

The religious put to the test of childhood and children: the challenges for anthropology

Marie Campigotto, Élodie Razy, Charles-Édouard de Suremain Véronique Pache Huber

Marie Campigotto :

Élodie Razy :

Charles-Édouard de Suremain :

Véronique Pache Huber :

Introduction

“Do infants have religion?” asked Alma Gottlieb in a 1998 publication. Beng adults in the Ivory Coast would categorically answer “yes”. But let us examine this question a little further, for implicit in it are the two elements that any research on children and the religious should incorporate. The first is what adults do, think, and say about the subject- which conditions to some extent children’s point of view- while the second attempts to determine what children themselves say, think, and experience. The latter perspective is certainly more appropriate for older children than infants. Formal and informal transmission from adults to children by means of imitation, education/teaching, or impregnation (particularly corporal) is an obvious starting point for discussion, but other spheres of transmission and experience such as peer groups or the media (e.g. TV series) are not to be ignored.

By tackling these questions and many others, this issue of *AnthropoChildren*¹ is a first response to the fervent appeal of Dr. Susan Ridgely (2012) who, after surveying the research on the theme of “children and religion”, laments the dearth of anthropological studies on the subject in terms of a series of questions: How does religion come (or not come) to children²? How does the religious shape their status? What place is accorded them in religious discourse? How are children incorporated into the apparatus of religious institutions and what role do they play therein? What sense do they make of the religious teachings they receive? Do they have religious beliefs and practices of their own? How do they share their experiences, and with whom (peers, adults)? What is the role of the religious in their everyday lives?

A more basic question is whether children possess their own sense of religion, either parallel to or independent of that of adults, and following from that, whether they are “religious beings” as others (i.e. adults) are. Whatever the answer to this question, it is still worth asking if children can exert an influence on adults’ religious modeling. Prior to introducing the contributions to the current issue, it would be useful to give a brief historical overview of work focusing on children and the religious.

Children within the Anthropology of the Religious vs the Religious within the Anthropology of Childhood?

Anthropological studies on the religious have traditionally afforded a place to children, young and old: indeed, they are the favorite subjects of inquiry into the religious, both in terms of discourse and practices. Numerous monographs and articles refer to religious representations and practices concerning children, sometimes even before they are born (Tylor 1871, Durkheim [1912]1979, Malinowski 1927, Mead 1928 and 1932, Evans Pritchard 1937 and [1940]1968, Fortes 1945). In particular, the question of rites in the most diverse societies was examined extensively in the founding works of the discipline: a bounty of work on rites and ceremonies marking conception, birth, and coming of age out of infancy or into adulthood,. We may mention in passing monographs exploring rites of initiation, age groups, or rites of passage: Van Gennep ([1909]1991), Griaule (1938)³, Condominas ([1957]1982), Firth (1967), Turner (1967), Vidal (1976), Descola (1993), Henry (1994), Peatrik (1999), Taylor (2003), Saladin d’Anglure (2006), Godelier (1982), and Baeke (2004).

Bronisław Malinowski was the first to do research on socialization that studied childhood and children in terms of development and enculturation. This current found expression in American journals such as *Culture and Personality* and later *Cross-Cultural Studies*, as well as in the work of some UK anthropologists such as Goody (1982). However, the topic of children and the religious is only occasionally referred to in Anglo-Saxon studies (with the notable exception of Gottlieb, 2004), being more frequently treated, even up to the present day, in research by French-speaking authors (Cartry [1973]1993, Le Moal 1981, Jonckers 1988, 2007, Fortier 1998, 2003, Albert 2005, Hamayon 2012).

The interest of francophone researchers in ritual and ceremonial ritual apparatuses and ceremonies involving (young) children in Africa began in the 1960's. Suzanne Lallemand and Jacqueline Rabain-Jamin were the pioneers, inaugurating the tradition of African studies whose aim it is to understand how, through singular or daily events, the shaping of the body is underlaid by the representations of the person and contributes to defining the individual's belonging to a given social group⁴. These studies have contributed significantly to the implicit epistemological transition from the paradigm of the "child receptacle" to that of "child agent" in that they show children, perceived by adult eyes, as beings possessing certain powers. This thesis is supported by the emblematic figures of the "child ancestor" (Lallemand 1978) and the child at the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds (Zempléni & Rabain 1965, Rabain-Jamin 1979, Rabain 1985, Bonnet 1988, 1994)⁵. Even if the "model of childhood" (Bonnet, Rollet & Suremain ed. 2012) they posit seems diametrically opposed, in terms of its basic principles and aims, to a certain western model inspired by psychoanalysis, these two models actually confer on children the same status as subjects and individual (Razy 2012).

Recent studies, some inspired by the contributions mentioned above, have explored the relationship between children and the religious not only by focusing on the repercussions of adult behavior on this relationship, but also from the perspective of the children's points of view and religious practices that are proper to them. From different angles, these studies investigate how children "learn" the religious (Hérault 1999, 2000, 2004) and to what extent their behavior, especially in play with their peers, is a reproduction of adult comportment (Jonckers 1988, Ségalen 2005, Duchesne 2007, Rabain-Jamin 2007) and how it might give rise to original mythologies and rituals (De Boeck 2000). Other research has explored the socialization and identity dynamics of children where the instituted religious serves as foil (Hemming & Madge 2012).

To conclude, let us mention some particular contemporary orientations. One of these, close to cognitive anthropology, investigates the transmission and learning of the religious in an attempt to understand how individuals incorporate concepts as peculiar as "beliefs in supernatural beings" and assert them as existential truths guiding personal and social conduct (Berliner & Sarro eds. 2007). Here, children are considered participants in the religious learning process, which is modulated according to the meanings they ascribe it (Hérault 2007). This approach may be articulated around the word "believe" and the ambiguous and sometimes pejorative connotation of "believing" in western cultures, as observed first by Jean Pouillon (1993) and expanded upon by Roberte Hamayon (2005). Contrary to what had long been thought, children build, share, and transmit meaningful beliefs and thoughts that are manifested in either collective or individualized practices⁶. These sets of beliefs and practices are similar to what Pierre Smith (1991) calls "ordinary rites". Finally, some recent studies focusing on the problematic of "ethnicity" "give children the floor" in situations where "traditional" or local meanings- made up of religious ideas and practices- clash with values

and lifestyles promoted by reforming politicians or development agents (García Palacios 2010, Carrin, in publication).

This brief overview of the place of children in the anthropology of the religious and the place of the religious in the anthropology of childhood and children reveals two main tendencies: one centered on the institutional religious apparatus and analyzed from the adults' point of view and the other on children themselves. The first approach is much more common in anthropology, particularly in the anthropology of childhood and children; this longstanding tendency has produced a substantial number of works. Research investigating children's own religious interpretations and experiences is less frequent, marginalized and less systematic. There is currently no coherent or in-depth corpus of research regarding children's creativity in the religious domain nor has the hypothesis of a religiosity specific to children, whether individually or in peer groups, been explored.

This situation has been underlined by Anglo-Saxon scholars associated to varying degrees with *Childhood Studies* (Hemming & Madge 2012, Ridgely 2012). This interdisciplinary movement, firmly rooted in sociology, developed in the 1990's concurrently with studies on "children's cultures" carried out by French-speaking sociologists and anthropologists (Arléo & Delalande ed. 2011). These approaches share the belief that children deploy autonomous and specific modes of apprehension, expression, and socialization and are able to build their own worlds both within the space dominated by adults and in areas free of adult influence. The thematic of the religious, however, is either rarely addressed by researchers espousing this approach (Zotian 2012) or treated in an incoherent manner.

Most contributions on the subject owe much to interdisciplinary Anglo-Saxon approaches such as those articulated in *Religious Studies*, where children's practices and discourse are scrutinized from a theological, historical and ethical perspective (see the special issue of *The Journal of Religion* 2006 : " Religion and Childhood Studies", Browning & Miller-McLemore ed. 2009, and Browning & Bunge ed. 2009). To these may be added works that are either psycho-pedagogical (Coles 1990) or sociological in their approach⁷. The latter build explicative models starting from correlations between standardized variables (e.g. "age", "sex", "religious observance"; see Hopkins *et al.* 2011). Others, however, examine micro-scale events and develop comprehensive analyses of phenomena that implicate children in the religious in different contexts, particularly school (Hemming 2011). In recent years, the confluence of these diverse research horizons has given rise to important events and initiatives, such as the *Copenhagen Colloquium on Children and Religion* (2011) and the foundation of the *Childhood Studies and Religion Group* within the *American Academy of Religion*⁸. Yet much remains to be done in anthropology to develop and synergize these different approaches.

All of the research focusing on the children's point of view concentrates on their relationship with the religious as an institutionalized entity. There is unanimity that children grasp its discourse and practices in order to use it, in dynamics of subjectivation and socialization, as a distinctive feature or a means of demand, protest, and self-assertion (see the polysemous example of children practicing Ramadan; Elsa Zotian 2012). However, no specifically anthropological approach has yet explored religious worlds that children build in peer groups outside (adult) instituted settings, at the crossroads of different sources of transmission or multiple cultural or religious references. Similarly, no anthropological inquiry has yet been devoted to children's comprehension of their personal and inner experiences and interpretations of the religious. Reflecting on such questions is of crucial importance if we are to deepen our understanding of the current reconfigurations of religious fields all over the world, especially as globalization continues to lessen the distances

between cultures and religious faiths and innumerable so-called “religious conflicts” seem to break out daily on the international, national and “inter-local” fronts.

It is essential to consider the questions that are presupposed, posed or implied by such an enterprise. Dismissing the legitimacy of children’s practices and beliefs or their religious significance would not only result in the annihilation of the anthropological project itself, but also in the elimination of debate on the notions of “belief” and “the religious” that help keep the discipline alive (Pouillon 1993, Hamayon 2005, Mary 2000) to mention just a few contributions). Analyzing children’s religious constructs leads one to question the relevance of the line drawn between childhood and adulthood. Is it not justified to ask whether children and adults establish preferential relations with the religious on the basis of similar ontologies? Is it not time to move beyond the assumption that children cannot differentiate between the real and the imaginary depending on a given context? If the answer to the latter question is yes, would this not imply doing away with the idea that children are more predisposed than adults to pretend when it comes to religious matters? This conception whereby children are spontaneously associated with play and imitation while adults enjoy the exclusive privilege of authentic religious dispositions leads to a dead end.

As proof, one needs only consult recent publications in developmental psychology⁹ and psychoanalysis¹⁰ which question certain aspects of Piaget’s theory and emergency situations that test the interpretation of children’s practices¹¹. The question of belief and the connection between the real and the imaginary is an essential one. Tightly bound to it is another crucial question where research on children is starting to provide some answers: the boundary between play and ritual and between distinct registers or orders of the real and the imaginary. This issue is explored from highly distinct perspectives in articles by Stéphan DUGAST, Marie CAMPIGOTTO and Armelle LORCY.

There is no doubt that an anthropology of childhood and children connected to general anthropology and parallel to other disciplines, could contribute to the recording and analysis of religious phenomena related to children and thus help extend our knowledge both of the religious worlds of children and the religious fact itself. Furthermore, using children as an entry point for research could be a step towards moving beyond the era of the “great divide” between the “exotic” and “Euro-American” fields, notions or theoretical frameworks correlated to the opposition between the great instituted monotheisms on the one hand and non-codified, non-instituted religious manifestations on the other.

From prenatal destiny to death: a crossing process

The present issue¹² leads off with an article that considers children as true social agents. Michael ALLEN offers a framework reflected through the prism of his long career and the evolution of the discipline. By distancing himself from an androcentric analysis of social phenomena in light of feminist anthropology, and by breaking with the dominant adult-centric conception, ALLEN illustrates a paradigm shift in the approach to the role of children in anthropology. Through a detailed ethnographic inquiry, the author examines the role played by little and young girls in the development of Marian worship in southern Ireland. Basing his analysis on conversations with the “visionaries” and their social environment as well as on his observation of collective practices, he explores the way the religious experience was interpreted, transmitted, and narrated by several individuals concerned (close relatives, villagers), including a growing number of pilgrims (Irish or foreign). ALLEN compares the visionaries’ accounts and practices (e.g. trance) with the

representations of those close to them and the pilgrims. Referring to two separate cases, the author shows that the experience of the Virgin Mary's apparitions is transitory, has a unique meaning for each visionary, and does not necessarily lead to a stable collective engagement. Indeed, one of the visionaries is pursuing a secular professional career, while the other has founded "a complex religious organisation owing many estate properties and efficient administrative structures, which attracts an increasing number of devotees and believers".

The two articles that follow also adopt the child's point of view but do not neglect that of the social environment. They involve very different contexts, i.e. a Northern and a Southern country, although both are Catholic, as in ALLEN's contribution. Armelle LORCY shows how the conceptions of childhood among the sea-dwelling black peoples of Ecuador assign children specific roles connected to those performed by previous generations in ritual contexts, in particular during adults' and especially children's funerals. The author explains that the status of children is related to a state of "divine being in human form": "As children have no experience of carnal sin they are depicted as 'pure' and have a special place among saints, virgins and cherubs. They are thought to be fellow beings". Sexual activity marking the entry into adulthood will make them sinners. Therefore, death has a different meaning depending on whether it touches a child or an adult. For children it represents a return to heaven and for adults a journey to purgatory. Burial celebrations, whose purpose is the sending off souls from the world of the living to the hereafter, are joyful occasions in the event of child mortality but sorrowful in the case of adults. Hence, children participate in mortuary rituals in a manner that is complementary, specific and indispensable to that of adult women and men.

Focusing on children's accounts and practices, Marie CAMPIGOTTO conducted an ethnographic study of children being taught the catechism in preparation for their first communion at Castelbuono, Sicily. Her analysis, which falls within the framework of "interpretative reproduction" (Corsaro 1993), seeks to apprehend the way children fashion "social and cultural worlds of their own by appropriating established religious features". She first describes the pedagogical methods of the catechism teachers and discerns two types of approaches grounded on contrasting conceptions of childhood: that of the Fathers of the Church which depicts children as passive recipients and the other recognizing their capacity to participate in the learning process. CAMPIGOTTO then focuses her attention on the meanings and the expectations that children ascribe to catechism: the playful dimension is explored as is the quest for social and symbolic benefits. The author examines the divergence between the children's and teachers' respective goals as well as the reciprocal adjustments that are made. By highlighting both the interpretative and creative capacity of children and the teachers' willingness to adapt in the interests of youth, the article reveals that children can exert a certain agency. As a result, it provides elements for understanding the intergenerational transmission dynamics of religious practices and discourse.

Sylvie ZONGO and Stéphan DUGAST focus on adults' points of view on birth from different fields and using distinct approaches and offer new insight into the Africanist perspective on the child-centered construction of the person. ZONGO reports that HIV-positive mothers in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) consider the birth of a healthy child as a "triumph over illness as well as over the stigmatization caused by infection and the absence of children". By giving their HIV-positive/infected children specific names that evoke their unique stories, women bear witness to the divine intervention they invoke both to protect them and express the social recognition they aspire to. The author explains that the names chosen reveal on a deeper level representations linked to a conception of children where the divine order and scientific progress are intermingled. The child

born of an HIV-positive mother is generally cared for according to strict medical guidelines. Follow-up consists of assistance at home, dietary for the most part, whose objective is to offer the child a “normal” life, with his/her name a constant reminder of the precariousness of his/her “normality”. The child is also prayed for at home. Therefore, naming the child does not aim to assign him a lineage nor is it a matter of “bringing an ancestor back to life”: its purpose is to keep the child alive. In this respect, the name functions as a sort of “oral charm” the child wears for his own protection. God and science are intertwined as mothers fight for the lives of their children born with AIDS. The desire for life prevails over the fear of death and finally results in rather novel representations of the person. ZONGO explains that everything is done to ensure that the child benefit from the unique protection offered by his name.

The present issue ends with the contribution of Stéphan DUGAST. He points out the crucial role played by supernatural beings among the Bassar peoples of Togo, with a special focus on amulets. Ritual care of children is based in particular on the impact of prenatal destiny on the present and future of individuals. Children are classified into three categories in terms of their relationship with life, death and the afterlife: “pasta eater” (who have decided to live entirely among humans and to go beyond the weaning stage); “non pasta eater” (who have decided to return to the afterlife); and “those who have business to carry out” (whose longevity depends on the accomplishment of certain rites). This categorization confers on young children an agency rooted in their attachment to the prenatal world that may force their social environment, especially their parents, to use strategies to keep them in this world. A preferred custom is the use of amulets with different properties. They are chosen according to the complex relations that children have with various beings from the other world. Amulets are meant to respond to the demands of the entity linked to the birth of the child and evoke commitments made in the prenatal world. The author examines one case in particular where a child is given an amulet responding to his human will. This is what DUGAST calls a “pretended rite” which calls up the representations of the construction of the person and its components within both the prenatal and human worlds. “Pretended rites” perfectly illustrate the particular relation children have with the other world as well as their agency inasmuch as they influence the ritual practices of their families.

This special issue does not claim to be an exhaustive review nor the final word on the relation between children and the religious. Rather, it is an attempt to stimulate new research insofar as it demonstrates the value of exploring the question comparatively through various fields, age groups, and approaches. The diverse nature of the contributions that address both traditional and more recent subjects in different geographic areas (Africa, America, Europe), and from a comparative perspective demonstrates the value, if need be, of including children within the anthropological study of the religious.

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Actes de colloques

Copenhagen Colloquium on Children and Religion (18th -19th May 2011). Organised by S. Anderson (Child and Youth Studies, Danish School of Education) & C. Højbjerg (MindLab, Aarhus University), Copenhagen.

Notes

¹ We are very grateful to Matthias and Douglas Craig for their precious help with the translation of the Introduction of this issue.

² To paraphrase the French title of Annette Weiner's book *La richesse des femmes ou comment l'esprit vient aux hommes* (1983).

³ Marcel Griaule largely focused on children's games, which he considered as "a-religious", the relics of extinct rites and myths: "Games owe nothing to cosmogony. They are prosaic, with no metaphorical meaning" (Griaule 1938 : 4, cit. in Jolly 2009 : 169 – our translation)♦.

⁴ Namely, rituals for extraordinary occasions such as the attribution of the name, loss of baby teeth or the first haircut, routine occurrences such as breastfeeding and toilet or finally particular situations such as the birth of twins or the deaths of consecutive infants. Cf. for example Lallemand (1981), Journet (1981, 1991), Dupire (1982), Rivière (1990), Jonckers (2001), Teixeira (2001), Gottlieb (2004) and Razy (2004, 2007). Similar studies have been carried out in other cultures; see for example Bonnet & Pourchez ed. (2007), Pourchez (2002) in Reunion Island, Koubi (2003) in Indonesia, Koubi & Massard-Vincent ed. (1994) and Massard-Vincent & Pauwels (1999) in South-East Asia; Baptandier (1996) in China, Collomb (2010) in Laos, Aubaile-Sallenave (1999) in the Muslim world, Walentowitz (2004) on the Tuaregs in Niger, Gélard (2003) in South-East Morocco, Loux (1978) & Belmont (1980) in Europe, Lestage (1999), Suremain (2007, 2010) in Latin America.

⁵ See Saladin d'Anglure (1986) for Inuit peoples.

⁶ See Delalande (2001) and Morin (2010) regarding children's traditions.

⁷ For psychological contributions in French, see the special issue *L'enfant et le religieux* in *La lettre de l'enfance et de l'adolescence* (2008).

⁸ <http://childhoodreligion.com/>

⁹ Since the 1980's, anthropological works deploy the most diverse approaches, theories, and topics, referred to several ages groups. See for example Gelman & Spelke (1981); Stern (1989); Baillargeon 1995; Spelke 1995; Harris (2007); Archambault & Venet (2007); Sholnick Weisberg & Bloom (2009).

¹⁰ Cf. Lebovici and Stoléro ([1983]1994)] and Fuchs (2000).

¹¹ See Véronique Duchesne on possession rituals conducted by children (personal communication).

¹² The articles of CAMPIGOTTO, ZONGO and DUGAST were initially presented in panel « Religion and Childhood, Children's religion » during the congress « Pour une anthropologie de l'enfance et des enfants. De la diversité des terrains ethnographiques – Towards an Anthropology of Childhood and Children. Ethnographic Fieldwork Diversity and Construction of a Field » (ULg, Liège, 2011).

Notes de bas de page astérisques :

* Cf. See *AnthropoChildren* first issue selected references. It includes other journal special issues on children and religion.