceptance or did not react to the story included in the letter. Among high school students, questioning and doubt were most prevalent, especially as the ability to carry ambivalence increased. Students tend to interpret the narratives in line with their existing image of God and are less inclined to revise their perceptions of God (though exceptions did occur within this sample).

### III/3. Considerations to Be Taken into Account from Theological and Religious Education Perspectives

- In the lower grade level sample, the negative aspect of the concept of God was less frequently addressed; nonetheless, certain elements of religious practice appeared in a neutral manner. This may indicate a break from tradition and a lack of family religious socialization, which should definitely be supplemented in catechism practice.
- While younger students often represented God in an anthropomorphic way, they sometimes depicted the "wholly other" nature as well (e.g., with a beard, in a cloud, or not depicted at all). Young children frequently used symbols, illustrated God metaphorically, or identified Him with Jesus. We should recognize the theological truth in this; for example, let us not correct them when they identify Jesus with God, but rather help them establish the concept of the Trinity or the dual nature of Christ. We should not dismiss anthropomorphic expressions, understanding that both laypersons and academic theology, not to mention Scripture, are rich in anthropomorphisms regarding God.
- Beginning in the upper grades (even as early as 3rd or 4th grade), it is worth allowing children to express their own exegesis seriously and to assist them in familiarizing themselves with biblical stories. We can encourage them to articulate questions related to the text. We can aid them in navigating different readings and interpretations by mobilizing academic theological knowledge while not stifling their often innovative personal thoughts. Let us support the group in developing their own theological competencies so that they can confidently articulate their reflections on their faith or their doubts, learn to listen to each other, and engage in dialogue.



- During the turbulent period of adolescence, religious beliefs may come into question, and the authority of Scripture can waver, even if the young person had previously accepted it. In this chaotic phase of life, the greatest support comes from an empathetic religious educator who provides a model for standing firm in faith despite doubts, questions, and challenges. It is important to remember that faith often emerges from the crucible of temptation, and throughout the process of becoming an adult, the young individual must find a way to own their faith, integrating even difficult experiences.

- Christian, and particularly Lutheran, theology is rich in paradoxical content, which can be surrounded by ambivalent feelings. Such themes may be encountered even in childhood (for instance, in the Small Catechism's passage, "We must fear and love God..."). Family, congregational, and school education should strive to process these themes in an environment that offers emotional security, supports the child's self-esteem, and reinforces fundamental trust.

- A religious education class can only be successful if it strives to capture the complexity of religious belief. Rather than relying solely on cognitive elements that merely convey knowledge and assess understanding, we should make space for approaches that develop the whole personality. Since we can approach the concept of God not only cognitively but also relationally, it is worthwhile to allow expressions of childlike spirituality, including elements of relationship, presence, and spontaneous wonder. A complex approach can also aid in developing resilience in religious education classes.

- In the religion class, children bring their "favorite deity" with them, whether we want it or not. It is worthwhile to get to know the image of God that resides within them as deeply as we can, in order to find the connecting point between the self-revealing God and the receptive learner. Since the constructive learning approach states that students adjust new content to their existing knowledge, we can most successfully correct the childish or doctrinally erroneous elements in their image of God through this path.

- At the same time, the relationship between the religious educator and the student remains asymmetrical. Partly due to the age difference and partly due to systemic elements (such as school evaluation), the educator has a certain power over the student, which can be abused. Extreme examples of this can be experiences of black pedagogy in religious education, or spiritual poisoning, or even the phenomenon of "disturbed devotion and faith." We should never punish or reward students based on the content of their current image of God or their

perceived or actual state of faith and relationship with God, as this would violently intervene in their processes.

- The educator should be aware that their own image of God is not identical to God with a capital 'G'. The educator is also subject to the limitations of human understanding, and God does not reveal everything about Himself. We can consider Luther's advice regarding learning God's word, which states that we must rediscover its content repeatedly, learning with the humility of a small child. In knowing God, we are always beginners.

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