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Attachment theory and religion

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Attachment theory deals with the development and dynamics of interpersonal affectional bonds. It also provides a framework for understanding individuals' relationship with God, which is central to religion. We review basic concepts of attachment theory and survey research that has examined religion both in terms of normative attachment processes and individual differences in attachment. We cite evidence from cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal studies showing that many religious individuals experience God as a source of resilience (e.g. a safe haven and secure base). We also summarize proposed attachment-related developmental pathways to religion. Finally, we review research on religion and mental health undertaken from an attachment viewpoint and discuss future directions.

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Attachment theory: Basic concepts

Bowlby [1] posits that an innate psychobiological system (*attachment behavioral system*) motivates proximity seeking to supportive others (*attachment figures*) in times of need for the sake of protection and safety. According to Ainsworth [2], people turn to attachment figures for two main provisions: a *safe haven* (i.e. distress alleviation and comfort) and a *secure base* from which to explore, learn, and thrive. Attachment theory also delineates individual differences in attachment-system functioning [3], usually resulting from variations in experiences with attachment figures and the storage of these experiences in mental representations of self and others (*internal working models*,

IWMs) [4]. Interactions with mostly sensitive/responsive caregivers lead to attachment security — expectations that support (a safe haven and secure base) will be available when needed — and reinforce positive IWMs of self-worth and others' benevolence. When attachment figures are not reliably sensitive/responsive, however, attachment insecurity may result, marked by negative IWMs.

In adolescence and adulthood, researchers have conceptualized attachment-related individual differences (orientations or styles) as regions in a continuous two-dimensional space [5]. One dimension, attachment-related avoidance, reflects the extent to which a person distrusts others' intentions and defensively strives to maintain behavioral and emotional independence (*attachment-system deactivation*). The other dimension, attachment-related anxiety, reflects the extent to which a person worries that others will not be supportive and anxiously seeks their love and care (*attachment-system hyperactivation*). Whereas high avoidance or anxiety scores reflect insecurities about others' responsiveness, people who score relatively low on both dimensions are considered secure with respect to attachment (i.e. comfortable with intimacy and more secure interdependence with others). Decades of research has largely supported the anxiety-buffering and growth-promoting functions of attachment security and the theorized developmental pathways from sensitive/responsive caregiving to the formation of secure attachments [6,7].

Normative processes: God as a noncorporeal attachment figure

The religion-as-attachment model [8[•],9^{••}] provides a framework for understanding religious beliefs, experiences, and behavior. With respect to major faith traditions that view God as a source of love and comfort, Kirkpatrick and Shaver [10[•]] conceptualized believers' relationship with God as an attachment bond and claimed that believers may perceive God as an especially powerful source of support (i.e. a safe haven and secure base). This view of God as an attachment figure appears at both doctrinal and experiential-affective levels of representation [11[•]]. Also, neuroscientific evidence has indicated that religious individuals perceive God as a relational, dialogical partner when engaging in personal prayer [12].

Attachment to God seems to develop in temporal conjunction with the maturation of attachment [8^{••}]. Cognitive developments (e.g. symbolic thought, mentalization)

that decrease children's reliance on physical contact with the caregiver and increase their ability to rely on internalized sources of security also enable them to represent noncorporeal entities like God as attachment figures.

There is extensive evidence that believers tend to perceive and relate to God as a safe haven and secure base [8**]. For example, many prayers (e.g. petitionary prayer) and rituals (e.g. raising arms) in times of need represent explicit requests for a safe haven [13]. Moreover, Beck [14] found that individuals who hold a secure attachment to God were more engaged in theological/existential exploration, and were curious about and tolerant of alternative views while subscribing firmly to their beliefs. In two sets of experiments, adults and children reacted to attachment-related threat primes (e.g. separation) with increased closeness to God [15*,16*]. Similarly, Granqvist *et al.* [17**] found that a threat prime (e.g. failure) heightened believers' cognitive access to God-related representations and that a 'God' prime heightened access to positive, secure-base-related words and increased positive affect to neutral stimuli. Further supporting the secure base function, Kupor *et al.* [18] found that a God prime increased people's willingness to engage in exploratory risk-taking, especially among those with secure attachment to God.

Individual differences in attachment and religion

Two hypotheses have been proposed concerning developmental pathways to religion based on attachment-related experiences – the correspondence hypothesis and the compensation hypothesis [9**,10*]. The *correspondence hypothesis* comprises two aspects. First, IWMs resulting from interpersonal experiences generalize to representations of God. Positive IWMs foster corresponding representations of a benevolent God, whereas negative IWMs foster more negative God representations. Second, sensitive/responsive caregiving and the formation of a secure attachment orientation facilitate social learning from attachment figures, therefore, promoting parent-offspring similarity in religion (i.e. socialized correspondence). The *compensation hypothesis* states that religious experiences may be used to compensate for a lack of attachment security in close relationships.

A large body of research has supported these hypotheses [8**]. There is evidence that security in close relationships and experiences of sensitive/responsive caregiving are positively linked to loving God images [19,20,21*]. Using a Religious Attachment Interview (RAI) [22] modeled on the coded semi-structured Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) [23], Nkara *et al.* [24] reported that estimates of sensitive/responsive caregiving on the AAI predicted, three years later, more coherent, benevolent God representations on the RAI. Also, coherent (secure)

attachment discourse on the AAI predicted more benevolent God representations.

IWM correspondence has also been supported in the experimental studies reviewed above. Specifically, participants with more secure attachment — operationalized as recalled attachment history in childhood [15*], child attachment representations [16*], and adult attachment style [17**] — showed greater increases in closeness to God and access to God concepts following threat primes. Furthermore, attesting to an intergenerational link, children of mothers with secure attachment representations on the AAI sensed God as closer than did children of mothers with insecure attachment representations [25*].

Studies of exploratory religious behavior have also supported the correspondence hypothesis. In a study of adult Jewish converts and apostates, higher attachment security was associated with more thorough exploration of religious ideas (e.g. 'I was interested in knowing about different forms of faith') [26]. Similarly, young adults with more secure attachment to parents and peers were more likely to mention secure-base themes, such as optimism, confidence, and felt security, in interviews about religious exploration [27].

There is also evidence that secure attachment facilitates the intergenerational transmission of religion [20,28]. At high levels of parental religiosity, individuals reporting responsive caregiving score higher on religion variables than those reporting less favorable caregiving [10*,29]. Similarly, Greenwald *et al.* [26] found that more attachment-secure adults tended to experience a religious change that was generally aligned with their parents' level of religiosity during childhood. By contrast, attachment anxiety was associated with more sudden changes, more rejection of parents' religiosity, and more emotional compensation themes, and attachment avoidance was associated with weaker exploration and socialization themes. Finally, in a short-term prospective study of religious development during adolescence, secure attachment with parents predicted subsequent re-affirmation of their parents' faith [30].

Support for the compensation hypothesis appears to be mainly restricted to religious conversion and the underlying motives for it. Studies have shown insensitive caregiving experiences and attachment insecurities to be associated with religious instability, especially sudden-intense religious conversion occurring in life contexts of turmoil [31*]. Religious instability has been associated with attachment insecurity as assessed with self-report measures of attachment in adulthood — recalled attachment to parents [32] and current romantic attachment [26] — as well as with the AAI [21*]. These links have been found in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies [33,34*] and diverse cultural contexts (e.g.

monotheistic faiths, countries) [26,32]. Specifically, a perceived relationship with God may help regulate attachment system hyperactivation, which may illustrate a compensatory use of religion. However, no systematic study has directly examined the extent to which attachment-insecure individuals can earn a sense of security over time via a compensatory relationship with God. In a recent review, Granqvist [2] suggested that religion-as-compensation may facilitate earned security by exception but not by default (because negative IWMs usually linger).

Religion and mental health from an attachment viewpoint

The religion-as-attachment model offers a persuasive account of the religion-mental health link [8**]. Specifically, *contextual factors* that heighten proximity seeking (e.g. stress, low social welfare) typically increase the strength of the positive link between religion and mental health. *Aspects of mental health* that are most notably affected by having a safe haven to turn to (e.g. freedom from worry/fear) and a secure base to explore from (e.g. personal competence and control) are particularly linked to religion. *Aspects of religion* that represent a secure relationship with a benevolent God are most consistently linked to mental health [35]. However, the relevant research suffers from considerable methodological limitations (e.g. cross-sectional designs, self-report measures, small convenience samples) [36]. We nonetheless review studies here notable for their relatively strong designs, samples, or findings.

Secure attachment to God has been found to be inversely related to psychological distress and emotional problems in Christian samples [37,38]. Similar associations have been found for Muslims, despite relationships with Allah having been described as less personal [39], and for Jews, even though Judaism has been described as more behavioral/ritual than emotional/relational [40]. Importantly, in these studies, secure attachment to God has predicted mental health above and beyond intrinsic religiosity, social support, or interpersonal attachment styles.

Some prospective studies highlight the complex bi-directional associations between attachment to God and mental health. Among Belgian nursing home residents, for example, depressive feelings predicted later increases in insecure attachment to God [41*]. Similarly, a study of American undergraduates found that religious/spiritual struggles predicted more negative experiences of God (cf. insecure attachment) six months later, and such experiences, in turn, predicted more negative doctrinal views of God a year later [42]. However, a longitudinal study, with impressive sample size ($N = 531$), indicated that insecure attachment to God was associated with diminished mental health over time, and this effect was significant above and beyond interpersonal

attachment [43]. Moreover, secure attachment to God has been found to prospectively predict increases in self-esteem and optimism over time [44]. Additionally, secure attachment to God has predicted more experiences of transformative sacred moments (e.g. transcendence and interconnectedness) six months later, which in turn promoted subsequent resilience and spiritual growth [45]. In addition, Monroe and Jankowski [46] showed that a prayer intervention facilitated corrective experiences in attachment to God, which led to subsequent improvements in mental health.

Concluding remarks and future directions

The religion-as-attachment model has generated much supportive research. However, there are still unanswered questions about normative aspects of attachment to God (e.g. how does such an attachment usually develop? How does the experiential separation from and loss of God unfold?). In addition, an overreliance on self-report measures in examining attachment to God and mental health has created issues of semantic overlap and shared method variance. Also, few studies have sought to improve the measures' construct validity for distinct populations, used varying statistical methods [cf. [47]], or examined the hypotheses in clinical samples [cf. [48]]. Addressing these shortcomings requires expanding the repertoire of attachment-religion research. For example, neuroscientific studies are needed to examine the neural structures and functions underlying representations of God [cf. [12]], and well-validated implicit measures are needed to capture these representations at a less conscious level [49]. In addition, more long-term longitudinal studies are needed to examine religious/spiritual development from childhood to adulthood from an attachment perspective as well as the intergenerational transmission of religion [50**,51]. Finally, the religion-as-attachment model has led to novel questions that have garnered increasing interest and are worth expanding such as 'irreligious socialization' [52], new-age spirituality [21*], and the replacement of God by a welfare state in secular cultures [53].

To conclude, the religion-as-attachment model [8**,54] provides a fruitful theoretical framework and research program for studying normative processes and individual differences in people's religious beliefs and relationships with God. We hope this review spurs new studies, with improved methodological rigor, that extend and refine the model.

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