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The Image of Divinity in Children's Perception. Social, Cultural and Artistic Influences

Adrian STOLERIU¹

Abstract

This research is a case study on how children aged 6-15 years represent the image of Divinity. Previous works and studies of various researchers have shown that the way in which children perceive the image of God is influenced by a range of social and cultural factors that may be highlighted in the artistic creations of small drawers. Our work is a research applied on the artistic creations of a total of 100 Romanian children of different ages, from different social backgrounds. The diversity of artistic representations - besides the usual anthropomorphisms, symbolic or abstract images being also represented -, as the numerous ways of perceiving the image of God at this age, underlines the importance of educational, cultural, artistic and religious formation of children. However, our study tries to find out some explanations on how the social and cultural context to which children belong, or how the artistic and religious education influences their creativity, their imagination and social manifestation. In this respect, the study also aims to underline how society affects the creative personality of children, enhancing it or inhibiting it, and how a religious environment can define a certain type of perception in respect with the idea of divinity.

Keywords: *image, children, Divinity, art, society.*

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1. Introduction

The history of art provides a multitude of examples of works of art depicting the image of Divinity. Whether they are the work of some famous artists or of some others less known, these creations represent a special chapter in art, being the subject of many artistic and scientific studies. Starting from these examples, this paper aims at analysing a topic not of little importance: the way children perceive and represent the image of God. Previous researches demonstrated the fact that the diversity of religious orientations and the importance of socio-cultural factors, differentiated from one region to another, proved to be specific aspects that influence children's visual representation of God. Thus, starting from this point, our paper is inspired by an important series of precursory studies in this field, which triggered the urge of finding out more on this topic. In order to arouse, in our turn, the readers' interest, we have to mention that our purpose was to verify the validity of the knowledge gathered so far on this topic, as well as to notice any possible similarities and differences revealed further to a practical research, similar to the previous one, on a group of children belonging to a Christian-Orthodox community from Iasi. Therefore, we obtained a great diversity of visual representations that were systemized in some essential categories, which the reader will discover while reading the following pages, for a more detailed analysis choosing only a few representative examples, illustrated towards the end of this article.

2. The idea of portraying Divinity

To see God is not possible for people, says an amazingly beautiful Christian chant in a very emotional way. Yet, the last two millennia's history has shown us a rich manifestation of the tendency to represent Divinity in the spaces influenced by the Christian belief. Even from the first Christian centuries up to nowadays, man has not ceased to imagine the face of God and to portray Him in images which are as suggestive as possible.

In fact, this tendency denotes an interior necessity of the human spirit to find its spiritual and psychological balance, only possible by the identification, avowal and representation of spiritual beings or superior entities, originated from a world beyond that of material limitations - the divine world. The essence is that, once the existence of this world is recognized, the human being passes onto the next phase, about one's relationship with God, consisting of His portrayal. Psychologists state that the human activity is conditioned by the possibility of departure from the borders of the definite world, from that *hic et nunc*, as well as from the

possibility of representation. This is defined as “*the psychological process that allows the mental action over an object in its absence, but under the condition that it has once interacted with our sense organs*” (Zlate, 2006, p. 185).

When we take into account the idea of representing Divinity, this last condition – the past action over our sense organs - opens a series of worthy perspectives both in the representation methods of adults, but more importantly, on those of children. Being widely known the fact that a representation uncovers the specific features of things, phenomena or beings, the problem of the methods used in order to portray the divine world is raised, about which most of us – with the exception of those who had concrete experiences in this case - cannot truly claim we saw it as such.

Generally, within the representation, the individual's personal subjectivity reflects the multitude of information perceived in the form of images. Past experiments of some researchers in the domain of psychology have shown the ideally-subjective nature of images, and the fact that between the perceived and represented images there are differences. Thus, the latter are more faded, less clear, paler, more unstable and more fragmented, lacking a big amount of details. Proven by the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, those features were stimulated by the absence of the perceived “object” in the moment of the development of this psychological process, thus leading to the most important of the features, that of *the generalized nature* of the portrayal (Zlate, 2006, pp. 190-192).

3. The way children perceive and represent the image of Divinity

This character is also defining for the way children portray various things they see. The famous German theorist Rudolf Arnheim, questioning in his turn the way children draw, has noticed that their early portrayals do not respect neither the realistic aspect nor the spatial projections of the drawn objects. The explanation for this fact consists in the children's lack of ability to accurately reproduce – from a technical point of view– the perceived images, because they lack the focus on sight and the security of the hand movement during sketching, thus proving “*an incomplete mastery of the motor activity*” (Arnheim, 2011, p. 162).

Even so, this does not seem to be the explanation for the way children draw, because some of their later representations show an amazing line precision and a certainty of the portrayal that cannot be contested, as well as an intense focus on the project during the creative process. Arnheim exemplifies in this context the way children draw their father, without

searching for an obvious physiognomic approach, by ignoring the model and creating a “symbol” type of image of what the designated person means to them. And so, they limit themselves to the portrayal of the general features of the represented objects or beings. This conclusion has been developed on account of the intellectualist theory, which states that portrayals done by children are actually images of what they know, and not of what they see (Arnheim, 2011, p. 163). To some extent, this motivates the abstract character of the representations created by them. Splitting the artistic portrayals into two different categories – a *conceptual* one - based on intellectual abstracting, and a *perceptual* one - founded on everything subjected to seeing, the intellectualist theory has shown its limits, not giving enough importance to visual perception.

That is why, as an alternative to this theory, the idea that children notice more things than they draw has been created, images realized by them being a representation designed by their self- imposed conditions over the respective image (Arnheim, 2011, p. 167). Thus, for children, the shape of a circle is enough to reproduce the image of the Sun or Earth, and a rectangle may represent a building or some random object. The result of their representation is therefore the configuration of an image, which contains and means more than the simple assembly of the elements registered at the level of the retina, presenting a real array of forces and energies, whose influence can be experienced both on the inside and outside of the figure.

A fundamental feature of the images created by children is their unpremeditated naturalness, which differentiates them without hesitation from any creative attempt of adults to come close to the style of the little ones. Through creation, drawing, modelling or painting, the child discovers the surrounding world, unintentionally eluding the laws of physics, modifying proportions, oversizing the most important parts or completely giving up on those ones they deem as insignificant. The creative manifestations of the child reflect a learning and understanding process of the surrounding world through images and colors. The Romanian aesthetician Victor E. Mașek therefore states that “important to a child is only the process of the plastic activity as it stands, the result being for nobody, as it does not constitute a means of communication” (Mașek, 1989, p. 41). In the children’s creations, the appeal to the plastic means of expression represents an ephemeral moment in his ulterior development, “works originated from the child’s sensibility and imagination (...) [being] the fruit of a passing spiritual season” (Mașek, 1989, pp. 42-43).

We hereby address the problem of the way children perceive and represent Divinity. This subject brings up a series of prior issues, investigating the “sensorial” ways in which children make contact with the sacred world, later managing to portray it in images as well. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger explains that the understanding of the divine essences, namely, of the sacred, cannot be conditioned by the simple sensorial perception or by the intellectual intuition, its quality unveiling the sacred to people as a “*representation of its own symbolic imagination*” (Wunenburger, 2004, p. 355). Maybe this is the very reason why, when compelled to draw the image of God, children, in comparison to adults, do not seem to encounter any difficulty during this process, freely exploiting their imagination. Previous researches regarding the way children visually portray God, have shown that despite their limited religious vocabulary – explainable by their young age -, they possess a unique sincerity when expressing themselves through images. Alongside imagination, another decisive factor in the portrayals done by children, is the way they are explained by adults the idea of “divinity”. Children’s drawings are in full accordance with “the spoken image” of God, and with the way parents and familiar people present to them this image. Children use this description in their own portrayals with ease, transposing it in a symbolic way, through their imagination.

4. Previous studies over children`s representations of Divinity

Even from the last century, researchers such as Ernest Harms, Hermann Siegenthaler, Helmut Hanisch and so on (Newberg & Waldman, 2009, p. 104), have shown interest for this subject, making studies over a big number of drawings from children, portraying the image of God. Later on, the results of those studies could be synthesized, resulting in conclusions which have highlighted a series of typologies in the portrayal of Divinity, systematized under some criteria. “For example, children under the age of six were usually drawing faces, while children between six and ten were drawing faces and people. God was seen as a protector or king, sometimes living in a palace or in the sky. Sometimes angels or biblical scenes were drawn, but while children got older, the faces and people were replaced by more symbolic images, like crosses, hearts, open hands, or an eye floating in the sky. The older children have often portrayed God as a sun, or as shiny spirals and light. In every study, the use of symbols increased with age.” (Newberg & Waldman, 2009, p. 104)

Furthermore, some other studies – like the one of the renowned American researchers Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman - have

shown, through a rich analysis regarding the relationship between the neurological and spiritual activity, that the image of God evolves from the well-known anthropomorphic portrayals from various religious cultures, usually created during childhood, to images with an increasing level of abstracting, on par with ageing and the level of study over the religious life and religious values (Newberg & Waldman, 2009, p. 10).

Another work created by a mixed team of Swiss, Russian and Japanese researchers interested as well in the way children draw the image of God, has identified four criteria which form the basis of this intriguing creative process: the age of children, their gender, the cultural context and the religious education they have received (Brandt, 2010, p. 8).

The study gives special importance to the cultural and religious influences, reaching a series of unexpected results at first, like in the case of the representations by children from Japan, a country dominated by the Shinto traditions and Buddhism. Here, even though the image of God cannot be directly associated with the anthropomorphic models found in other regions of the world, the results of the studies have proven a predilection of Japanese children to draw a significant number of anthropomorphic images – similar in some cases to the one from the Christian world, but with a unique diversity and meaning.

Regarding the representation methods, the study has revealed a multitude of ways to represent Divinity, which were delimited under various thematic areas. And so, among the anthropomorphic portrayals, there were discovered images of ordinary people, without signs of holiness, traditional religious figures (Jesus, Buddha, God represented as an ordinary priest), feminine figures, some inspired from *manga* – a contemporary style of Asian origin to draw comic books (Bouissou, 2010, p. 17). Other representations have portrayed God in a terrestrial scenery, or, on the contrary, floating above the clouds in the sky. From the series of anthropomorphic representations, there was no possibility for the portrait-like representations followed by certain specific elements to suggest their divine quality, such as aureoles or halos of light. A particular typology of this theme was also the one in which God is shown as an all-powerful being, protecting Earth or dominating the entire Universe.

His portrayal on a throne or floating over the clouds above Earth, strengthens the image of an all-powerful being which children develop in their minds at a very young age. Moreover, in their image, God is the expression of some supernatural powers, children portraying Him with distinct imperial symbols (crown, scepter and so on). Other images have

shown the complex nature of God, portraying Him as a rescuing entity, appreciative and benefacting, as well as one that angers and punishes the bad ones. Children capture these qualities in their drawing, focusing on the portrait and the expressivity of the expressed gestures.

Another series of analysed drawings in the aforementioned study present the idea of the dialogue between the human nature and the divine nature, showing various aspects from the intimacy of the praying moments.

Mentioning some of the religious and artistic reminiscences of antique origin, in another representation typology, God appears under the image of the sun, either exclusively as a portrayal of the orb itself, or together with a character of anthropomorphic nature – Christ, winged angels, oriental deities. The reason of this “Sol Invictus” is present in many of these drawings, shining and protecting with its light the entire existence.

Being carried out on a significant number of children from Russia and Japan, the undertaken research has as well revealed some tendencies in the portrayal of multiple divinities, polytheism being another religious orientation that was captured in the drawings of the participating children. The multitude of represented deities has revealed some celestial hierarchies, God being considered to be surrounded by angels and various other spiritual entities.

Like the ancestral myths that describe the birth of the Universe and the fantastic fight of the creating deities (Kernbach, 1978, p. 23), the children capture this eternal opposition between good and evil in their drawings. The duality of those two fundamental principles is personified through the portrayal of God and the devil, of the benevolent and malevolent divinities, but also by the portrayal of a single bivalent being.

Understanding the image of God as that of a plenary being, difficult to portray in images, some of the children's creations were focused on the significance of the used colors. The complexity of the divine world has been transposed in images with a vast chromatic fortune, the chosen alternation of colors, being in their own conception, a viable formula to materialize this specific concept of the sacred.

Concluding over the performed study, the author remarks that the drawings in which only a simple figure appears, imagining God, are very rare, most of them using various combinations of specific elements to create an image as satisfying and complex as possible (Brandt, 2010, p. 240). On this line, their drawings constitute a synthesis of the most representative aspects perceived at a subjective level by each child, partially on what Divinity represents for them.

The idea of such studies has opened a new road in the research over the method in which children perceive and represent the surrounding world in images, both the visible, and the invisible one. The already made analyses by researchers from around the world, have shown a series of themes and tendencies that children address in their creations, when faced with the great challenge of portraying Divinity. For most of them, this task constitutes a fact of pure normality, going straight to work without any anterior preparation, letting their imagination run free. For others, however, like for some adults too, such a process is a difficult task to pass, where neither the acquired knowledge, nor the lively imagination, are sufficient arguments to accept the possibility of representing God, or to prove the correctness between His created image at the mental level and that forged through drawing and color, at the material level. This explains why some subjects have drawn nothing, leaving the page blank, either because of a sincere lack of knowledge, or by the understanding of the fact that God could not be portrayed.

5. Continuing the research

Knowing these working directions, in September 2014, inside a social project of an Orthodox Christian community from Iasi (the Parish “Adormirea Maicii Domnului” Galata Iași), this challenge was relaunched in a group of 100 children with ages varying between 6 and 15 years. Divided into three distinct working teams, children were asked to draw from their imagination, how they portray God, in 10 minutes, without being offered any indication or suggestions regarding this subject. Being given this freedom, an expression as sincere as possible was expected from them. Even though the task was, like in the previous studies, a pretty challenging one, the results at the end of time limit were conclusive. Even if some managed to fit in the indicated time interval, a big part of them asked for a couple more minutes, because they were not done finishing what they had to draw. This was a prime aspect of what could be observed, consisting in the actuality of the theme and the interest that the children showed towards it. This aspect came to strengthen the idea previously presented, citing Victor E. Mașek, which said that for children, the process of creation itself is more important than its result, offering real satisfaction to them.

Like in the case of previous studies, even in this case, a series of representation typologies could be observed. As expected, our research has tested the validity of the results obtained in the past, rediscovering the already mentioned themes, but it has also observed new aspects. The latter

could be explained by the cultural and religious traits of the area in discussion, Iasi being mostly composed of orthodox Christians, with a rich tradition in this direction.

Even though there was an expectancy that most of the drawings would be strongly influenced by the orthodox Christian imaging, in the case of the aforementioned study, three main types of visions could be observed: anthropomorphic images, portrayals of the natural environment and abstract-symbolic representations of God. The great majority of the created drawings fit in the first category, the human figure being the model mostly met in the children's drawings. God appears either through the form of Jesus, or angels, or through the form of supernatural characters, winged, crowned or wearing a halo. The attribute of guarding being is revealed this time as well in numerous creations, children being capable to understand even at this age that the entire existence of the Universe and humanity, of nature and life, in general, is conditioned and protected by Him, highlighting the most important triadic relationship: "God-human being-Nature" (Nicolaidis, 2005, p. 30)

From the second themed category, an inclination of children to represent landscapes and various natural environments could be observed, thus suggesting the universal character of Divinity. The Sun, the Earth, the Moon, the stars and strong trees –reminding of the motif of the Tree of Life - all of these are part of children's imagination regarding the divine world.

Young age does not seem to be a problem in the making of creations with a symbolic and abstract character, with a powerful suggestive potential. Finding ingenious formulas to symbolize day and night, life and death, good and evil, children have proven a free-flowing imagination in the portrayal of the divine world.

Some of the created images have captured our interest in a special way. One of those, depicts a child, walking on a road flanked by the symbols of good and evil. On the right side, the road is paved with flowers, and at one end, a smiling angel flank a lighted cross, placed on the center side, in the upper part of the image. The left side of the road is full of briar, the symbolic image of an angel of evil balancing the picture in its superior side. The author proves a good administration of the compositional space, that reminds the style of a medieval miniature (Stoleriu, 2010, p. 50). We find interesting, in this situation, the power of the synthesis of the little artist and the optimistic atmosphere that can be felt, despite its apparent balance, the symbolic elements of good dominating the entire picture (Fig.1).



Fig. 1-2. Different representations of Divinity in children's perception

In another creation, two halo wearing characters, between which only one sports wings, playing two instruments which could be compared to violins, each sing facing a group of two crosses. This detail opens the way for a dual interpretation of the identity of the two characters. As such, it could be about two angels, or about an angel and a saint, as exponents of the

spiritual world and of the material world. The image impresses through its visual complexity, through its imaginative force, and last, but not least, its compositional harmony. Like in other examples such as this one, there can be felt a visual influence from the Renaissance pictures or from some religious texts that evoke the chants of angels in honor of God.

Some drawings feature a special maturity, as God is not portrayed in a physical way, like many of the already known models, for He can be identified in the presence of certain full of meaning elements. This is the case of a drawing, in which, on the generous background of a sun with its rays, a young girl offers gifts to a poor man, who radiates with happiness. At first sight, the creation spontaneously awakens the question: where is God, then? The answer lies focused in the image, evoking "God's presence in the world in the form of its mysterious absence" (Nesteruk, 2005, p. 8). In a symbolic way, there is the sun that passively watches everybody's acts, the good and the bad at the same time. In a spiritual way there is the human in pain and trouble, who needs help more than ever. This simplistic representation of the scene is charged by a profound religious message, behind which the words of Christ from the gospels echo: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." (Matthew, 25, pp. 35-36).

In general, our research process regarding the portrayal of Divinity by children has reached its objective, with the exception of one child – who wrote on the center of the page that he does not know what to draw - all others have found a personal formula to express themselves through drawing. In fact, even this singular example is of great importance, because even in previous studies there were some cases like this, in which some of the questioned children argued the incapacity of portraying God, Him being infinite, immaterial and impossible to capture in images.

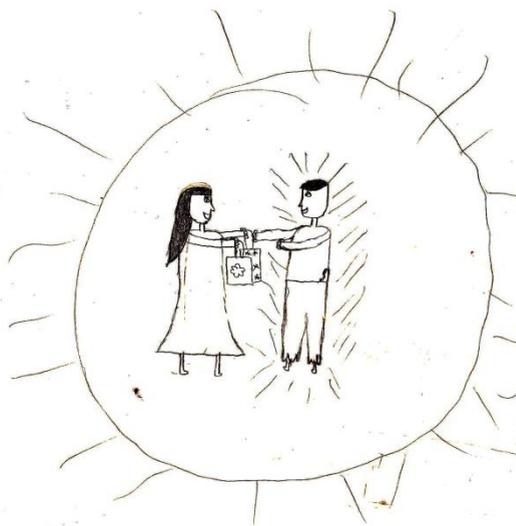


Fig. 3. A symbolic way to represent Divinity

6. Conclusions

The way in which each child portrays the surrounding world has always inspired the artistic creations of various eras and the theoretical studies of numerous researchers in different domains. Even if they could be associated with a form of naïve art, which makes a goal in itself from the stylizing of the surrounding world, apparently, independent from any artistic guidance, the plastic creations made by children offer the mark of a sincerity hard to match in all of art's history. Found at young ages, the challenge of portraying Divinity is a good opportunity for children to exteriorize through images their own religious beliefs, reflecting on the way they relate to a sacred otherness.

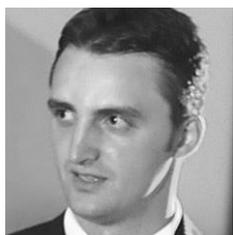
From the performed study regarding this topic, the main idea is the fact that the religious culture's influence is extremely important in the spiritual and implicitly the educational development of children. In each and every one of the created drawings, a general positive attitude could be noticed, God being perceived as a guarding being, caring, all-powerful and all-knowing. By making children understand these ideas, the quality of a religious education through various methods, both inside the family, as well as at school and Church, shines, offering them a positive and ethical behavior and social models.

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Biodata



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