

The Role of Religious Context in Children's Developing God Concepts

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Abstract

This study investigated young children's concepts of God. We interviewed 36 4- to 8-year-old children of different religious backgrounds to explore the influence of religious context on children's developing God concepts. Children were asked about God's physical, biological, and emotional properties, God's supernatural abilities, God's knowledge, and God's emotions towards them. We found that (1) children who are more religious tend to attribute fewer anthropomorphic properties to God, (2) all children think supernatural phenomena cannot occur but are less sure about those phenomena which are recorded in the Bible, (3) religious children differentiate between God's knowledge and human knowledge more than non-religious children, and (4) all children think God has more positive than negative emotions, but religious children think God has more emotions in general than non-religious children. These findings highlight the impact that religious teachings can have on children, in addition to the importance of sampling a diverse population before drawing conclusions about children's cognitive abilities.

The Role of Religious Context in Children's Developing God Concepts

Religion and spirituality have been ever-present companions to humans for all of recorded history. Today, there are thousands of religions being practiced, as well as many people who choose to live a non-religious life altogether. All of these diverse backgrounds share some commonalities. From a young age, children from every religious and non-religious background hear about God, either through direct instruction or some form of cultural osmosis. Yet, there has been much debate among researchers as to how children actually interpret the abstract concept of "God." The nature of God is hardly a simple concept even for adults to grasp and has been grappled with by countless theologians who have provided almost as many different perspectives. How do young children process and understand such a weighty yet ephemeral idea? How do they conceptualize God? To some parents, the answers to these questions are the yardstick with which they measure their success. It is natural to suspect that the culture of the house and the educational decisions made by parents ought to be considered. What role does a child's cultural background play in informing their opinions about the existence and nature of God?

Researchers have proposed two hypotheses to describe the developmental trajectory by which children develop an understanding of God—the anthropomorphism hypothesis and the preparedness hypothesis. The anthropomorphism hypothesis suggests that young children lack the ability to represent God's non-human qualities and, therefore, they anthropomorphize and attribute human-like qualities to God (Makris & Pnevmatikos, 2007). This hypothesis stems from Piaget's (1964) theory of the stages of cognitive development, which states that children simply cannot think about abstract God concepts until they exit the concrete operational stage in early adolescence. Instead, children think of God as a man who

lives in the sky, until they learn to adapt the theological messages that they hear to their understanding of God.

Barrett, Richert, and Driesenga (2001) have challenged the anthropomorphism hypothesis, claiming that even children as young as three years of age resist treating God like a human. Instead, they have proposed the preparedness hypothesis, which suggests that young children are cognitively equipped to develop concepts of God and resist treating God like a human (Barrett, Newman, & Richert, 2003). Research suggests that no matter how they conceptualize God, children tend to believe in God. Harris and Koenig (2006) conducted a literature review of studies that explored children's beliefs in scientific entities that they cannot see, as well as spiritual entities. They concluded that across a number of studies, children have been shown to believe in the existence of germs and the brain even though they cannot see either of those entities. However, some children believe in spiritual entities such as God, while others do not. They hypothesize that perhaps children who are exposed to religious teachings are more likely to accept them as fact, the same way that they accept other scientific phenomena as fact. In the present work, we investigate the accuracy of this hypothesis. We ask children of different religious backgrounds about God and God's properties to see what the influence of a religious upbringing might have on children's beliefs.

How do children conceptualize God? Do children attribute human-like qualities to God? To begin answering this question, Shtulman (2008) asked 5-year-old children and their parents questions about the physical, biological, and psychological properties of God and of fictional characters. He found that parents made some psychological attributions to God but were unlikely to make biological or physical attributions to God. Children, on the other hand,

attributed all three property types to God, indicating that they have a highly anthropomorphic view of God. Two possibilities are suggested to explain the discrepancies between the parents and the children. One possibility is that parents teach their children about God in an anthropomorphic way so that they can understand the concept of God before they learn the more abstract and theologically correct views of God present in their culture. Alternatively, perhaps children do not understand the abstract concept of God and therefore adopt a more anthropomorphic view on their own. Because Shtulman (2008) did not collect information about participants' religious affiliation, he could not tease apart these possibilities. Therefore, a question remains unanswered—would children of all backgrounds answer in such an anthropomorphic way?

Other studies suggest not. In one such study, both British children and Jewish Modern Orthodox Israeli children believed that God was not subject to life-cycle processes such as being born and dying. The Israeli children, however, were even less likely than the British children to attribute life-cycle traits to God. These findings suggest that in addition to the fact that most children resist treating God anthropomorphically, culture does have an impact on children's conceptions of whether God has biological traits (Burdett & Barrett, 2015). Similarly, Richert, Shaman, Saide, and Lesage (2016) asked children and their parents if God possessed a number of anthropomorphic needs or abilities—to forget, to get bored, to get sick, to get wet in the rain, to eat and drink water, to have a heart to stay alive, to walk through walls, and to be touched. They found that parents' and children's anthropomorphic tendencies correlated with one another. These studies suggest a likelihood that anthropomorphic tendencies are not universal for all children but instead are influenced by each child's upbringing. The present work further investigates this hypothesis by asking

children of different religious backgrounds about the biological, psychological, and physical properties of God.

When investigating whether or not children think of God anthropomorphically, we must ask not only about God's properties but about God's abilities. How do children relate to God's powers? Do they believe God can interact with nature in supernatural ways? Or is God confined to the laws of nature just like humans? Woolley and Cox (2007) found that when children are read story books of fantasy, most children will determine that the events in the book could not possibly take place. Thus, even young children have a grasp on reality versus fantasy. However, when children are read religious stories that defy the laws of nature, such as Jonah and the whale, although 3- and 4-year-old children do not believe these stories could take place, 5-year-old children do believe these stories. One explanation for this pattern is that religious education influences children's beliefs. By the time a child is 5, they have been exposed to religious teachings that lead them to believe that these stories, although supernatural, can take place. To test this possibility, the present work investigates children's beliefs about whether a supernatural physical phenomenon could take place, such as a person walking through a wall, and whether a supernatural religious phenomenon could take place, such as a man splitting the sea. If Woolley and Cox's (2007) account is correct, we expect to find that all children will think the physically impossible phenomena cannot take place—a man cannot walk through walls—but children from more religious backgrounds will be more likely to say that the religious phenomena could take place—a man could get swallowed by a whale and stay alive.

As a related question, how do children conceptualize God's mind? Do they believe that God is all-knowing or do they apply the same mental limitations of humans to God?

Barrett and colleagues (2001) found that even children as young as three years of age resist treating God like a human when thinking about God's mind. They tested Christian children, ages 3 to 8, in a false belief task in which they were shown a cracker box. When asked what they thought was inside the box, the children answered crackers. At this point, the experimenters revealed to them that, in fact, there were rocks inside the cracker box.

Children were subsequently asked what certain agents, such as their mother and God, would say is inside the cracker box. If the child had not yet acquired theory of mind, meaning that they did not understand that others can hold false beliefs, they would claim that all agents, including mom and God, would say that rocks were in the box. However, as children acquired theory of mind, they realized that Mom would say that crackers were in the box, thus attributing a false belief to her. Yet, they still claimed that God would know that rocks were in the box. According to the anthropomorphism hypothesis, as children are just beginning to acquire theory of mind, they should begin to attribute false beliefs to God and only later place God back in the all-knowing category. However, these results suggest that children actually resist treating God like a human and give answers that are consistently "theologically correct," suggesting support for the preparedness hypothesis. A similar study with Maya children from Southeastern Mexico also suggested support for the preparedness hypothesis (Knight, Sousa, Barrett, & Atran, 2004).

One limitation to the above studies, as argued by Kiessling and Perner (2014), is that children may be answering questions egocentrically. They know that rocks are inside the box, therefore they claim that God will also know that rocks are in the box, not because they understand God's omniscience, but rather because they don't understand that their knowledge may be different from another agent's knowledge. This limitation was addressed

in another study (Barrett, et. al., 2003) that tested Christian children ages 3 to 7. In this study, children were shown three different items for which they were lacking information—an occluded picture of an elephant, a secret code, and a game whose instructions were unknown. The children were asked whether they knew what the picture was, whether they could decode the secret code, and whether they knew how to play the game. Children were also asked whether a dog, their mother, and God would know these pieces of information. If children without theory of mind answer false belief questions egocentrically, as argued by Kiessling and Perner (2014), then children should have claimed that just as they did not know the missing information, all of the other agents would not know the missing information. The 3-year-old children were able to differentiate between God and the dog, claiming more often that God would understand the displays and that the dog would not understand. Older children assumed that God would understand the displays, whereas they predicted that the dog and their mother would not understand. Next, children were given the information that had been missing from the displays, and were asked again whether the dog, their Mom and God would share that knowledge. Now that they understood the displays, many 3- and 4-year-old children did overestimate the dog and their mothers' ability to understand the displays, but they were significantly more likely to say that God understood the displays. Still, it wasn't until age 5 that children reliably understood that their knowledge and perception differ from their mother's and therefore their mother would not understand the displays without the information that the children now possessed. These findings address the concerns raised by Kiessling and Perner (2014): If children respond to false belief tasks egocentrically, then when they did not have full knowledge of the displays, they would have believed that God did not understand them either.

Still, other researchers disagree with this interpretation and offer an alternate interpretation that is more consistent with the anthropomorphism hypothesis. Makris and Pnevmatikos (2007) argue that it is unclear whether 3-year-old children attribute divine qualities to humans (and therefore say that their mother would know that crackers are inside the box) or if they anthropomorphize God's mind. They showed Greek Orthodox children, aged 3-7 years, a closed shoe box and asked whether God or a girl, Titi, would know what was inside the box. The children themselves did not know what was inside the box. Consistently, children of all ages said that Titi would not know what was inside the box. 3- and 4-year-old children said that God too would not know what was inside the box. Here, children were technically correct about human knowledge in recognizing that they would not be able to know what was inside the box, but they were theologically incorrect about God, claiming that God would not know what was inside the box. Thus, younger children do seem to attribute some human limitations to God's mind. These findings have been taken as evidence that children do perhaps answer knowledge questions egocentrically.

Richert, Saide, Lesage, and Shaman (2016) responded to the above concern by addressing a limitation that is present in most research on children's understanding of God. The vast majority of prior research has been conducted with Christian children, and has not considered the influence of children's own background knowledge of and exposure to their religion. Richert and colleagues (2016) addressed this issue by conducting a study with participants who were either Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, or non-affiliated. Parents filled out detailed questionnaires about their religious affiliation and their child's level of religious exposure, in addition to their own views on the anthropomorphic qualities of God, such as whether or not God has emotions and a physical body. Children participated in two tasks: one

in which they were shown a mostly occluded picture and asked whether God and other human agents would know what the picture was, and a perspective-taking task in which they were shown a piece of paper with a picture on it but were too far away to see the picture. Muslim children were the most likely to differentiate between God's mind and human minds, followed by the Protestant and Catholic children (who were not significantly different from each other), and then the non-affiliated participants. Interestingly, the strongest predictor of knowledge differentiation in the children was whether their parents held anthropomorphic views. The more the parent attributed human-like qualities to God, the more likely it was that their child would treat God's mind like a human mind. The fact that non-affiliated children tended to treat God's mind like a human mind suggests support for the anthropomorphism hypothesis in the absence of religious teachings. Muslims were most likely to differentiate, possibly due to Islam not allowing images of God whatsoever. Protestant and Catholic children fell somewhere in the middle, perhaps because they are exposed to both religious teachings about God's omniscience and to human images of Jesus as well as discussions about Jesus's birth and death. What remains clear is that while children's default belief about God may be anthropomorphic, these beliefs only hold in the absence of religious teachings. Children who are exposed to religious teachings easily incorporate them into their God concepts and are not limited to a purely anthropomorphic understanding as understood by Piaget (1964).

The present study provides an additional test of whether or not children respond to theory of mind tasks egocentrically. After children are shown a novel object inside a band-aid box, they are asked about a non-superhuman agent and God. If they are answering egocentrically, they will answer the same way for both agents. If, however, they place no

limitation on God's knowledge, then they will attribute ignorance to the non-superhuman agent and knowledge to God. We also gather information on children's religious backgrounds. If Richert and colleagues (2016) are correct, then we expect to find that more religious children differentiate more between the two agents.

Furthermore, we also seek to understand how children view their relationship with God. Do children view God as a loving and comforting figure, or as a being to be feared? Noffkee and McFadden (2001) surveyed 250 adult Christians about their views of God such as whether they see God as angry, punishing, restricting, kindly, majestic, or sovereign. They found significant differences between denominations of Christianity in their views of God. Here we ask, what do children think of God? We ask children whether they think God loves, comforts, and helps them, and whether they think God punishes, gets angry, or scares them. We predict that just like for adults, religious background will have an influence on the way that the children answer these questions.

Thus, the present study gathers information about children's conceptions of God in four different areas— God's physical, biological, and emotional properties, God's supernatural abilities, God's knowledge, and God's emotions towards them. This will give us an overview of how children from different religious backgrounds think about God from multiple angles. There is a debate in the literature about whether children are locked into anthropomorphic views of God or whether they are prepared to think about God abstractly, and we aim to speak to this debate. We expect that religious background will have an impact on children's answers, and the more religious exposure the child has, the less anthropomorphic the child's answers will be.

Method

Participants

36 4- to 8-year-olds ($M = 6.08$) participated. 35 were recruited in the Liberty Science Center. Families visiting the museum were approached by researchers and asked if they wanted to participate in a science activity. Children who participated were tested immediately in a quiet space, and were given a small prize worth about \$1.00 for participating. One additional child was recruited through a local school and was tested over video-chat on Zoom.

Demographic information

Parents provided demographic information about their child and family. The demographic survey included questions about how often their child attended religious school, attended religious services, participated in personal prayer, performed religious rituals, discussed religious topics, spoke with a religious leader, celebrated religious holidays, and heard or used references to religious concepts in everyday language (e.g., "thank God"). Parents rated how often their child performed each activity on a 5-point scale ranging from never (1) to daily (5). Parents also described what religion their family associated with and what particular sect of the religion they associated with (if any), and rated their family's level of religious observance on a 7-point scale (1= not religious at all, 7= very religious). Not all parents filled out the demographic information, and any child for whom we did not have this information was excluded from our final analyses, resulting in a final sample of 21 children. All children spoke English.

Procedure

Children were interviewed by an experimenter in 15- to 20-minute one-on-one sessions. Each child was first asked if they knew who God was and what God was like. Then, they completed the rest of the interview in four sections. The four sections (general God concepts, anthropomorphized properties, supernatural causality, and theory of mind) were presented in counterbalanced order. Because many religious Jewish children are exposed in everyday life only to the Hebrew terms for God (*Hashem*), two versions of the interview were created—one in which the Hebrew term was used, and one in which the English term was used.

General God concepts

In this section, children were asked about a number of positive and negative properties of God, in counterbalanced order. The positive properties regarded whether God helps, comforts, and loves people. The negative properties regarded whether God punishes, gets angry, and scares people. For each question, participants first answered yes, no, or I don't know, then stated how sure they were of their answer (a little sure or really sure). Responses to these two questions were recoded so that they fell on a continuous 5-point scale ranging from 'no-really sure' [-2] to 'yes-really sure' [2]). After each question, children were asked to elaborate and their open-ended answers were recorded.

Anthropomorphic properties

This section assessed the degree to which children anthropomorphized God, by asking children questions about God's psychological, biological, and physical properties. The psychological properties involved forgetting, feeling happy, and getting bored. The biological properties involved needing to eat food and drink water, having a heart to stay alive, and being able to get sick. The physical properties involved getting wet when it rains,

needing to open a door to go through, and being able to be touched. As a comparison point, children were also asked the same questions about a human (their mom), with order counterbalanced within each property type. Participants responded on the same 5-point scale as above ('no-really sure' [-2] to 'yes-really sure' [2]), with positive scores indicating a belief that God is anthropomorphic. To help the children keep track of whether they were answering questions about their Mom or God, before hearing each set of questions they were shown a picture. For the Mom questions, the picture was of a woman, and children were told to imagine that it was a picture of their mother. For the God questions, they were shown a paper that said the word "God" (*Hashem* for the Hebrew version) on it; no image was used for God so as not to suggest anthropomorphic properties. When asking the questions, the experimenter held up the corresponding image.

Supernatural causality

In this section, children were asked whether they had ever seen certain supernatural phenomena in the world. Two of the phenomena were physically impossible—a person walking through walls, and a person becoming invisible. The other two phenomena were also impossible, but appear in the Bible—a person holding out a stick and moving water apart, and a person getting swallowed by a whale and staying alive. The physical-impossible and religious-impossible items were presented in counterbalanced order. For each item, children were asked whether they had ever seen the phenomenon, whether it could happen in real life, and whether it could happen if they asked God to make it happen. Answers were recorded on the same 5-point scale mentioned previously. Children were then given the opportunity to explain their answers in an open-ended response. Each of the four phenomena was accompanied by a corresponding illustration.

Theory of mind

This section was a variant of a classic false belief task. Children were shown a band-aid box and asked to guess what was inside. After they made their guess (71% of children guessed band-aids), they were told that they were incorrect, and that only the experimenter knew what was inside. Then, they were shown a small stuffed animal named “Ducky”—Ducky was then hidden so that he supposedly couldn’t hear or see what was going on. Once Ducky was out of sight, the researcher showed the child the band-aid box and revealed that there was a unicorn keychain inside. The box was closed back up and the child was asked three questions—(1) what they had thought was in the box before it was opened, (2) what Ducky would think was inside the box, and (3) what would God think was inside the box. For both Ducky and God, children were given a score of 1 if they predicted the agent would know what was in the box, and a score of 0 if they predicted the agent would not know what was in the box. We subtracted each child’s Ducky score from their God score to give each child a “knowledge differentiation” score between -1 and 1, where higher numbers represent more differentiation between God’s mind and Ducky’s mind.

Results

We first explored children’s responses to the questions about anthropomorphized properties. We ran a three-way mixed ANOVA to examine the effects of agent (mom vs. God), religiosity, and property type (biological, physical, and psychological) on children’s responses. As shown in Figure 1, we found a main effect of agent, $F(1, 85) = 63.37, p < .0001$, and a marginally significant interaction between agent and religiosity, $F(1, 85) = 3.53, p = .063$, suggesting that all of the children tested attributed all of the properties to mom

more than to God, but that this difference was more pronounced for children who were more religious.

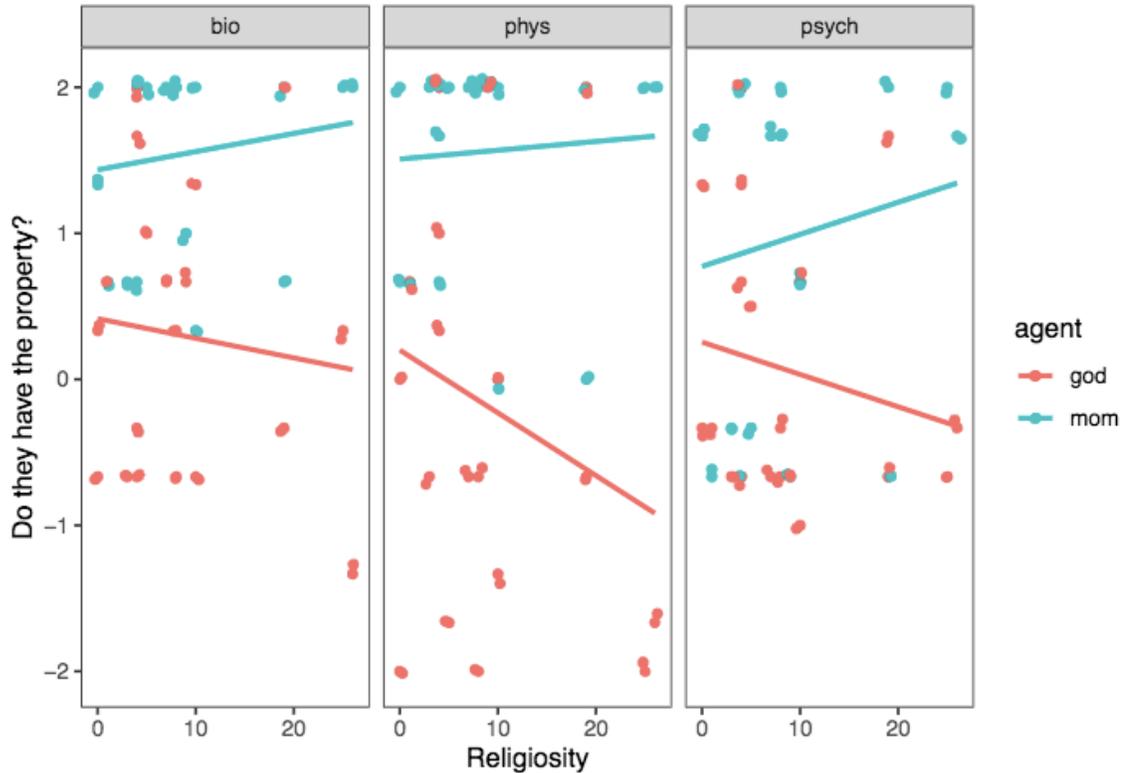


Figure 1. Children's responses for presence of biological, physical, and psychological properties of mom and God, measured against religiosity.

Next, we tested whether children differentiate between physical phenomena and religious phenomena when rating the possibility of impossible events. We ran a two-way mixed ANOVA testing for effects of religiosity and item type (religious, physical). We found a main effect of item type, suggesting that children thought that the physical phenomena were more impossible than the religious phenomena, $F(1, 17) = 10.34, p = .005$ (see Figure 2). This effect was constant across religious levels.

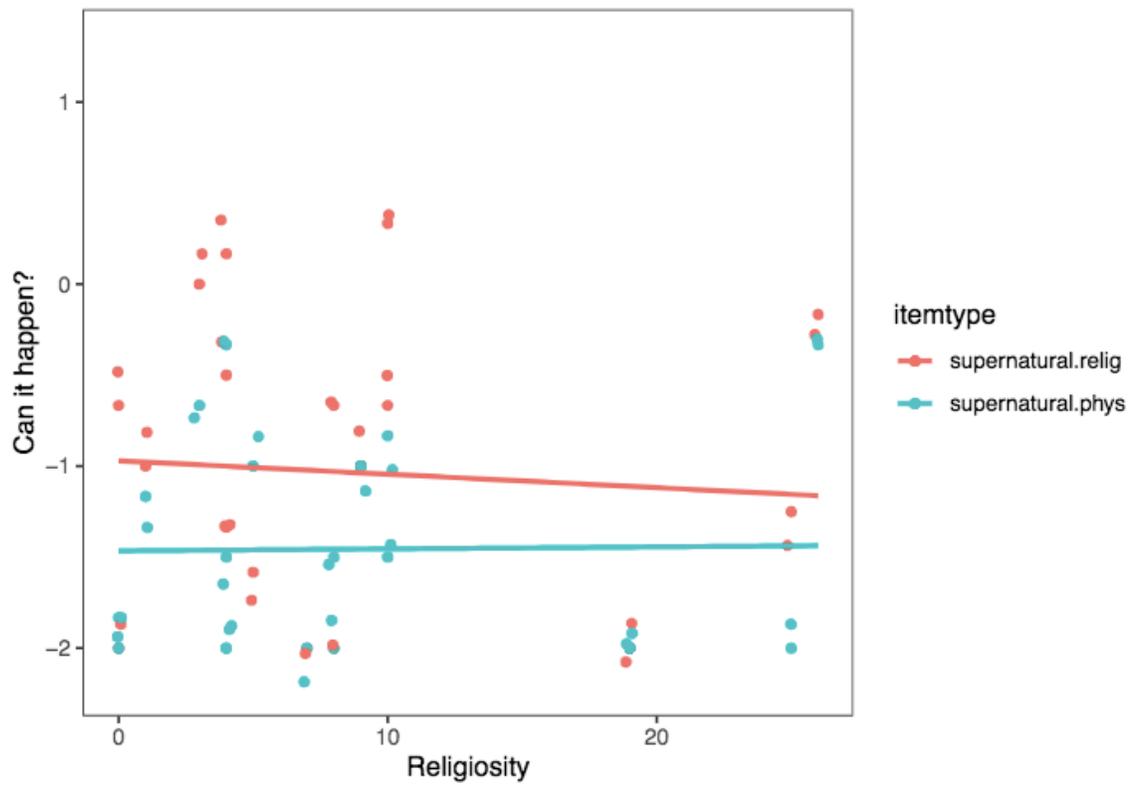


Figure 2. Children's responses about the possibility of supernatural religious phenomena occurring as compared to supernatural physical phenomena occurring, measured against religiosity.

We next tested whether children differentiated between God's mind and the mind of other anthropomorphized agents by investigating whether there was a correlation between children's religiosity scores and their knowledge differentiation scores. We found a moderate positive correlation between religiosity and knowledge differentiation, $r = .43$, $p = .050$, suggesting that children who were more religious were more likely to think that God has more knowledge than others (see Figure 3).

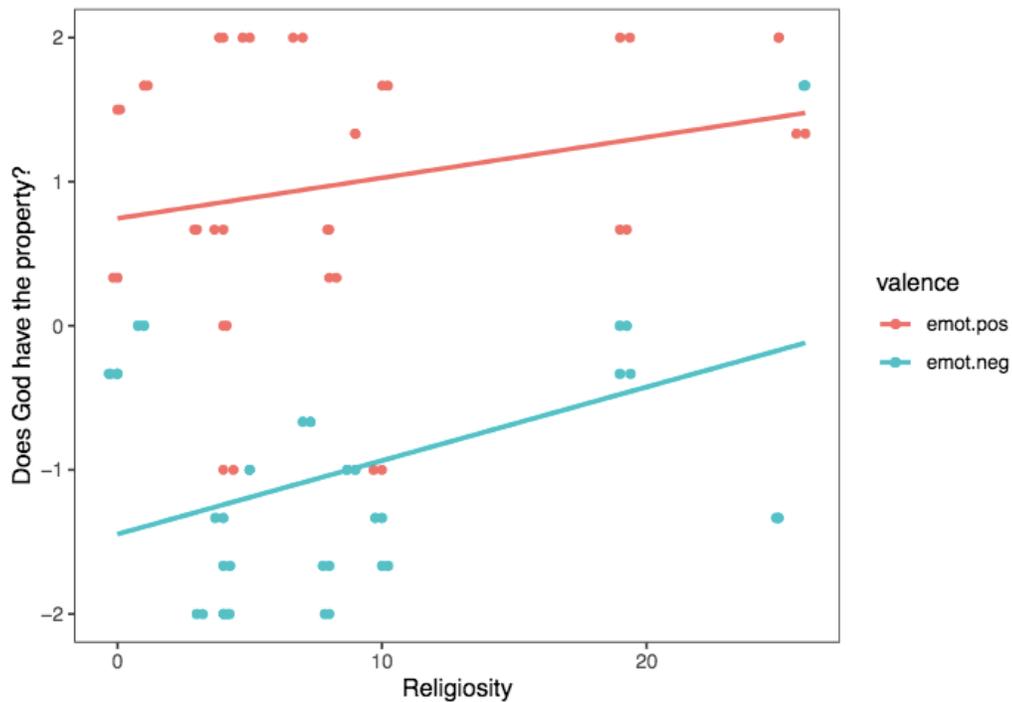


Figure 4. Comparison of children's responses for the presence of negative emotions versus positive emotions, measured against religiosity.

Discussion

The present study was motivated by the discrepancies in the literature about children's cognitive abilities to conceptualize God. While some research (e.g., Makris & Pnevmatikos, 2007; Shtulman, 2008) suggests that children attribute human-like characteristics and limitations to God, thus supporting the anthropomorphism hypothesis, other research (e.g., Barrett, et al., 2003) suggests that children resist treating God like a human, thus supporting the preparedness hypothesis. Richert and colleagues (2016) suggest that the discrepancy lies in the background in which the children grow up. Children who are exposed to religious teachings are more likely to resist treating God like a human, as compared to their counterparts who grow up in more secular environments. Their findings

were limited to a perspective taking task in which they answered whether or not God would be able to perceive a stimulus that was too far away for a human to perceive. Our current study looked to further investigate this hypothesis. We had children of different religious backgrounds engage in a similar perspective-taking task to investigate how they perceived God's knowledge, and we also explored how children think about God's physical, biological, and emotional properties, God's supernatural abilities, and God's emotions towards them.

To begin answering how children conceptualize God and whether they attribute human-like properties to God, we asked children whether their mother or God have certain biological, psychological, and physical properties. We found that children attribute all properties to mom more than to God but this pattern is more pronounced for children who are more religious. This finding is consistent with the findings of Burdett and Barrett (2015) and Richert and colleagues (2016). It also supports Shtulman's (2008) theory that the discrepancies in his study between parents and children in the amount that they anthropomorphize has to do with the way that parents talk about God to their children, and not because all children lack the ability to think of God in non-human terms altogether.

Next, we asked children about God's supernatural abilities by asking them whether God could cause four impossible phenomena to occur, two of which were religious— these events are recorded in the Bible. All children thought that these supernatural phenomena cannot happen, but were less sure that the religious phenomena cannot happen, meaning, children did not believe that God could cause supernatural phenomena to happen, but they were less confident in their answers about the religious phenomena, suggesting that they are more open to the possibility that such an event might occur. Our finding that children do not think the physical supernatural phenomena can occur is consistent with the findings of

Woolley and Cox (2007). With regards to the religious phenomena, they found that older children believed these events could take place while younger children believed they could not take place. In the present work, we did not have a sufficiently large sample to analyze age as a factor, and therefore we cannot conclude whether or not our findings would have been the same. Still, because children were less sure about the impossibility of the religious phenomena, this does suggest that children do differentiate in their minds between physical and religious supernatural phenomena. This finding was particularly interesting because the fact that children, religious and non-religious, seem to limit God's powers suggests that children do anthropomorphize God in this area, believing that God's powers are confined to the laws of nature. However, there still remain some open questions in this area. After we asked children for a simple yes-or-no response to a question about God's abilities to make a particular phenomenon occur, we asked an open-ended follow-up question—"why could that happen/why couldn't that happen?" While some children provided a scientific explanation for why the phenomenon could not occur, others suggested that God could, in fact, make the phenomenon occur, but chooses not to do so, providing some general rule about the way that God operates. Further research should include open-ended questions to allow the children to explain their reasoning, exploring the possibility that children think God has powers but chooses not to use them.

In addition to children's conceptions of God's abilities, we investigated how children conceptualize God's mind. We performed a theory of mind task with the children, asking them to guess what was inside a band-aid box, and then revealing a toy keychain. We subsequently asked them what a non-superhuman agent and what God would think was inside the box. We found that children who are more religious are more likely to think that

God has more knowledge than others. Our findings are consistent with other studies (Barrett, et al., 2001; Barrett, et al., 2003; & Richert, et al., 2016). One challenge posed by Kiessling and Perner (2014) was addressed in our study as well. They suggested that because children know what is inside the box, when they indicate that God would also know what was inside, they are answering egocentrically, rationalizing that because they know what is inside the box, everyone else must know as well. However, because we asked children about a non-superhuman agent as well, we eliminated this concern. If children were in fact answering egocentrically, we would have expected them to answer that both the non-superhuman agent and God knew what was inside the box. Instead, we found that children distinguished between the two agents, ascribing ignorance to the non-superhuman agent and knowledge to God.

We also investigated how children view their relationship with God. Do they view God as a loving and comforting figure, or do they fear God and see God as a punishing figure? Noffkee and McFadden (2001) found a distinction in the ways that adults of different religious backgrounds view God, and we also found this distinction in children. Children think that God has more positive emotions than negative, and more religious children think that God has more emotional properties overall. One possible suggestion for the distinction between the positive and negative emotions is that adults generally emphasize the positive emotions of God more than the negative ones. It is likely that children hear the message that God loves them more often than they hear that God will punish them. Further research could investigate this possibility by asking parents to report the way that they talk about God in their household.

In each of the four domains that we investigated, religious context had an impact. Only when we asked questions about the supernatural phenomena did we find no differentiation between religious and non-religious children. However, we did find a difference between religious phenomena and physical phenomena, suggesting that hearing about these stories in a religious context has an influence on the way that children view the plausibility of these stories. There are a number of limitations that should be considered. First and foremost, we tested a small sample. Further research should investigate these questions with a larger number of participants. Because of the small sample size, we grouped the children into two groups—religious and non-religious. Further research should gather large samples of children from different religions, particularly the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Investigating the similarities and differences between the children's conceptions of God in these three religions will provide more information on the role of religious context in children's understandings of God. We would expect that Muslim and Jewish children would have a less anthropomorphic view of God because of the taboo on images of God in these two religions. Christian children would likely have the most anthropomorphic view of God because they are exposed to images of Jesus as well as stories of his birth and death. Furthermore, giving parents the same questionnaire as the children would provide robust information about the influence that the environment has on children's views of God. Finally, we investigated children ages 4-8, but did not differentiate within that age range. Further research should explore differences in these cognitive tendencies across development.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the important role that religious context plays in children's developing God concepts. While some children think about God

in anthropomorphic terms, particularly those children who grow up in non-religious backgrounds, it is clear that children are not limited to a strictly anthropomorphic view of God. This could have educational implications as children may be readier for abstract God concepts than previously thought. Furthermore, this study stresses the importance of studying a wide range of children from diverse backgrounds before making conclusions about children's cognitive abilities.

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