

# Chapter 6

## Where Gods Dwell? Part I: Spatial Imagery in Children's Drawings of Gods



Zhargalma Dandarova-Robert , Christelle Cocco , Grégory Dessart ,  
and Pierre-Yves Brandt 

**Abstract** Supernatural agents, although imagined by humans as omnipresent, cannot escape being placed (at least mentally) by believers somewhere in physical space. For example, kami in Shintoism are believed to reside in natural elements of the landscape. In Christianity, God is typically associated with Heaven. Similarly, Jesus is said to have ascended into Heaven after his resurrection. According to Buddhist mythology, gods live in the heavens, and the next Buddha, Maitreya, will descend to earth from heaven.

This study (Part I of a two-part project) investigates the role of spatiality in children's conceptions of the divine as shown through their drawings of god. We collected drawings by participants from four different cultural and religious environments ( $n = 1156$ ): Japanese (Buddhism and Shinto), Russian-Buryat (Buddhism, Shamanism), Russian Slavic (Christian Orthodoxy) and French-speaking Swiss (Catholic and reformed Christianity). Our study indicates that the tendency to place god in the sky was not strongly related to a particular cultural or religious context. Children from all groups most often drew god either in the sky or with no background at all. We note two implications for folk psychology: (1) Children tend to conceptualize god in single location, (2) They often associate the divine with a celestial background.

**Keywords** Cross-cultural · Children's drawings · God representations · God concept · God's dwelling · Drawing background

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Z. Dandarova-Robert (✉) · C. Cocco · G. Dessart · P.-Y. Brandt  
Institute for Social Sciences of Religions, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland  
e-mail: [zhargalma.dandarova@unil.ch](mailto:zhargalma.dandarova@unil.ch); [christelle.cocco@unil.ch](mailto:christelle.cocco@unil.ch); [gregory.dessart@unil.ch](mailto:gregory.dessart@unil.ch);  
[pierre-yves.brandt@unil.ch](mailto:pierre-yves.brandt@unil.ch)

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Space is one of the main dimensions of human existence. We live in space and organize our actions in the spatial world. From the early years of our life, we learn to locate objects and entities in space. This capacity is ontologically fundamental and undoubtedly critical from a biological point of view. Tuan wrote, “Spatial perceptions and values are grounded on common traits in human biology, and hence transcend the arbitrariness of culture. Although spatial concepts and behavioural patterns vary enormously, they are all rooted in the original pact between body and space” (Tuan, 1979, p. 393).

Our religious belief system is also formed by our everyday experiences with the physical world and with the cultural environment in which we live. Even supernatural agents, imagined by humans as entities with uncertain boundaries and supernatural physical properties allowing them to be everywhere at the same time, cannot escape being positioned somewhere in the physical space by believers. For example, in Shinto, the belief system traditionally connected with our Japanese sample, the multiplicity of the “way of the kami”<sup>1</sup> presupposes their different spatial locations. Dossett (1994) notes that some kami are connected with geographical regions, such as villages and provinces, while others are believed to reside in mountains, trees, forests, rivers, or in celestial bodies. Mountains have an especially important place in Shinto. They are believed to be the link between heaven and earth; they are also considered as “the other world” where one goes after death (Hori, 1966). Buddhism added the idea of paradise to the extant concept of mountains because death gave the opportunity for salvation and rebirth into Buddha’s Pure Land. For instance, the mountain of Kumano in central Honshū was identified as the Pure Land of the bodhisattva Kannon (Goodwin, 1989). Moreover, according to Buddhist mythology, gods inhabit 26 heavens, and the next Buddha, Maitreya, will descend to earth from Tūṣita heaven.

In Christian theological reflections, omnipresence is one of the major attributes of God.<sup>2</sup> God can be not bound to a particular place, physically located in empirical space; He is far above all spatial distance and separation (Brunner, 2014). At the same time, in the Bible, and more particularly in the Old Testament, God is consistently associated with a heaven that is located above in the sky and is identified as the place where immortal souls go after death of the physical body (Van Noppen, 1995). Moreover, the claim that Jesus was divine and came to earth

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<sup>1</sup> Shinto is usually translated as the “way of the kami” where *kami* means gods or deities, sometimes souls or spirits. According to Rots (2017) it is practically impossible to give a neutral, empirically adequate definition of Shinto because it is a historical construct, subject to continuous negotiation and redefinition and not the indigenous worship tradition of Japan. According to Rots, modern Shinto is largely an invented tradition that developed out of Buddhism and incorporated elements from a variety of sources, including existing shrine traditions, imperial rites, and Confucian ideology. Shinto has no founder, no official sacred scriptures, and presents a mixture of polytheism, nature and ancestor worships, and emperor cults.

<sup>2</sup> Why the term *god* begins sometimes with an uppercase letter G, sometimes with a lowercase letter g, and why it appears sometimes in the singular and sometimes in the plural, is explained in the introductory chapter of this book (Chap. 1, this volume).

only to die, then rise from the dead, and finally ascend back into heaven to retake his throne serves as the basis for much of the Christian faith (Wright, 2000).

The primary concern of the whole project presented in this book is to investigate how children from different cultural and religious contexts imagine and depict the divine. In the current paper, we address one of the unexplored aspects of this issue. We explore children's conceptions of god's dwelling as presented in their drawings of the divine. We collected data from four groups of participants characterized by different cultural and religious environments: Japanese (Buddhism and Shintoism), Russian-Buryat (Buddhism, Shamanism), Russian Slavic (Christian Orthodoxy) and French-speaking Swiss (Catholicism and reformed Christianity).

### **God's Dwelling Place as Shown in Children's Drawings: A Literature Review**

Existing research presents only fragmentary data on this topic. Hanisch (1996) gives the most complete findings on the subject we could locate. He examined drawings by children ( $n = 1471$ , 6–16 years old) from Western Germany, considered by Hanish as a religious environment, and of children ( $n = 1178$ , 6–16 years old) from Eastern Germany, who were not religiously educated at the time of his data collection. According to his results, 41.3% ( $n = 351$ ) of the children from Western Germany who drew anthropomorphic<sup>3</sup> representations of God positioned the figure "in clouds."<sup>4</sup> As for children from Eastern Germany, their number was slightly higher, precisely 46.4% ( $n = 482$ ). Unfortunately, the author did not present the data for other types of background, nor did he provide the percentage of such drawings (the sky as background) that he found in non-anthropomorphic representations. Hanish explored also the implications of age on the drawings. The trend he discovered is rather complex and dependent upon the different samples. In Western Germany 41.5% of the youngest children (7 years old) drew God in clouds; while in Eastern Germany, only 24% did this. The percentage of God figures positioned in the clouds increases in both groups, but peaks at different ages. In representations from Western Germany, drawings with God drawn in the clouds peak (55.2%) at 14 years of age. In Eastern Germany, such pictures peak (59.6%) at 12 years of age. Regarding the older age group (16 years of age), the sample from Western Germany contains no such drawings. The percentage of such drawings from that age group in the sample from Eastern Germany has fallen to 37%. Hanish also examined the effects of the participant's sex on their representation of God. He found that in both

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<sup>3</sup>These results concern only drawings categorized by Hanish as anthropomorphic. It should be noted here that Hanish did not categorize as anthropomorphic drawings showing a hand as a symbol of God. In our research, we took all types of drawings into consideration.

<sup>4</sup>"God in clouds" is one of Hanish's categories. We do not know if he included in this category any drawings that lacked clouds but depicted a god figure set against blue coloured, sky-like background.

samples, more girls than boys drew God in the clouds (42.5% girls versus 40% boys in Western Germany and 49% girls versus 43% boys in Eastern Germany<sup>5</sup>).

As for other studies, results are not consistent because the categories and various elements distinguished by different researchers often overlap, blurring the picture of our understanding rather than providing better focus. Nevertheless, we see that children often represent god in the sky, or as levitating above the ground. For example, Pitts (1976) reported that children from diverse groups of North American religious denominations ( $n = 180$ , 6–10 years old) often portrayed God in a non-earthly context, e.g., amongst clouds. Tamm, working with a Swedish sample ( $n = 425$ , 9–18 years old), identified one of the most popular categories as *God in heaven* (Tamm, 1996). Kay and Ray (2004) examined the frequency of the various elements drawn by children in a Church of England primary school ( $n = 135$ , 4–11 years old) and found that majority of children depicted God as levitating (87.9% of girls and 70.8% of boys).

Pnevmatikos (2002) reported another finding relevant to our research, although the task cited was not identical to that which we cited above. The author asked children (English-speaking primary school children living in Luxembourg who self-identified as either Catholic or Greek Orthodox,  $n = 132$ ) to “draw their own house and the house where God lives”. Pnevmatikos distinguished four main groups of drawings. The first group of drawings represented material constructions on Earth (a real house or a real church) drawn by children at the same level as their house. According to Pnevmatikos, the underlying idea is that God is like a real man who lives on Earth and does not differ ontologically from human beings. The second group of drawings represented material constructions in the clouds (a real house, a real church, or a real garden). The underlying idea is that either God is a human being whose soul has never been freed from his body (Jesus Christ resurrected) or is the soul of a dead human being, now living in heaven under analogous conditions to those of real life on Earth. In the third group, children drew houses or symbolic elements like the gates of paradise, houses made of clouds in heaven, or angels and planets. The underlying idea is that God does not need a material house to live in but does need a particular spiritual place to live in. For Pnevmatikos, this does not suggest that the children are aware of the symbolic nature of God’s dwelling place. The last type of drawing was done by Catholic children who drew clouds labelled with qualities like goodness, love, peace, etc. For Pnevmatikos, this type of drawing implies that God does not need a tangible house or a particular place to live in, but that He exists anywhere where such qualities exist. As for the age effect, Pnevmatikos found the gradual diminution of drawings of the first type (God as a human being living on Earth) from 55% in first grade to 3.7% among fifth graders. The second type of drawing (God living in a material construction in heaven) increased from 15% among the first graders to 66.7% for the older participants. The percentage of the third type remained almost the same (15–30%) for all grades. The fourth type

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<sup>5</sup>Hanish did not include inferential statistics.

appeared only as a small percentage (6.3%) among fourth graders (Pnevmatikos, 2002).

From the studies cited above it is clear that children often imagine gods as beings physically located in some space on the Earth, in the sky, or somewhere in a heavenly realm. It means that the idea of god as omnipresent (not bounded to a particular place) as is taught in Christian doctrine, appears both rather late in the developmental stage, and according to the religious education made available to these children (Hanisch, 1996; Pnevmatikos, 2002). As for results showing gender differences, some studies have revealed that girls more frequently represented god as a being in the clouds (Hanisch, 1996) or in heaven (Tamm, 1996), or drew god as levitating (Kay & Ray, 2004).

## Aims of the Study

The review of research we have presented above shows that children often represent gods as celestial beings and draw them in the sky. Unfortunately, these studies presented only fragmentary data on this topic. Moreover, we found no studies conducted in non-Western cultures that considered god's dwelling in their analysis. The present research aims to fill this gap and looks for a more nuanced and consistent account of children's conceptions of god's dwelling. To do this we explored the background in children's drawings of god and identified the context (celestial, terrestrial, or other) in which children placed god when composing their drawings. We also aim to examine if the drawn background would be impacted by age, gender, and religious vs. public school settings, and, further, to examine if developmental and gender patterns would be the same in our culturally and religiously diverse t samples.

## Data Sample

For the purpose of the present study we used a subset of the drawings collected in Japan, Russia, and Switzerland ( $n = 1156$ ; age min = 6 years and 3 months, age max = 15 years and 11 months).<sup>6</sup> Drawings from Japan ( $n = 135$ ) were collected in regular and Buddhist schools in four prefectures, namely Tokyo, Kyoto, Fukushima, and Chiba. Drawings from Russia ( $n = 511$ ) were divided into two separate samples because of important cultural and religious differences between children from two different ethnic groups, Russian-Slavic and Russian-Buryat. The Russian-Buryat subsample ( $n = 219$ ) of drawings was collected in regular schools in Ulan-Ude

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<sup>6</sup>The data used in this study were initially selected and annotated for the study described in part II (Chap. 7, this volume). For this reason, blank sheets of paper, or drawings containing more than one god figure were excluded.

(Buryatia), where the majority of children declared themselves to be Buddhists. Regarding the Russian-Slavic subsample ( $n = 292$ ), drawings were collected both in regular schools (Ulan-Ude and Saint Petersburg) and in Orthodox parishes (Saint Petersburg). Drawings from the French-speaking part of Switzerland ( $n = 510$ ) were collected in regular schools and in Protestant and Catholic parishes. To study the age effect, all samples were divided into three age groups (7–9 years, 10–11 years, and 13–14 years old). For more detailed information about age groups (age,  $M$  and  $SD$ ), see Table 6.1.

## Method

### *Drawing Task*<sup>7</sup>

Researchers provided participants with paper (size A4), a graphite drawing pencil, a set of wax pastels, and coloured pencils. The following instruction was used in all countries:

Have you ever heard the word “god”? Close your eyes and try to imagine it. Now draw it.  
Do not look at your classmates, because I would like to know how you imagine it.

After completing this task, the participants were asked to describe their drawings and to answer a questionnaire about their religious environment. Researchers arranged to meet with small groups of participants (10–12); participants worked individually on the drawing task. Time for drawing was not limited and the full session lasted 40 min on average.

### *Coding Drawings*

In order to study images of god’s dwelling place in the children’s drawings, two judges (both females; one of whom is the first author of this article) coded the background of each drawing independently. We based the coding on the content of the drawing, and, in some cases, on the children’s description of their work, in order to obtain precise information about the image. Six categories were employed to identify the location of god representations in the pictorial space. They included five types of background (1–5) and the absence of any background (6):

1. *In the Sky* (god figure is set in a background of clouds and/or blue colour, the earth and/or terrestrial decor is far below but the Earth is not represented as a planet) (see examples of drawings, Fig. 6.1);

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<sup>7</sup>For more detail about the procedure see the introduction to the present volume (Chap. 1, this volume).

**Table 6.1** Participants' socio-demographics

Samples	Age		Young age		Middle age		Older age		Child's gender		Context	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	Girls	Boys	Regular	Religious
Japanese (n = 135)	10.88	2.29	8.09	0.49	11.07	0.55	13.60	0.42	58 (42.96%)	77 (57.04%)	55 (40.74%)	80 (59.26%)
Russian-Buryat (n = 219)	10.97	2.69	7.81	0.64	11.22	0.71	13.90	1.04	113 (51.60%)	106 (48.40%)	219 (100%)	0 (0%)
Russian-Slavic (n = 292)	10.90	2.18	8.17	0.65	11.20	0.66	13.37	0.72	152 (52.05%)	140 (47.95%)	195 (66.78%)	97 (33.22%)
Swiss (n = 510)	10.99	2.41	8.18	0.73	10.92	0.83	13.71	0.79	266 (52.16%)	244 (47.84%)	223 (43.73%)	287 (56.27%)



**Fig. 6.1** Drawings representing the *god-in-the-sky* category from Japanese, Russian-Slavic and Swiss samples ([http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/IFGUoiGkQ\\_ebEM9KQMnwRQm.20200407T131153635227Z](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/IFGUoiGkQ_ebEM9KQMnwRQm.20200407T131153635227Z), <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/bHuHkm9FQ767zrFyTm7txAf.20180702T191757675Z>, <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/9yqWi69TRlagOTciTCzLUQl.20201010T084537738978Z>)



**Fig. 6.2** Drawings representing the *god-on-earth* category from Japanese, Russian-Buryat and Swiss samples (<http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/3ibe2A2KSmiSua9jti9Etge.20180702T165551173Z>, [http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/U\\_sHKj5TSsict3DnXNY2sQq.20180702T184705255Z](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/U_sHKj5TSsict3DnXNY2sQq.20180702T184705255Z), <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/bfi8ECn8Q6t6wyfKNuXsAtgD.20201008T101853913774Z>)

2. *On Earth* (god's feet touch the ground or the surface of the water) (see examples of drawings, Fig. 6.2);
3. *Levitating* (god levitates above the ground, feet do not touch the ground or the surface of the water) (see examples of drawings, Fig. 6.3);
4. *Outer Space* (Earth is represented as a planet, the stars and other planets can also be represented; the figure of god dominates the universe) (see examples of drawings, Fig. 6.4);
5. *Other Background* (all pictures that do not meet the criteria of previous types, e.g., god is depicted in paradise, supported by the children's description of their





**Fig. 6.3** Drawings representing the *god levitating* category from Russian-Slavic, Russian-Buryat and Swiss samples (<http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/R51HZfJORHid8ISt=WmzSgR.20180702T19364819Z>, <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/x1B5WpDIS7KsIp=qjv8mjw2.20180702T185330748Z>, [http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/yl4vFkVDQeyd-VGaZqY\\_IUgE.20180702T164531789Z](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/yl4vFkVDQeyd-VGaZqY_IUgE.20180702T164531789Z))



**Fig. 6.4** Drawings representing the *outer space* category from Japanese, Russian-Slavic and Russian-Buryat samples (<http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/r6MMzwV0THCe6F7bfgUkgY.20200415T113646218451Z>, [http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/4bMI3AEfThaXUPZ\\_3PzYbw6.20200906T104809769572Z](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/4bMI3AEfThaXUPZ_3PzYbw6.20200906T104809769572Z), <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/4guytwktQGSFK13DygidQ4.20180702T201302842Z>)

own drawings, or with other characters like angels, humans, and/or animals in the absence of any other background) (see examples of drawings, Fig. 6.5);

6. *No Background* (no background was drawn) (see examples of drawings, Fig. 6.6).

Inter-rater agreement was measured with Cohen's Kappa. The inter-rater agreement was excellent for all samples: Japan:  $\kappa = .97$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Russian-Buryat sample:  $\kappa = .95$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Russian Slavic sample:  $\kappa = .94$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Switzerland:  $\kappa = .94$ ,  $p < .001$ .



**Fig. 6.5** Drawings representing the *other background* category from Russian-Buryat, Russian-Slavic and Swiss samples (<http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/GVnHho8MRtWIVmMZQ9o64QK.20180702T192340855Z>, [http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/xRCqLiZH-SOC1h0K0\\_loM6Qx.20180702T195711637Z](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/xRCqLiZH-SOC1h0K0_loM6Qx.20180702T195711637Z), <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/WipnUlu7SeuOIeN12Q3UiQJ.20201008T101217863717Z>)



**Fig. 6.6** Drawings representing the *no background* category from Russian-Slavic, Japanese and Swiss samples ([http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/2IkdKr\\_KT1ixLfiEpVFtAS.20200906T082317495333Z](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/2IkdKr_KT1ixLfiEpVFtAS.20200906T082317495333Z), <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/0IObP2HASw2u8RE4nBv1kgM.20200311T145442226719Z>, <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/8CECSoEMQW=cbV8OLcDWCQn.20201010T083618347468Z>)

### *Statistical Analysis*

We performed a Pearson's chi-square test of significance to compare background types in the data. The possible contributing factors that were examined included children's culture and religion (as defined by one's country or ethnicity), age, gender, and religious schooling.

## Results

### *Effects of Culture and Religion*

Results of the Pearson's chi-square test of significance are presented in the Table 6.2. As we observe throughout the dataset, there was a significant dependency between country and background type ( $\chi^2(15) = 56.65, p < .001$ ). Our results indicate that a large proportion of participants did not draw any background: one third of the children in the Russian-Buryat (30.1%) and the Russian-Slavic (31.8%) samples, 42.2% of the Swiss children, and a half of the Japanese children (50.4%).

When the children did draw backgrounds, they most often depicted god in the sky (across all samples). Nearly the same percentage of children in the Russian-Buryat (44.3%) and the Russian-Slavic (41.1%) samples drew god in the sky, while slightly fewer participants in Japan (31.1%) and Switzerland (28.8%) did this. As shown by the descriptive statistics in Table 6.2, we found that the next most frequent background type depicted by the participants was god on earth. This was true for drawings from all locations except Japan. The god-on-earth category appeared in 14.6% of the Russian-Buryat drawings, 15.1% of the Russian-Slavic drawings, and 11.2% of the Swiss drawings. Only 3.7% of Japanese drawings depicted god on earth. In the Japanese sample, other background was the second most frequent category (10.4%). In these drawings, god or kami were depicted in company with other entities such as angel(s), human(s), or animal(s). Other categories of background, such as levitating and outer space, were drawn relatively infrequently in all samples. We did note that Swiss children drew an outer space background more frequently (6.9%) than participants from other locations.

**Table 6.2** The distribution of drawings according to culture and religion

Samples	In the sky (%)	On Earth (%)	Levitating (%)	Outer space (%)	Other background (%)	No background (%)
Japanese (n = 135)	31.1	3.7	1.5	3.0	10.4	50.4
Russian-Buryat (n = 219)	44.3	14.6	4.1	2.7	4.1	30.1
Russian-Slavic (n = 292)	41.1	15.1	2.1	4.5	5.5	31.8
Swiss (n = 510)	28.8	11.2	3.5	6.9	7.5	42.2

**Table 6.3** The distribution of drawings according to age

Samples	Age groups	In the sky (%)	On Earth (%)	Levitating (%)	Outer space (%)	Other background (%)	No background (%)
Japanese (n = 135)	Young (n = 45)	17.8	–	–	–	15.6	66.7
	Middle (n = 47)	44.7	4.3	4.3	4.3	6.4	36.2
	Old (n = 43)	30.2	7.0	–	4.7	9.3	48.3
Russian-Buryat (n = 219)	Young (n = 77)	24.7	24.7	6.5	3.9	3.9	36.4
	Middle (n = 65)	56.9	7.7	1.5	–	3.1	30.8
	Old (n = 77)	53.2	10.4	3.9	3.9	5.2	23.4
Russian-Slavic (n = 292)	Young (n = 93)	38.7	20.4	5.4	4.3	2.2	29.0
	Middle (n = 109)	42.2	11.9	0.9	2.8	5.5	36.7
	Old (n = 90)	42.2	13.3	–	6.7	8.9	28.9
Swiss (n = 510)	Young (n = 169)	23.7	13.6	4.1	3.6	8.9	46.2
	Middle (n = 162)	27.2	9.9	3.7	3.7	10.5	45.1
	Old (n = 179)	35.2	10.1	2.8	12.8	3.4	35.8

### *Effects of Age*

We found a statistically significant dependence between age and the type of background in three out of four samples (see Table 6.3). The Russian-Slavic sample ( $\chi^2(10) = 17.16$ ,  $p = .070$ ) did not demonstrate statistical significance, but the Japanese ( $\chi^2(10) = 20.28$ ,  $p = .027$ ), Russian-Buryat ( $\chi^2(10) = 26.05$ ,  $p = .004$ ), and Swiss ( $\chi^2(10) = 29.67$ ,  $p = .001$ ) samples did. We discovered another trend of similarity across these same three samples when considering the no background category: Japanese (66.7%), Russian-Buryat (36.4%), and Swiss (46.2%) children from the youngest age group drew god more often without any background than the older age groups. Concerning other types of background, we observed that younger children from all locations (except for the Japanese sample) represented gods standing on the ground (god on earth) with relative frequency when compared to other age groups. The number of such drawings of god on earth was equal to the number of drawings categorized as god in the sky in the youngest age group in Russian-Buryat sample (24.7% god on earth, 24.7% god in the sky). Then, the percentage of the

drawings of god on earth dropped considerably in the middle age group, while the drawings of god in the sky increased in all samples. As for the older children, specific tendencies differed by location. In the Japanese and Russian-Buryat groups, the number of drawings of god in the sky decreased slightly among the oldest children, when compared to the middle age group—this was particularly marked among Japanese children. As for the Russian-Slavic group, the percentage of drawings of god in the sky remained equal from the middle to the older age groups. In the Swiss group, there was a gradual increase in drawings of god in the sky across age groups; as age increased, so did the number of drawings that depicted god in the sky.

### *Effect of Children's Gender*

No significant dependence was found between gender and background types in all samples: Japanese ( $\chi^2(10) = 3.49, p = .674$ ), Russian-Buryat ( $\chi^2(10) = 4.77, p = .445$ ), Russian-Slavic ( $\chi^2(10) = 0.49, p = .992$ ), and Swiss ( $\chi^2(10) = 7.21, p = .205$ ). However, the percentage of drawings of god in the sky showed that girls in all locations—except Japan—drew such pictures more frequently than boys did (see Table 6.4). This tendency was particularly marked in the Russian-Buryat and Swiss samples.

**Table 6.4** The distribution of drawings according to the child's gender

Samples	Gender	In the sky (%)	On Earth (%)	Levitating (%)	Outer space (%)	Other background (%)	No background (%)
Japanese	Girls (n = 58)	31.0	5.2	1.8	5.2	6.9	50.0
	Boys (n = 77)	31.2	2.6	1.3	1.3	13.0	50.6
Russian-Buryat	Girls (n = 113)	47.8	15.0	1.8	3.5	3.5	28.3
	Boys (n = 106)	40.6	14.2	6.6	1.9	4.7	32.1
Russian-Slavic	Girls (n = 152)	41.4	15.1	2.0	4.6	4.6	32.2
	Boys (n = 140)	40.7	15.0	2.1	4.3	6.4	31.4
Swiss	Girls (n = 266)	32.0	11.7	2.6	6.4	9.0	38.3
	Boys (n = 244)	25.4	10.7	4.5	7.4	5.7	46.3

**Table 6.5** The distribution of drawings according to the schooling context

Samples	Schooling	In the sky	On Earth (%)	Levitating (%)	Outer space (%)	Other background (%)	No background (%)
Japanese	Regular (n = 55)	38.2	1.8	–	3.6	7.3	49.1
	Religious (n = 80)	26.3	5.0	2.5	2.5	12.5	51.3
Russian-Slavic	Regular (n = 195)	47.7	12.8	2.1	4.6	4.1	28.7
	Religious (n = 97)	27.8	19.6	2.1	4.1	8.2	38.1
Swiss	Regular (n = 223)	26.5	10.8	3.1	3.1	5.8	50.7
	Religious (n = 287)	30.7	11.5	3.8	9.8	8.7	35.5

### *Effects of Religious or Regular Schooling Contexts*

As for the relation between the drawn background and the religious or secular schooling contexts, we examined the data from the three samples (Japanese, Russian-Slavic and Swiss) for which drawings were collected in two distinct settings<sup>8</sup> (see Table 6.5). A chi-square test showed a statistically significant dependency between the type of background and schooling in the Russian-Slavic ( $\chi^2(5) = 12.06, p = .034$ ) and the Swiss ( $\chi^2(5) = 17.22, p = .004$ ) samples. In the Russian-Slavic sample, children in regular schools depicted god in the sky (47.7%) more frequently than the *god on earth* (12.8%). The difference between these two types of backgrounds was not so large in drawings collected in Orthodox parishes where 27.8% of the drawings showed a background that was characterized as god in the sky and 19.6% of the drawings placed the figure of god on earth. In the Swiss sample, the difference between drawings collected in regular schools and in religious classes was small; the percentages for the god-in-the-sky category were 26.5% and 30.7% respectively, the percentages for the god on earth category were 10.8% and 11.5% respectively. Apparently, the main difference between these two Swiss samples resides in the percentage of drawings composed without any background. In the regular school setting, 50.7% of drawings had no background. In the religious school setting, only 35.5% of the drawings had no background. In the regular school setting, 3.1% of the drawings fit the outer space category; the percentage from the religious school setting was higher (9.8%). In the sample from Japan, there was no statistically significant dependency ( $\chi^2(5) = 4.79, p = .442$ ) between drawings collected in Buddhist or regular school settings and the background types, although children from the regular schooling context (38.2%) drew a

<sup>8</sup> We did not conduct an analysis on the Russian-Buryat sample because there was only one type of schooling represented in the data.

god-in-the-sky type of background more often than children from a religious school context (26.3%).

## Discussion

The present study examined children's visualisation of god's dwelling place as represented in their drawing of god; particularly, we looked at the background surrounding the god figure. We examined three variables (age, gender, and religious schooling) thought to influence the background that the children composed in their drawings.

Children from all four groups most often drew god in the sky or with no background at all. The former was predominant among drawings showing an actual background. Our findings maintain consistency with previous studies conducted in Western (predominantly Christian) countries. These studies indicate that most often children visualize god's dwelling to be the sky (Hanisch, 1996; Kay & Ray, 2004; Pitts, 1976; Pnevmatikos, 2002; Tamm, 1996). The tendency to draw god in the sky was particularly marked in the Russian groups, one of which (Russian-Slavic) is characterized by Christianity and the other (Russian-Buryat) by non-Christian references (mainly Buddhism and Shamanism). The tendency to draw god in celestial background was also present in drawings from Japan, where the sample was largely characterized by participants who self-identified as Buddhist or Shintoist. These findings indicate that the tendency to imagine god in the sky might not be related solely to a particular cultural or religious context. Meanwhile, observations based on content showed that children from the Japanese or the Russian-Buryat sample were more likely to draw gods coming from outside their typical religious environments than children from the Russian-Slavic or the Swiss sample were. For instance, drawings depicting angels or an old bearded man in the clouds were not rare in their drawings.

Age was a significant contributor to background preference in the Japanese, Swiss, and Russian-Buryat drawings, but not in the Russian-Slavic drawings. This developmental trend generally began in the middle age group and then plateaued through the oldest. This general effect of age was consistent with our predictions. Conversely, with increased age, there was a decreased occurrence of the god-on-earth type of background. This means that with age, not only do god representations become more celestial, but they also lose their earthly characteristics. This is important, as either of these trends could stand independent of the other (celestial features could increase with no loss of earthly characteristics; celestial features could remain stable while earthly characteristics diminish). This was not the case for the Japanese drawings, but we note that drawings depicting the god-on-earth background type were underrepresented in that group generally.

We found that culture and traditional religious beliefs seem to have a greater effect on the choice of drawn background in the older age group when compared to the two other age groups. For instance, the number of drawings representing the god

in the sky remained equal or even decreased in the oldest age groups of the Russian-Buryat and Japanese samples, respectively. Both of these religious and/or cultural groups are marked by Buddhism and animistic beliefs (Shinto in Japan and Shamanism in Buryatia). Shinto and Shamanism are characterized by beliefs in the multiplicity of supernatural entities residing everywhere: in mountains, trees, forests, rivers, celestial bodies, and in other natural phenomena such as thunder and wind, etc. Although drawings representing gods incarnated in such natural settings and phenomena were seldom found in either of these samples, animistic representations could have had an influence on the observed decrease of the god-in-the-sky type of background. Another explanation might be that the oldest children from these groups more often represented Buddha (and other Buddhist deities) while other age groups typically represented gods in the form of angels or as bearded old men in the sky. This would therefore consist in an indirect influence of age on the type of background through the choice of god representations. On the other hand, in the Russian-Slavic and Swiss groups drawings representing the god-in-the-sky type of background did not decline—in fact, they consistently increased among the drawings by Swiss children. As mentioned earlier, God in Christian faith and iconography is consistently associated with Heaven. Consequently, children from a predominantly Christian background are prone to continue to represent a god figure in the context of a literal heaven. Finally, other types of drawings also associated with the upper part of the paper, such as the levitating or outer space background types, did not show particular developmental trends.

As for the influence of gender, our results were not significant. However, there was a slight tendency for girls to draw the god-in-the-sky background type more often than boys did (except in the Japanese group). This result is consistent with findings reported in previous studies (Hanisch, 1996; Tamm, 1996; Kay & Ray, 2004).

Regarding the effect of religious schooling, our research showed mixed results. Russian-Slavic (with a significant schooling effect) and Japanese (without a significant schooling effect) children in religious schools depicted the god-in-the-sky background type considerably less often than the god-on-earth background type when compared to children from regular schools. This could be due to the broader impact of religious socialization and, consequently, of traditional religious iconography, on the drawings of these children. For instance, Russian-Slavic children often represented the face of god in the form of an icon. In the Swiss sample, the effect of schooling was significant but the main difference resided primarily in the ratio of drawings with a drawn background to drawings without a drawn background. We also found in the Swiss sample that drawings representing the outer space background type occurred three times more frequently in the religious school setting than in the regular school setting.



## Conclusion

A question that has received much attention within the field of the psychology of religion is how the concept of god is represented in human minds. Unfortunately, much of the existing research has focused on mental, rather than physical, characteristics of god (Nyhof & Johnson, 2017). The present study has shown that spatiality contributes to the way individuals conceive of the divine. A systematic examination of the drawn background in children's drawings collected in culturally and religiously diverse groups (Japanese, Buryat-Russian, Slavic-Russian, French-speaking Swiss) revealed that children more often depicted god's dwelling in the sky (when children drew a background). Moreover, results indicate that older children were more likely to depict god in the sky. It can be assumed that children acquire such representations—passively and/or actively—through agents of socialization such as families, religious institutions, and the mass media. The consistency across cultural and religious environments to set god in the sky is striking. Why is the sky so consistently associated with the dwelling place of the divine? One possible explanation could be suggested by recent studies inspired by theories of embodied cognition and conceptual metaphor, both of which provide evidence for a link between a vertical dimension and the concepts associated with affect, size, power, high social status, morality, wealth, intellect (for review on this topic, see Cian, 2017). Following this line of research, our second study, Part II (Chap. 7, this volume) will attempt to apply these theories to children's pictorial productions in order to see whether or not children exhibit a tendency to draw god representations in the upper part of their drawings.

Finally, at least, two limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, developmental changes were examined by a cross-sectional design. Second, factors such as the level of religious commitment or the positive/negative attitude toward god figure were not taken into account in the present study. More generally, future research will be needed to explore how the spatial dimension is involved in our conceptualization of the divine. In particular, possible universalism in spatial processing of the divine should be examined further.

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