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Visual Depictions of Religion in Children's Picture Books

Abstract: How children are introduced to concepts of faith is a sensitive matter. One approach used by both religious and secular organizations is children's literature, including children's picture books. This paper offers an exploratory study of how religion and spirituality are depicted in such literature.

Résumé : La manière d'introduire les enfants au concept de la foi est un sujet délicat. Une approche utilisée par les organisations religieuses et non confessionnelles est la littérature jeunesse, y compris les livres d'images. Cette communication présente une étude exploratoire sur le traitement de la religion et de la spiritualité dans la littérature jeunesse.

How children are introduced to concepts of faith is a sensitive matter. One approach used by both religious and secular organizations is children's literature, including children's picture books. "Picture books" are books for pre-scholars and early-primary-age children. The books tell a story using illustrations and few words. This paper offers an exploratory study of how religion and spirituality are depicted in such literature. It makes use of a sample of 56 titles from a larger collection of 21,000 picture books published in the past 40 or more years. The paper also addresses the Conference theme in that it studies the physical, intellectual, and organizational spaces found in children's literature and represented by expressions of visual communication as well as words.

The intent of the study is to introduce possible areas of more-detailed research into how religious concepts are visually represented in picture books. We began by asking questions such as, "How is religion depicted in the illustrations used in children's picture books?", "Have there been changes over time in these depictions?", and "What avenues for research might there be in such a substantial collection?" Using subject descriptors in the cataloguing records of the collection, concepts including the following were identified as a means to selecting books with religious content: spirituality, church, religion, death, god, and goddess. The methodology employed is one of content analysis of words and illustrations. Of course, this study is limited to one collection and then to just a sample of possible titles from the 21,000 found in that collection.

The literature on both children's books and spiritual information is extensive, to say the least. The writers of spiritual information tend to claim that they receive information by a method beyond the five senses (Kari, 2009). Children's picture books provide one set of information sources that have received little attention in regard to their use of spiritual themes. The actual creation of spiritual information is an area of study that has not been given much attention (Kari, 2006). This study serves to fill this gap in the literature by studying the spiritual information as it exists separate from actual use.

The books in this study are coded according to their spiritual or physical appeal. Books with cognitive themes are ones that appeal to spiritual and symbolic language. Those books with physical themes appeal to the senses of children. The nature of the picture book indicates that all of the books will include at least some element of the physical. Most of the books in this study are religious, invoking a particular Christian commitment to doctrine and the Bible as sacred (Kari, 2006).

All books in the collection had been previously catalogued by subject, and so the books were searched by subject heading. The following subject terms were employed: “angels,” “church,” “god,” heaven,” “Jesus,” and “religion.” The books were then selected based on religious presence and date of publication and after that were coded by religious theme. The religious themes of all the books in a given subject heading were studied for commonality. These common themes were then studied among all books in the selection for overall commonality and reoccurrence.

The initial level of analysis was an effort to categorize the contents of each subject into themes. In each case, the books found under each subject term were examined for possible themes in the realm of spirituality and also in the realm of physicality. Three themes for each realm were determined based on the content of the books. Thus, the analysis covers three levels, as follows:

Realm: Spiritual or Physical

Themes observed (23): Growth, Inspiration, Fun, Task, Nature, Protection, Leadership, Structure, Sacrifice, Emotion, Desire, Process, Location, Aesthetics, Blessing, Direction, Creation, Nature, Naming, Teaching, Imagery, Sensuality, Dependency.

Subject terms: Angels, Church, Heaven, God, Jesus, Religion

The study is a continuation of previous work done on the text of the picture books. This study focuses on the illustrations and draws new categories of evaluation based on those illustrations. As such, accepted approaches to analyzing children's picture books are applied.

Shulevitz (1985) observes that "picture books are 'written' as much with pictures as with words" (p.3). The story should be accessible to the very young child who cannot read. The pictures expand the words. The researchers discuss and illustrate elements of the picture books which add to our understanding of the religious content and intent of the author and illustrator. These elements include consistency between the words and pictures, complementary message of the author and illustrator, accuracy of the pictures, use of colour, appropriateness of typeface to image and content, use of the front pages and end pages to reinforce the story theme, the use of borders to tie the theme together, and more. Asking how these elements are used in the communication of the story leads to a fuller understanding than is provided by just the words. Thus, the visuals are integrated into the intellectual, physical, and organizational spaces present in the minds of the creators and of the readers.

References

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