Non – reflexivity and the religious preparation of children in the process of socialisation

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Abstract:

The religious preparation of children is considered from the point of the socialization of non-reflexivity. According to the author of this article, non-reflexive socialization of children begins at the early school stage. During this stage, the religiousness of a child is based mainly on knowledge gained during religion classes. The influence of religious practices gained at home is slowly dissipated. For the purpose of this article, pilot studies have been used which were conducted in Poland (2014) with children of an early school-age.

1. Introduction

Non-reflexivity or non-reflexive thinking, in contrary to reflexive thinking, is the phenomenon of taking something for granted, considering it unquestionable and true. Non-reflexivity is demonstrated in a lack of critical thinking and ideas that are deeply installed into the unconscious and function beyond the individual's perception.

The key theory relevant to the subject matter being addressed is religious socialization, which takes place within the family (Hood et al., 1996, Thunder 1996), in school and in church (De Hart 1990). The issue of religious socialization is situated within religious pedagogy, the psychology of social influence, theological catechesis, and sociology. The research presented here is very innovative as a result of the subject matter being studied. Up till now, the study of the religiousness of children and of the means of portraying God is has concentrated on matters relating to knowledge (Wales 2005, Thunder 2000, Fuentes 1995). Religious socialization in the family is most influential during the first years of a child's life, i.e. during the period attributable to nursery and elementary school age, and it is then that the most important religious attitudes are established.

> *The force of socio-educational effects is all the greater the more consistent the parents' attitudes are and the more congruent the subject matter they pass on is with their behaviour patterns* (Marianski 1991).

The practices of religious initiation are a part of this process. Durkheim states that religion must have a system framework combining beliefs and practices relating to holiness, a system which has a specific and differentiated moral identity connecting people to a single community (1997). Every religion has its singular rites of passage. In the case of Catholicism these are baptism, first communion, confirmation, and the funeral service. The most frequently practiced are baptism and first communion. These singular practices of the church are associated with a certain ethos which has become traditional in the society they live in.

> *To a significant degree, non-reflexive socialization takes place in school, both primary and secondary. This is because it is there that the mindless reproduction of knowledge is usually favoured (Dolinski 2000, p 197).*

Currently, there is increasing discord between Church and society, and society is demanding dynamic change and openness to having its voice heard. Traditional society is rapidly disappearing, especially within large urban communities. Deference to authority and the non-reflexive receipt of beliefs as facts are beginning not matter. Clearly, attitudes of self-conscious and independent choice are being developed. In this context, an important issue is the relationship of religion classes, and hence the catechism, to the core curriculum and to the religious education program aimed at children. Religious automaticity is still being perpetuated through such activities as: the teaching of definitions and assessment based on reproducing knowledge gained from handbooks. School catechism lessons involve memorizing information by rote and therefore cognitive functions are not developed from the unreflective to the reflective. Emile Pin, a French sociologist of religion, identified several sources of religious behaviour, i.e. primary and secondary factors affecting religious practices. His primary factors are: mystical experiences, cosmological and biological motives (the feeling of helplessness in controlling nature, uncertainty about the effects of one's own actions) and motives of eternal salvation (the desire for everlasting life). The secondary factors are social in origin – being non-reflexive, conformist and accepting of community custom, or conscious with regard to participation in religious life (Pin 1983).

From a theological perspective, the religiousness of a child needs to be examined in the context of the educational processes for which the Church is responsible. We are faced here with doctrinally catechistic premises expressed in the documents of different denominations within Christianity. Against this background, the most appropriate approach is to take the theoretical bases formulated by those who study the pedagogy of religion in respect of certain faiths, such as Catholicism and Protestantism.

> *There is a particular educational responsibility which rests on the Church and on theology that requires openness and dialogue, including dialogue between theology and pedagogy. The pedagogy of religion considers it significant that the Church carries out its educational responsibilities directly through parish catechesis, parish counseling, and the work of lay associations, groups and institutions of an educational character, and indirectly through the family and society (Milerski 2009).*

Psychology deals with religious education from the point of "psyche". Bernhard Grom, in the research tradition of the psychology of religion, understands the concept of religiousness as

> *the willingness of people to think and to experience themselves, their contemporaries, and the entire cosmos in relation to a suprahuman and non -worldly reality (Grom 2011).*

Within this understanding, it does not matter how people comprehend this reality and what religious community they find themselves in. Representations of the world created by a child have been extensively dealt with by J. Piaget. In his research he undertook the problem of how children think. Juxtaposing perceptions of the external and the internal world, he looked for answers to the question – "Does a child distinguish between both realities"? (Piaget, 2011).

Charles Glock (1962) and later Glock and Rodney Stark (1968), coming from social psychology, conducted studies that treated religion as a phenomenon made up of five dimensions: practical means of behaviour, confirmation of one's religion's central dogmas, being emotionally moved by a sense of security or fear, religiously motivated attitudes in various matters of daily life, knowledge and understanding of the truths of faith. Gordon Allport and James Ross, coming from the psychology of motivation and personality, formulated the still accepted Religious Orientation Scale, which distinguishes two religious attitudes: internal (faith itself) and external (the benefits of faith). External religious attitudes have a greater bearing on the religious behaviour of children.

> *Above all this concerns the benefits provided by the acknowledgment of parents, other educators, and one's own peer group – i.e. people who are important to them and appreciate religious practices or who expect them from children and adolescents (Grom 2011).*

Interesting research into the religiosity of children and adolescents was conducted by Tamminen (1993). It was related to the situation of need, material and social assistance and to coping with anxiety, frustration and loss, and it showed that children most often experience closeness to God in situations of need. Their prayers for assistance and protection were related to life events and living conditions.

In all psychological areas, where the desire for a positive sense of self-worth and the awareness of faith meet, self-esteem is the main motive for human behavior. For children, religiosity in this sense may take the

form of emotional motivation (Erikson 1997). Faith proceeding from the educational process can motivate children's future readiness to empathy and pro-social behavior due to the central commandment to love God, self and neighbour (Batson, 1991; Bierhoff, Montada 1988 Borkenau, 1991; Staub, 1982).

The basic models explaining religious development include:

1. The depth psychology model and object relations

All standpoints within depth psychology agree that human personality and religious, cultural, and social behaviour are shaped by psycho-dynamic development during the first five years of life. Sigmund Freud described man as an individual and God as a "father" figure. A man's relationship with his father and his longing for his father determines the man's relationship to God (Freud, 1964). A revised theory of object relations was formulated that was in opposition to Freud's theory, (Kernberg 1981; Kutter 1982; Mitchell 1989; Rizzuto 1991). Ana-Maria Rizzuto considers that the understanding of God is constructed on the basis of the concept and the portrayal of God experienced during the first years of life. The concept of God includes the theory produced by theologians, but it does not exist without portrayals of God that relate to the unconscious patterns of relationships with fellow man, taking the form of a good or bad father. According to Rizutto, the process of upbringing is focused as a whole around the emotional foundation of faith formed in childhood, which is why the family is the foundation of religious socialization. Other studies have focused on the relationship with the mother (Fraas 1973). According to this theory, the child creates its first basic trust in relation to its mother, and it is on this relationship that a trust in God depends. The building of a relationship with mother is synonymous with the building of a relationship with God in the later years of life.

2. The Genetic Structuralism theory of James Fowler and of Fritz Oser and Paul Gmunder

The theory of Genetic Structuralism assumes that the development of thinking, living and religious behaviour takes place in successive stages. It harks to the accomplishments of Jean Piaget in the framework of cognitive development theory and to Lawrence Kohlberg who applied this theory to the stages of moral judgment. Jean Piaget did not deal with religiousness in his research, and only accepted the theory of transference,

according to which a child, up to five or six years of age, credits their parents with omnipotence, holiness, omniscience and eternity. After the crisis of disappointment, at seven to eight years of age, the idealized features of the parents are transferred to God, and He is artificially perceived to be like the parents, a creator of the things of nature (Grom 2011).

This position was later rejected, but the stages of cognitive development were made use of and developed. Lawrence Kohlberg modified them into three levels of moral judgment: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional.

James Fowler, by using the theory of Erich Erikson's stages of life, formulated six stages of faith corresponding to cognitive stages and L. Kohlberg's levels of moral judgment:
1) Intuitive-Projective faith (three to six/seven years of age)
2) Mythic – literal faith (from seven years of age)
3) Synthetic – Conventional faith (from puberty)
4) Individuative – Reflective faith (from twenty years of age)
5) Conjunctive faith (from forty years of age)
6) Universalizing faith (rare)

Fowler made a compilation of various psychological theories, and his theory gained many opponents. The above stages do not exhibit consequence and are not consistent with cognitive development. One of these opponents was Fritz Oser, who perceived Fowler's work as "a conglomeration of several concepts of stage".

Fritz Oser and Paul Gmünder, using cognitive structuralism, presented a concept of the development of religious thought:
1) Orientation of Religious Heteronomy
2) Orientation of "Do Ut Des" ("Give so that you may receive.")
3) Orientation of Ego Autonomy
4) Orientation of Mediated Autonomy and of the plan of salvation
5) Intersubjective Religious Orientation

6) Orientation of communication and solidarity

Fritz Oser did not relate his stages to age but simply stated that a seven year old child could only achieve the second stage. He recommended that these stages be made use of in catechetical teaching. This theory met with great criticism, as the research sample comprising only of Catholics, Old Catholics and Protestants was perceived as a cultural simplification. The stages were also only seen as relating to dilemmas which had been constructed in the form of provocative questions and ready answers (Hood et al., 1996; Wulff, 1993; Gorsuch, 1995). It should be noted, however, that the description of Fritz Osera's stages contains important facts, even though these are widely known, such as the difficulty of faith in God in situations of suffering and the artificial perception of God by children.

Phases in the development of a child's religiousness according to Czesław Walesa:
1. Quasi – religious behaviour of eight to fifteen month old children
2. The phase of the first manifestations of religiousness
3. The phase of magical religiousness
4. Phase of authoritative-legal religiousness

Given the subject matter of the presented studies, which concern children from five to nine years of age, analyses of magical and of authoritative-legal religiousness are required.

During the magical religiousness phase, a child's reasoning assumes the nature of pre-operative thinking which involves the irreversibility of thinking. Hence the child's functioning is perceived as egocentric (Vasta 1995).

The religiousness of a pre-school child is closely linked to symbolic function, which occurs in a child from the age of three. This is when a child's ability to form structures and generalizations begins. The cause-effect reasoning developed during this phase enables the child to become sensitive to social roles during free play, which is full of emotional involvement. First concepts of God characterised by syncretism also appear at this time. The child becomes interested in religious content that is directly associated with the symbols of faith, such as the cross, the church and other cult objects (Rusiecki 2012). This content is directly related to learning about the person of Jesus Christ and the facts of his life. The child

> *experiences emotionally in a very profound way, and treats simple religious practices, gestures, and short spoken or sung prayers in a similar way, can understand the make-up of good deeds and willingly carries them out because they are liked by the Lord God, and knows that sin offends God and cannot be pleasing to Him* (Rusiecki 2012).

Children express these behaviors in their play activities.

The accepted way of describing religiousness at kindergarten age is as magical. The magical approach is connected to fantasizing and to the animating of inanimate objects. In their behaviour, children manifest infantile ways of perceiving reality, such as syncretism, atomism, primitive realism, phenomenalism, contamination, self-centeredness, anthropomorphism, artificialism, instrumentalism, illusionism, animism, finality, alogicality, literalism, ritualism, magic attitude (Wales 2005). A large role in the development of children's religiousness is played by the attitude of trust in the family, which allows a child to adopt a confident attitude which is deepened through the asking of questions. Czeslaw Walesa's studies were carried out only among children from Catholic families and as such are culturally narrow. It is not possible therefore to expect universality from their conclusions. The studies primarily describe the content aspect of a child's religiousness, since they only relate to knowledge of God, Jesus, how to communicate with God, expressions of religiousness and the religious practices of children.

The second phase, commonly known as authoritative-legal religiousness (Walesa 2006), is associated with cognitive realism, that is, logical thinking and action. This also marks the first appearance of religious sensitivity associated with the preparation and adoption of the first sacraments (Penance and Reconciliation, and the Eucharist). In religiously engaged families it is possible to see the fundaments of religious maturity. Through catechesis at the school or parish the child "*carries over its religious experiences from the family to peer groups*" (Rusiecki 2012). Czeslaw Walesa's studies were concentrated around the understanding of Gospel texts, religious situations, doubt in religious faith, emotional meanings of religious concepts and prayer (Walesa 2005).

In modern pedagogy, researchers are mainly interested in the experiences of the child, and the source of these is the family, kindergarten, school, peer group and socio – cultural contacts. Here we are dealing with

the diversity of a child's existence, flowing from the individual predisposition of the child, its attitudes and the environment in which it lives (Zwiernik 2009).

> *The child not only finds itself in its experienced/perceived world (Lebenswelt) but also finds a rich set of assets, values, resources, meanings, and standards of behaviour which the child itself generates through its creative contact with the world* (Smolińska-Theiss 1993).

Studies of childhood in Poland, focused on the realities of social life, have been well established for many years hence their content also focuses on the everyday (Smolińska-Theiss 1993). Attempts to define a child's life encompass various spheres and dimensions, such as the employment activity of parents, political attitudes, and the religious convictions of adults and children (Smolińska-Theiss 1993). With the emergence of new areas of education, researchers have begun to recognise a number of dependencies that exist between childhood, economic and political progress, and the growth of technical knowledge. An understanding of "childhood" is inextricably linked to the cultural and socio-political context of a given society (Smolińska-Theiss, 1993; Segiet 2005). The determinants of organised society are the attitudes, beliefs, and values prevalent at a given time (Kwak, Mościskier 2002). Many studies have shown that within a single society children show a variety of competencies and capabilities (Sternberg 2001 Matsumoto, Juang 2007), and these are closely related to membership of a specific socio-cultural group.

> *A child's experiences are related to a child's cognitive capabilities and capacity for moral judgment. These are understood in the context of the child's phases of development (...) educators and sociologists examine the world of children's meanings and experiences, and children's occurrences, activities, and ideas. Here experience refers to the environment as seen from the child's perspective* (Smolińska-Theiss 1993).

In Polish social pedagogy the phenomenon of unreflective assimilation of religious knowledge has been written about by Anna Odrowąż-Coates, although this was not concerned with an examination of the Polish religious education system or the child per se, but with a particular and endemic education system associated with a non-Christian religion.

2. Methods, techniques and data collection process

The child constructs an image of God and religion as a reflection of the experiences taken from family, family religious practices, school – especially catechesis, and from participation in the life of its church and peer group.

The presented research studies have been based on constructivist and phenomenological perspectives concerning research into childhood. A total of eighteen children from the second grade of a primary school in the vicinity of Warsaw took part in the study. They represent a pilot group for further research on a larger scale, and a preliminary to comparative research in a broader socio-cultural and religious context.

Some authors (Bahnken, Zinnecker, 2001) note that research projects which specifically look at children can either exclusively employ qualitative procedures or may combine these with other methods of research. In this project, the qualitative research process was supported by the use of projective techniques. The emotional bonds with parents or significant others can be brought out through projection (Rembowski, 1986). To this end, the selection of instructions for animated play was determined by the many ways in which God can be viewed. A further technique for data collection involves children drawing God and where he lives (Pąchalska, 1999; Popek, 1999; Oster, Gould, 2004; Szuman, 2008). This basis for acquiring data involves arranging situations permitting children to freely draw in reply to such questions as "what does God look like?", and "Where does he live and what does he do?" Animated games on the subject of "what does God do", and "where can you meet God?" were also carried out. A plan was prepared for each exercise, and in-depth interviews were carried out with each pupil after the group activities. Audio material was saved in the form of interview transcriptions (Ligus, 2009). The texts of the transcriptions were subjected to structural characterisation, i.e. they were divided into segments and then structural processes were highlighted. The following stage was analytical abstraction (Ligus, 2009). Analysis of transcription proceeded essentially in two stages (Kszychała, Offshore, 2008):

- Formative – descriptive assessment,
- Reflective – formal assessment.

Drawing, especially a child's, is not a mechanical imitation of nature. It is rather an expression of knowledge units, capturing the reality always from the specific point of view, and the specific way it is understood. Drawing is a symbol of reality, not its likeness (Szuman, 2008). Analysis of the drawings included components such as: colour, composition, level of care applied and the line dynamics (Popek 1978). Rating of these artistic creations also took into account the subject matter of a drawing. In the course of the study, care was taken to capture the perspective of the child, treating them as a competent actor in his own experienced world (Friebertshauser, 2000).

The objectives of the research centered on questions about how the image of God reflects family relationships, how the religious world is created and what it contains.

3. Analysis of obtained data

The image of God as a reflection of family relationships

Similarities that exist in relationships created with parents and God can be understood in two ways, by using the theory of coherence or theory of socialization. The first can be seen in cases when parents support a positive or negative self-knowledge, from which positive or negative statements about God are created, since they just confirm the self-knowledge (Benson, Spilka, 1973). The indicated parallels can be better understood by the other aforementioned theory of socialization. In this regard we are talking about accepting parents who tell the child about God: accepting, punitive, controlling (Eckensberger, 1993; Nunner-Winkler, 1995). Research carried out in a school in Poland also testifies to the similarities in the relationships created. During the projective tasks, in which children were supposed to draw "what does God looks like?", "Where does he live and what does he do?", the dwelling was always staged as a normal house, food often appeared as well as regular household activities, such as home renovations. Among the children there was a discrepancy between the relationship of God and significant others. Some of the children drew the whole family, some drew God in solitude, and some of the children drew God with a child (the author's guess: God reflects the mother). During in-depth interviews with the children it was noted that children ascribe the same attributes to parents as to God: He cares, loves, helps. They understand God as an extension of their sense of security and love, but also of the severity and discipline experienced at home. When questioned about who helps them in difficult moments and sad times, children respond *"when I am sad I cry, and then mommy, daddy, and God help me"* (girl, eight years old), *"God is good to all people, that's why He helps us"* (girl aged eight), *"We need Jesus in times when we are unhappy, when someone ridicules or hits us"* (boy, aged eight).

Children describe God as follows: *"kind, warm, quiet, but also reasonable and fair"* (boy, 8 years old); *"God is holy, was born in a stable, is now called the solar star, He helps people in need and that is why people pray to Him"* (boy, aged eight). When asked about the dwelling place of God and of what he does, children respond as follows: *"He lives in heaven, together with Jesus, and they reign there. St. Peter lives there or St. Luke (I can't remember now)"* (boy, aged eight); *"Dwells in heaven,"* *"lives in heaven with Mary, who is his sister"* (author's guess: a reflection of the relationship with siblings), (boy, aged eight). The children also talked about the things important to God: *"People, love, goodness"* (girls, boys, aged eight). It is significant that the children attributed characteristics to God on the basis of opposites to human qualities: *"God doesn't take offence, just apologize to Him and He is very happy, whilst my people often take offence"* (girl, aged eight).

Religiosity in the context of unreflective socialization

Non-reflexive socialization was evident in the statements of all the pupils. On the question of sin, they all responded: *"the rupture of friendship and love of God"* (boys and girls, age 8). Despite the fact that the interviews were individual, on certain questions, which concerned the dwelling place of God , church, prayer, the children replied using either memorised formulas or textbook definitions. To questions concerning where they learned about it, they all responded with *"from the Lady catechist"*; *"from the Priest"*; *"at religion class."* In contrast, when asked about help in difficult moments concerning encounters with God, to the question *"what do you think about the fact that God can do anything"*, children respond very differently and always said that they learned the answer from my mum, dad or from both parents. Children also responded by saying that

"*somehow I have not yet met the Lord God, but I have heard that you can meet him in baptism*" (boy, aged eight); "*Apparently at times able to help other teachings, but he cannot prevail over us so that everyone can live in friendship*" (boy, aged eight); "*God is immaterial and can at go under water for a long time, meaning He does not exist from any material such as skin, blood, bones*" (boy, aged eight). Children's statements concerning knowledge about God were an accurate reflection of the stories they had heard at religion classes: "*I feel that in the stories this could perhaps have happened, but I'm still not sure*"; Statements children about the mass., were based around textbook definitions: "*Holy Mass., that the Eucharist then you can meet with God, accepting God's body, I cannot yet unfortunately, the Body of Christ is in other words the transubstantiation of bread into the body, and wine in the blood* "(girl, aged eight). Notable during the study were statements about sorrow and joy. Sadness was always associated with interpersonal relations whilst happiness was been attributed to the merits of God. This may be evidence that the children found it difficult to solve problems using their relationship with God, with the majority in this case choosing concrete help from their parents.

Nineteen drawings resulted from the study and their analysis permits us to address many issues relating to the religiousness of children. Despite the fact that during the individual interviews all the children said that God is invisible, each attempted to draw God, and in each case He was depicted in human form, differing only in His attributes. Only one boy drew a star, explaining it by stating "*I heard about a star, which came down as Jesus was being born and Miss said that it was God.*" The drawings can be divided into seven categories:

1. A sole figure of God (seven)
2. God and Jesus (two)
3. God and an angel or angels (three)
4. God with a child (two)
5. Jesus and Mary (two)
6. Jesus crucified (two)
7. Jesus resurrected (one)

Two of the drawings depicted heaven with a gate or ticket office leading to it, and the children's explanation was that one enters into heaven by good works.

4. Conclusions

The research demonstrates that children of a young school age base their knowledge of God solely and exclusively on what they have learned during religion classes. Their religious experiences oscillate between the religious practices of their parents and their grandparents. In such programmed religious education and socialization it is difficult to identify a reflective teaching model which would be based on simultaneous reflexive reference to the acquired information. A. Perkowska-Klejman (2013) argues that

> *teaching based on the models of reflective practice proceeds in stages or in a revolving cycle. The process mainly depends on the student. The teacher acts as a coordinator. His role is, among others, to ask questions that encourage reflection, conceptualization and the testing of ideas. Students have the opportunity for self-assessment and mutual critique, and to gain feedback from the coordinator.*

The results indicate that right from the start, children of a young school age are characterized by finality in relation to knowledge. Their religious knowledge is based only on what they have heard in class and not broadened through the asking of questions, which demonstrates that they are not encouraged to do this. In religion classes, young children are only required to learn responses to questions from the textbook. All the children attribute their knowledge of God to their teacher and their knowledge of religious practices to their parents.

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