Attachment Foundations of a Religious or Spiritual Approach to Life

Beyond contributing to physical survival and mastering various life tasks such as career development, academic performance, and health maintenance, attachment security may facilitate what the psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1958) viewed as an important indicator of psychological growth and maturity in adulthood: the development of a religious, spiritual, or philosophical approach to life. This often involves developing a faith that life goes beyond the biological realm and that one is part of a larger spiritual entity or enterprise (“God”) that provides meaning to existence, transcends biological limitations, and expands the boundaries and capacities of the isolated self. It also typically involves endorsement of the humane values and ethical behavior encouraged by most religious denominations, such as benevolence, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity toward other human beings, if not “all sentient beings” [Dalai Lama, 2001]. In terms of Jung’s (1958) theory of psychological development, the attainment of a mature religious or spiritual approach to life is the heart of the individuation process by which people integrate personal and collective aspects of their personality, as well as biological and spiritual realms of existence. This component of individuation involves confronting the mysteries of life and death, achieving deep respect for other beings, and living a meaningful life.

How might attachment security contribute to a mature religious or spiritual perspective? Attachment theorists (e.g., Granqvist, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2005) have noted that the relationship between a believer and his or her “God” often meets the three defining criteria of an attachment relationship—seeking and maintaining proximity (e.g., the Protestant hymn, “Nearer My God to Thee”), achieving a safe haven in times of distress (“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me”; Psalm 23:4), and using a “stronger and wiser” other as a secure base (e.g., “On the day I called, you answered me and made me bold with strength in my soul”; Psalm 138:3). Believers assume that God is omnipresent, therefore, always nearby, and that they can increase proximity and closeness through religious practices, such as praying, meditating, performing sacred rituals, and engaging in altruistic acts. It is also well known that people turn to God in times of stress and distress; countless prayers amount to asking for assistance, comfort, reassurance, and relief. Thus, it seems likely that people project their working models of human attachment figures onto God (a tenet that Kirkpatrick calls the “correspondence” hypothesis). In other words, secure adults are likely to be able to project positive working models onto God and feel comfortable seeking proximity to God, confident in God’s supportiveness, and emotionally secure in opening themselves up to faith and spiritual transformation. Less secure individuals may have more difficulty imagining God as an always-available, highly responsive attachment figure.

Secure people’s self-regulatory skills should contribute to more mature forms of spirituality. Their cognitive openness should allow them to explore spiritual possibilities and engage in what Batson (1976; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993) called a religious “quest”—exploration of core existential questions and development of an autonomous, individuated spirituality that includes tolerance of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and confusion inherent in an open-minded quest. In addition, their willingness to take responsibility for their decisions and actions may facilitate an understanding of the ways their actions promote or hinder the welfare of others. Beyond these self-regulatory skills, secure individuals’ relative lack of fear, their sense of connection with others (see Chapter 9, this volume), and their caring and compassionate attitudes toward others’ suffering
(see Chapter 12, this volume) may help them adhere to the humanistic values (e.g., the Golden Rule) embodied in most world religions.

We do not mean to imply, of course, that insecurely attached people have no religious experiences or religious beliefs. In fact, Kirkpatrick (2005) assumed that insecure people can sometimes compensate (or, at least, attempt to compensate) for their frustrating human attachment experiences by directing their unmet attachment needs to God (the “compensation” hypothesis); that is, insecure people can turn to God as an alternative attachment figure whose beneficence may overcome fears associated with human attachment figures. However, their approach to religion can be expected to differ from that of more secure individuals. Whereas secure people's spirituality results, theoretically, from exploratory, growth, and self-expansion motives, insecure people's spirituality may include defensive efforts to overcome mundane frustrations and pains. Moreover, insecure people may project not only their need for a good attachment figure onto God but also the insecurities and negative working models acquired in other attachment relationships. They may view God, at least at times, as a harsh, rejecting figure; feel uncertain about God's love, care, and acceptance (in the case of anxious people); or try to maintain distance and independence from God (in the case of avoidant people). (One of our avoidant friends once said, jokingly, “I definitely have a relationship with God; I leave him alone and he leaves me alone.”) In addition, cognitive closure motivated by insecurity may prevent a comfortable religious quest and interfere with the attainment of autonomous spirituality. Insecure people may be especially prone to dogmatic, fundamentalist beliefs that portray God as an angry, sometimes arbitrary, judgmental figure who needs to be obeyed and placated lest he explode in rage and violence.

In the first studies of attachment and religiosity, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990, 1992) found that people who reported being more securely attached to parents or romantic partners were also more likely to report having a personal relationship with God (“I feel that I have a relationship with God”) and to believe in a personal God (“God is a living, personal being who is interested and involved in human lives and affairs”). These findings were replicated in subsequent cross-sectional studies (Granqvist, 1998; Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 1998b) and extended to other measures of religiosity. Attachment security has been associated with a more intrinsic (autonomous) religious orientation (Diller, 2006; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990), greater commitment to religious beliefs and practices (Byrd & Boe, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, 1992; Mickelson et al., 1997; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005), and higher scores on a measure of mature spirituality (TenElshof & Furrow, 2000). Although most of these studies focused on Christians in the United States and Sweden, some of the findings have been replicated in two studies of Israeli Jews (Diller, 2006; Gurwitz, 2004).

Several studies have found that the association between attachment security and religiosity is moderated by parental religiosity; that is, young adults who are securely attached to their parents tend to display higher levels of religiosity than their insecure counterparts, mainly when their parental attachment figures were also religious (Granqvist, 1998, 2002; Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). In fact, Granqvist and Hagekull (1999; Granqvist, 2002) found that more secure people scored higher on a measure of socialization-based religiosity (the extent to which participants adopt their parents' religious standards). These findings led Granqvist (2005) to propose a two-level correspondence hypothesis, by which social learning of parental religiosity in the context of secure attachment has effects on an offspring's religiosity beyond the projection of positive working models onto God.
There are also interesting findings about the religiosity of insecurely attached adults. Kirkpatrick (1997) asked participants in Hazan and Shaver's (1987) early survey study of romantic attachment to complete a questionnaire on religiousness 4 years later. He found that insecure women, whether anxious or avoidant, were more likely than secure women to report having formed a new relationship with God during the preceding 4-year period. Anxiously attached women were also more likely to report increases in religious experiences, such as being "born again" and speaking in tongues (glossolalia). This association between attachment anxiety and increases in religiousness over time was also observed by Kirkpatrick (1998b) in a subsequent study over a shorter time period (4 months) and in both sexes.

Research has also linked attachment insecurities with sudden religious conversions, that is, increases in religiousness characterized by a sudden and intense personal experience (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Granqvist, 1998, 2002; Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999, 2001). In a meta-analysis of all available data on this issue, encompassing around 1,500 research participants, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) concluded that people classified as insecure in their relationships with parents are more likely than secure people to experience a sudden religious conversion. There is also evidence that attachment insecurity, assessed either by self-report scales or the AAI, is associated with greater interest in New Age beliefs, spiritualism, and esotericism (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001, 2005; Saroglou, Kempeneers, & Semyhaeve, 2003).

Given that both secure and insecure individuals can adopt a religious approach to life, it has been important to explore differences in secure and insecure forms of religiosity. The meta-analysis by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) revealed that whereas people who were securely attached to their parents report gradual changes in religiousness, the changes experienced by insecure people were more sudden and emotionally turbulent. In addition, secure people's increases in religiosity were characterized by themes of affiliation and correspondence with significant others' religious standards, such as becoming more religious in connection with close friendships with believers (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999, 2001). In contrast, insecure people's religious changes were characterized by themes of compensation, such as becoming more religious in response to problematic close relationships, personal crises, and mental or physical illness (Granqvist, 2002; Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999, 2001). Furthermore, whereas secure people were more religious if their parents had been religious, insecure people were more religious mainly when parents displayed low levels of religiosity (Granqvist, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Thus, insecure religiosity may be a defensive attempt to distance oneself from parents and compensate for insecurities and personal crises, rather than a gradual and positive identification with the values and beliefs held by parents and other close relationship partners.

In a prospective (15-month) study of changes in religiosity during adolescence, Granqvist and Hagekull (2003) found that secure people exhibited increases in religiosity over the 15-month period mainly when they had formed a new romantic relationship during this period. Thus, their sense of spirituality or religiosity seemed to be influenced by an intimate interpersonal relationship. In contrast, insecure adolescents showed an increase in religiosity mainly when a painful romantic relationship breakup occurred during the 15-month study. These findings suggest that religiosity is more "compensatory" for insecure adults. The same patterns occurred in a subsequent study that used the AAI as a measure of adult attachment orientation (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2005).

Secure and insecure adults also differ in the extent to which God and religious beliefs provide a sense of having a safe haven and secure base. For example, securely attached people score higher than their insecurely attached counterparts on scales tapping emotionally based religiosity—the use of God as a safe haven and secure base (Granqvist,
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2002; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000)—and react to subliminal primes of rejection and separation with heightened religiosity of this kind (Birgerå & Granqvist, 2004). In a conceptual replication of these findings among Jewish believers, Gurwitz (2004) found that more secure participants (those with lower scores on the ECR Anxiety and Avoidance dimensions) reacted to subliminal exposure to threat-related words such as “failure” or “death” (compared with neutral words) with higher mental activation of God-related concepts (indicated by shorter reaction times in a lexical decision task). Gurwitz also found that more secure participants reacted to subliminal exposure to religion-related pictures (compared with neutral pictures) with more positive affect (projected onto previously neutral stimuli). Together, these findings indicate that (1) secure people displayed higher automatic activation of religious mental representations during threatening conditions than insecure people, and (2) this activation had more beneficial affective consequences for secure than for insecure people. This suggests that attachment security supports effective use of religious concepts and images as a psychological “safe haven.”

If God is truly used as an attachment figure, in the sense implied by Bowlby’s (1969/1982) theory, secure and insecure people should appraise and relate to God somewhat differently. Using P. Benson and Spilka’s (1973) Loving and Controlling God-Image Scales, several researchers have found that more securely attached people (assessed with either self-report measures or the AAI) are more likely to view God as a loving, approving, and caring figure (Gurwitz, 2004; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 1998b; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, 1992). This finding has been conceptually replicated in a study using a less explicit measure of God images. Gurwitz (2004) found that whereas secure participants reacted to subliminal exposure to the word “God” (compared to a neutral word) with faster reactions to positive trait terms (e.g., loving, caring) in a lexical decision task, insecure participants reacted faster to negative trait terms (e.g., rejecting, distant). This indicates, again, that attachment security is associated with greater cognitive access to positive mental representations of God, and that attachment working models forged in early human relationships get transferred onto God.

In an early attempt to probe attachment style differences in the way people (mostly Christians) relate to God, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) constructed a self-report scale to measure attachment to God and found that insecure participants (in human relationships) were more likely to have an insecure relationship with God. This correspondence between human attachment style and style of attachment to God has been replicated by researchers using other measures of attachment to God (R. Beck & McDonald, 2004; McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy, 2003; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002) and in Israeli Jewish samples (Diller, 2006; Gurwitz, 2004).

In a recent study of religious orientations among young-adult Israeli Jews, Diller (2006) found links between insecure attachment and difficulties with religious exploration: More avoidant individuals were less involved in a religious quest (assessed with Batson’s Religion as Quest Scale), experienced more distress during periods of uncertainty and doubt about religious beliefs, and were more negative in their appraisals of a hypothetical person who was asking spiritual or existential questions. Although attachment anxiety was not associated in either direction with a questing orientation to religion, it was associated with greater emotional turmoil during periods of religious quest and more ambivalent feelings about a person who was engaged in a religious quest. Thus, insecure people were more disturbed than their secure peers by a questing approach to religion or spirituality. This supports our idea that attachment security provides a foundation for mature religiosity. We say this without endorsing any particular religion; so far, the findings seem to be theoretically consistent across the different religions studied. Thus, we interpret the findings in psychological, not theological, terms.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

We began this chapter by explaining that Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory was innovative partly by virtue of taking seriously the cybernetic approach to conceptualizing goal-directed, and "goal-corrected" (Bowlby's term), behavior. This was in stark contrast to Freud's drive theory of motivation, which was understandably weak in its conceptualization of cognitive processes—a central aspect of mental life that had to await the arrival of digital computers and technologies that provide models of cognitive programming and behavioral self-regulation. Bowlby was influenced both by then-new military technology (he served in the British Navy during World War II) and Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which was as different from previous learning theories as cybernetics was from psychoanalysis. As a result of his emphasis on cognitive models and cognitive development, Bowlby was especially interested in cognitive aspects of both behavioral and emotional self-regulation.

Throughout this chapter we have shown that Bowlby's ideas provide fruitful guidelines for studying the role played by adult attachment style in self-regulation, in domains as different as daily personal strivings, success in college, balancing work-family pressures, maintaining good health, and achieving a mature spiritual perspective on life. Although many interesting findings have been obtained over the first 20 years of adult attachment research, most of the studies have been correlational and cross-sectional in design rather than longitudinal and experimental; many have involved only self-report measures; and only a few have measured both the primary independent and dependent variables and the proposed mediating variables. Few studies have included measures relevant to alternative explanations, such as common determination of independent and dependent variables by genetic or temperamental factors of the kind assessed indirectly by measures of the "Big Five" personality factors or common influences of states of mental health, such as depression. Fortunately, in cases when these potential confounds have been assessed and statistically controlled, the attachment-theoretical interpretations of the findings have been supported.

The prospects are therefore excellent for future research that explores mediating processes and evaluates the replicability and generalizability of existing findings to other societies and non-Western forms of religion, or to major philosophies of life that take the place of traditional religions. For example, we know almost nothing about the role of attachment processes in Buddhism or Taoism, where there is no personal God with whom one might establish a close relationship. Interestingly, a common Buddhist prayer encourages adherents to "take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha"—a mentally represented loving teacher, the scriptures flowing from his teachings, and the local religious community that disseminates the teachings and supports their practice (see Chapter 16, this volume). Combined with reverence for personal teachers and models, such as local monks and internationally known exemplars such as the Dalai Lama, these safe havens ("refuges") may serve some of the same psychological functions as the image of God the Father and Jesus Christ in Judaism and Christianity, respectively. Finding ways to retain these essential attachment-related aspects of religion, while deemphasizing dogmatic differences between sects, would be one good way to improve the chances of world peace and personal security of all kinds.