

**Title of Article:** **Children's conceptions of Jesus**

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## Abstract

This paper presents findings from a recent study investigating young children's (aged 10-11) conceptions of Jesus in England. The overall picture revealed by the study is that whilst there was a general assent amongst pupils in our sample towards an ethical and humanistic conception of the historical Jesus, there was less of a consensus about those issues which previous research claims children find difficult to understand, namely: the divinity of Jesus; the miracles of Jesus; and Christian beliefs pertaining to Jesus' continued presence in people's lives today. The paper concludes by arguing that the variety of conceptions of Jesus which are encountered in RE may be seen by children as a barrier to learning rather than an opportunity to grow in understanding and highlights the need for further research into the relationship between children's hermeneutical horizons and RE curriculum content.

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## 1. Introduction

Previous research into children's conceptions of Jesus has taken a variety of forms including examination of children's *beliefs* about Jesus (Cox 1967; Francis 2001); children's *attitudes* towards Jesus (Alves 1968; Francis 1989a, 1989b, 1992); children's *images* of Jesus (Cox 1967; Savin-Williams 1977; Astley & Francis 1996; Francis & Astley 1997); and children's *thinking* about the nature of Jesus (Claerhout & Declercq 1970; Madge 1971). Together these studies paint an interesting picture. Whilst attitudes towards Jesus may be generally favourable, particularly amongst girls (Alves 1968; Savin-Williams, 1977), research suggests they have become less so in

recent years (Francis 1989a, 1989b, 1992). Young people's thinking about Jesus places greater emphasis on Jesus' humanity than his divinity (Claerhout and Declercq, 1970; Madge, 1971), perhaps at least in part, because they have a tendency to model their image of Jesus on their own self image (Francis and Astley, 1997). Furthermore, rather than promote belief in Jesus' divinity, the miraculous elements of the Gospel narratives are frequently met with suspicion by young people leading to a general distrust of Christian claims made about Jesus based on those narratives (Cox 1967; Madge 1971; Savin-Williams, 1977).

Whilst a number of research instruments employed in the above studies have been subject to criticism over the years (Greer, 1982; Hyde, 1990; Levitt, 1995; Walshe, 2005), their findings offer a useful overview of some of the ways in which children and young people might think about Jesus. However, as these studies were conducted prior to the turn of the century, and often formed only a small part of larger scale studies investigating children's attitudes towards Christianity, it was felt that a more up to date examination of children's conceptions of Jesus would be appropriate in order firstly, to assess the extent to which findings from previous research might be applicable to children today and secondly, to gain a deeper understanding of the variety of ways in which children conceptualise Jesus. Results from this study would directly inform the development of curriculum materials designed to address those aspects of the RE curriculum relating to Jesus which children continue to claim they find difficult to understand (Walshe, 2005).

The study consisted of two phases: phase one, which sought to identify by means of a questionnaire survey the multiplicity of ways in which children conceive of Jesus; and

phase two, which employed semi-structured interviews in order to gain deeper insights into the processes involved; the way(s) in which children conceptualise or form their ideas of Jesus. The remainder of this paper presents key findings from the questionnaire survey.

## **2. Methodology**

The research was undertaken by means of a questionnaire survey of primary school pupils in year 6 (pupils aged 10-11). The sample included 479 pupils of whom 245 were male (51.1%) and 232 were female (48.4%). Two pupils did not identify their sex. The sample also contained pupils from a diversity of religious backgrounds Christian (45.1%); Muslim (28.8%); Other (1.3%); Hindu (0.2%) and none (23.8%). The respondents were drawn from ten co-educational primary schools, including two independent schools and two voluntary controlled (VC) schools (Church of England and Methodist). These were situated in Birmingham (2), Devon (4), Dorset (2) and Lancashire (2). Although they do not constitute a base from which generalisations can be made about all year 6 pupils in England, they do provide data from children in a range of types of school and varying geographical locations. It is hoped therefore, that the ideas expressed by pupils in this sample may find resonance in the experiences of others working with young people in similar contexts.

The questionnaire was similar to that used in an earlier study with year 8 pupils (Aylward, 2006; Walshe, 2005;). The first section assessed pupils' knowledge of Jesus' life and teachings and the second section examined their understanding of Jesus and ideas about him. One of the research instruments employed in the second section

invited pupils to respond to a set of twenty opinion statements about Jesus presented in a three point Likert scale. On the basis that these items should be derived from the opinions of pupils rather than statements generated by adult researchers, this instrument was based on research undertaken in a primary school in Somerset. In this initial pilot study, year 6 pupils were asked to respond to open-ended questionnaire items, such as ‘When I think about Jesus, the following thoughts/feelings/words come into my mind...’ In spite of the invitation to offer thoughts/feelings/words, the responses were predominantly cognitive (thoughts and words) rather than affective (feelings). These were sorted into categories, with one statement from each selected for inclusion in the final research instrument which was subsequently piloted in three other primary schools. The data from completed questionnaires in all stages of the research was analysed using SPSS Version 11.0.

### **3. Results**

The results reported focus on data gathered from responses to individual items on the Likert scale, and, where it increases understanding, from answers to other questions presented in the survey (see appendix). The table below shows pupils’ responses to the twenty items presented in the Likert scale. It is important to note, that these items were not intended to constitute an overall scale. Responses to each item were analysed using descriptive statistics and comparisons were made. All percentages reported in this paper refer to the actual percentage of pupils who completed a particular question. The difference between this figure and the entire pupil sample reflects the percentage of missing data.

**Table 1: Pupils' responses to items in the Likert scale (%)**

<b>Statement about Jesus</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Not important	9.4	16.5	71.8
Cared for people	84.3	10.4	3.3
Died for me	31.1	33.6	32.6
A normal person	24.6	31.9	40.9
Tried to bring peace	75.4	16.1	5.8
Told people about God	77.7	17.1	3.1
Rose from the dead	43.8	26.1	27.1
Hard to believe in	28.0	31.7	37.2
Told stories to make us better people	62.2	24.0	11.3
Loved everyone	73.5	16.1	8.8
Sent by God	63.5	23.8	11.1
Kind and generous	76.6	14.4	4.2
Was/is God	9.4	31.3	56.4
Not real	10.4	25.1	60.1
Healed people	57.2	25.7	12.9
Willing to lose his life for others	56.8	27.6	11.5
Not the Son of God	23.6	23.0	49.5
Makes prayers come true	23.0	47.4	25.7
A bit confusing	32.6	31.7	31.1
Cares about me	56.2	25.9	15.4

Of the twenty statements about Jesus presented in the survey, ten gained the assent of the majority of pupils (>50%) and three (almost four<sup>i</sup>) gained the dissent of the majority of pupils. If we analyse the statements about which there is a considerable degree of consensus, it is clear that the children in this sample generally agree that Jesus was important (71.8%) and that he cared for people (84.3%); told people about God (77.7%); tried to bring peace (75.4%); was kind and generous (76.6%); and loved everyone (73.5%). These items, other than 'not important', all describe Jesus in the past-tense, acting morally and in a non-supernatural way.

If we analyse the remaining statements to which the majority of pupils (>50%) either agreed or disagreed, the children in this sample generally maintain that Jesus was sent by God (63.5%); told stories to make us better people (62.2%); was/is real (60.1%);

healed people (57.2%); was not/is not God (56.4%); was willing to lose his life for others (56.8%); and cares about me (56.2%). Some of these statements contain references to Jesus' affect on people in the present day: Jesus told stories to make *us* better people and Jesus care about *me*. One statement, which aimed to uncover children's reactions to claims about Jesus' miraculous abilities, refers to Jesus' power to heal. The other statements either contain theological/Christological claims or an interpretation of his death.

In regard to the remaining seven statements, no particular mode of response (i.e. agree, not sure, disagree) gained the assent of more than 50% of the pupils. The pupils are divided about whether Jesus died for them; rose from the dead; was/is not the Son of God; was a normal person; is hard to believe in; is a bit confusing; and makes prayers come true. These statements pertain to some central Christian doctrines, such as the atonement and resurrection, as well as Christological issues about Jesus' sonship, divinity and humanity. They also relate to issues about the children's beliefs and ability to understand. One statement relates to Jesus' ability to respond to and intervene in human events today. Indeed, it should be noted that while 84.3% of children agreed that Jesus 'cared for people' only 56.2% agreed that he 'cares for me'. Similarly, while 56.8% of children agreed that Jesus was 'willing to lose his life for others', only 31.1% agreed that he 'died for me'. Historical statements about Jesus' moral acts gain greater assent than ones relating his actions to the respondent in the present day.

There appears to be general assent towards an ethical and humanistic conception of the historical Jesus, but less of a consensus about statements concerning (i) belief in



and/or confusion about Jesus; (ii) Jesus' miracles and actions relating to the present; and (iii) theological or Christological issues. Some of the general responses to statements in the latter category require further exploration, for instance, nearly half of the pupils in this sample (49.5%) agreed that Jesus was the Son of God, but only 9.4% agreed with the claim that Jesus was/is God. Clearly for pupils in this sample, adherence to the view that Jesus was the Son of God is not necessarily associated with belief that Jesus was/is God. For those for whom the phrase 'Son of God' pertains to Jesus' divinity, this would clearly be a contradiction. However, it can be accounted for by referring to responses to another questionnaire item. Pupils were asked to explain what they thought Christians meant when they refer to Jesus as the Son of God. Of those pupils who offered an interpretation of the term, the majority understood 'Son of God' to mean a special holy person sent as God's messenger (see appendix). This would explain why almost a quarter (22.1%) of Muslim pupils refer to Jesus as the Son of God; a position usually considered distinctly Christian.

Other apparent assertions of Christian faith also failed to correlate strongly with the belief that Jesus was/is God, for example, only 15.4% of pupils who believed that Jesus died for them, 13.9% of those who accepted his resurrection, 11.4% of those who agreed Jesus could heal and 21.1% of those who claimed he could make prayers come true, believed that Jesus was/is God. Furthermore, whilst 40% of the pupils in this sample disagreed with the statement that Jesus was a normal person, only 10.8% of these pupils believed him to be God ( $\chi^2(4) = 19.805$ ;  $p < .001$ ). This suggests they had other reasons for believing him to be unusual. Indeed, of those pupils who claimed that Jesus was not a normal person, the majority agreed that he cared for people ( $p < .001$ ); was sent by God ( $p < .001$ ); told stories to make us better people

( $p < .001$ ); tried to bring peace ( $p < .001$ ); could heal people ( $p < .001$ ); and was willing to lose his life for others ( $p < .001$ ). It would appear that Jesus' *actions*, rather than any claims about his *nature*, are more likely to account for the reason why the pupils in our sample *disagreed* with the statement that Jesus was a normal person.

## 4. Discussion

As in earlier research which suggested that young people have a relatively high regard for Jesus and respect him as a philosopher, social reformer and moral teacher (Alves 1968; Savin-Williams, 1977), the overall picture as illustrated by pupils' responses to items presented in this study reveals a generally favourable reaction towards Jesus. However, whilst there was a general assent towards an ethical and humanistic conception of the historical Jesus, there was less of a consensus about statements concerning (i) belief in and/or confusion about Jesus; (ii) Jesus' miracles and actions relating to the present; and (iii) theological or Christological issues. This coheres with past studies which have described the tendency of pupils to place greater emphasis on Jesus' humanity than his divinity (Claerhout and Declercq, 1970; Madge, 1971; Francis and Astley, 1997). However, we should be wary of making too many claims from this data regarding the beliefs of pupils in our sample concerning Jesus' divinity as the term 'divine' was not one we employed in the questionnaire. Pupils may use that word to mean something other than that Jesus was/is God. In normal everyday conversation for instance, it is often used to signify beauty, perfection or excellence. What we can say from this data is that, in general, the pupils in our sample do not believe that Jesus was/is God, but they do believe that he told people about God and that he was sent by God. In addition, almost half of the pupils believe that he was the

Son of God, although it does not necessarily follow that they believe him to be divine. Pupils' responses to the additional questionnaire item regarding understanding of the term 'Son of God' were problematic. Although we invited them to explain what they thought *Christians* meant when they refer to Jesus as the Son of God, the majority of pupils responded by describing Jesus as a messenger sent by God rather than by referring, for instance, to the divinity of Christ or other concepts such as Messiahship. There could be many reasons for this: (i) it could reflect what they have or have not been taught; (ii) they are not yet able to differentiate their own beliefs from those of the people they have studied; (iii) they were suggesting what they thought Christians *should* mean when they refer to Jesus as the Son of God rather than what they *do* mean; or (iv) they were unable, perhaps due to their young age, to employ the appropriate religious language. Although we do not know which of these suggestions (if any) is most accurate, there are clear opportunities for further research into the Christological conceptions held by children and young people at differing stages of development.

Our exploration of the pupils' responses to the Likert Scale statements was further complicated by the possibility that pupils may have interpreted 'was/is God' as meaning 'was/is God the Father' in order to differentiate between God as 'God the Father' and Jesus as 'God the Son'. If this was the case, then pupils would not agree that Jesus was/is God because Jesus is Jesus (the Son) and God is God (the Father). A similarly complex pattern of responses can be found in Cox's study (1967), where the majority of students rejected the notion that Jesus was the Incarnate Word of God but claimed to be either fairly/completely confident that he was the Son of God who became man. It is likely that at least to some degree the inconsistency evident in both

studies results from varying interpretations of the terms employed, with the added complexity in our study, that the respondents were only ten or eleven years old.

Previous studies have observed that rather than promote belief in Jesus' divinity, the miraculous elements of the Gospel narratives often lead to a rejection of Christological claims made about Jesus based on those narratives (Cox 1967; Madge 1971; Savin-Williams, 1977; Walshe 2005). We cannot confirm or deny this causal relationship on the basis of our data, but from the pupils' responses we can conclude that they do not correlate the healings of Jesus with the fact that Jesus was/is God. This suggests that they have found other ways to explain such 'miraculous' occurrences. Whatever explanation is offered, it diverges from the explanation that the majority of Christians would proffer and may be due to the proportion of Muslims within our sample (28.8%). In addition, it should be noted that the questionnaire items pertaining to the resurrection and Jesus' ability to make prayers come true provoked varied reactions from pupils. This evidence of disagreement in regard to the statements concerning Jesus' miracles may relate to a recent study which found that the majority of year 8 pupils (aged 12-13) surveyed identified the miracles of Jesus as the aspect of the person, life and teaching of Jesus they found the most difficult to understand (Walshe, 2005).

It is interesting to note that the issues about which there is a less clear consensus of opinion among our pupil sample are also the issues which children for a long time have found it hardest to understand. In 1967, Cox demonstrated that young people find the miracles of Jesus, including the virgin birth and the resurrection, difficult to understand and, in 1971 Madge noted that students experience difficulty with ideas

relating to the relationship between Jesus and God and with the plausibility of the miracles. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between those aspects of the curriculum which children say they find difficult to understand and a) their own personal beliefs and b) the extent to which there is consensus of opinion about those curricular components. It is possible, for example, that pupils identify Jesus' miracles as hard to understand simply because either they don't believe that Jesus performed miracles or they find it hard to make sense of the multiplicity of beliefs about miracles that they have encountered.

At this point, it is worth noting that we have not undertaken this research in order to assess children's conceptions of Jesus against standard Christian doctrine or to exhort teachers to correct perceived misconceptions. Instead, we have asked our respondents for their own thoughts because we think it is important for religious educators to know and understand what children's conceptions of Jesus are. There may be significant variance between a pupil's conception of Jesus and the conceptions of Jesus held by other pupils, the teacher, the textbook writer, the religious adherents under study, the author(s) of, or characters within, the Bible, and so forth. It is possible that this conceptual variance could become a significant barrier to children's learning *about* and *from* subject matter relating to Jesus. Rather than embracing the opportunity to engage with, and develop their understanding of, the diversity of beliefs they encounter in RE, it is possible that such wide divergence of opinion leads pupils, in bewilderment and frustration, to claim that they do not 'understand' when actually their levels of understanding may be quite sophisticated.

From our perspective, it is important that pupils should have an opportunity to explore the similarities and differences between conceptions of Jesus, as well as the justifications which underpin them. As has been stated in a previous study, if RE wishes to present the person of Jesus more effectively, then it needs to embrace 'the variety of beliefs held about him by members of different faith communities, the findings and challenges issued by contemporary New Testament scholarship, and the difficulties experienced and questions raised by the pupils themselves' (Walshe, 2005, 77). These differing perspectives create a space which is characterised by conceptual variance and differences of opinion. This provides fertile ground in which children can learn about, reflect on, and respond to, their own and other people's conceptions of Jesus.

It may be tempting for teachers to focus on an ethical and humanistic conception of the historical Jesus because that conception provokes less controversy in that it does not emphasise Jesus' miracles and actions relating to the present day or raise complex theological or Christological issues. However, this does not do justice to the Jesus presented in the Christian New Testament or the Christ worshipped by Christians around the world. If children are to develop their conception of Jesus to increasingly sophisticated levels then they must grow in knowledge and understanding of their own and other people's conceptions of Jesus which includes discussing claims about Jesus' divinity as much as, if not more than, his humanity. Over the course of their entire school careers, this should enable pupils to better articulate their conceptions of Jesus and to be able to locate their conceptions within wider discourses.

In conclusion, whilst this study has confirmed many of the findings of previous research in the field, further investigation into the difficulties experienced by pupils in regard to the presentation of Jesus in RE is required. Thus, in the second phase of the research, which will be reported shortly, we employed semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into children's conceptions of the resurrection, healing miracles and the title 'Son of God' and to explore the reasons why children identified these aspects of the curriculum content as difficult to understand. Ultimately, such research is important because it uncovers how children's hermeneutical horizons, that is, their ontological and epistemological assumptions and their interpretative frameworks, affect the way they conceptualise and engage with RE curriculum content, as well as providing religious educators with clues as to how they can ensure that children learn *about* and *from* the figure of Jesus in effective, purposeful and meaningful ways.

## Appendix

In section B of the questionnaire, pupils were asked to explain what they thought Christians meant when they talk about Jesus as the Son of God? The table below presents the most popular responses:

<b>Explanation of Son of God</b>	<b>Pupils' responses (%)</b>
Repetition of term with no explanation	20.7
Jesus was a special holy person chosen/sent by God to be his messenger	19.5
Jesus was like God in his words/actions	6.5
Jesus is the second God	1.9
Jesus was God in human form	1.7



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## **NOTES**

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<sup>i</sup> 49.5% of pupils disagreed with the statement 'not the Son of God'.