On the Relation Between Secular and Divine Relationships: An Emerging Attachment Perspective and a Critique of the “Depth” Approaches

Pehr Granqvist
Department of Psychology
Uppsala University, Sweden

The psychology of religion has existed as a neglected subdiscipline in general psychology, but a trend toward integration is currently present, partly due to applications of well-corroborated theories from mainstream psychology. The article has two aims. First, the most influential psychodynamic “depth” approaches (those of Erikson, 1958, 1959, 1963; Freud, 1913/1919, 1927/1964a, 1939/1964b; Jones, 1991; Rizzuto, 1979, 1991) to the study of relations between secular and divine relationships are criticized. The critique encompasses theoretical, methodological, and empirical reservations, including natural science and falsifiability concerns; reservations concerning the relation to the biological sciences and the theory of evolution by natural selection; and concerns with broad stages of development, the content of mental representations, and the parsimony of the analyses. Methodological points of critique are offered for the sole use of nonoperationalizable constructs, clinical case study designs, and post hoc reconstructions of past relationships. It is suggested that the problems with the depth approaches are serious enough to warrant a different point of departure for the study of relations between secular and divine relationships. Second, for the sake of further integration of the psychology of religion with general psychology, attachment theory is proposed as an emerging alternative to the traditional depth approaches, and some of the convergences and divergences between the two are highlighted. It is argued that besides passing the test in relation to the above
theoretical and methodological challenges, the emerging attachment framework re-
tains the most important insights of the traditional depth perspectives.

Psychologists of religion have complained about the lack of respect that their discipline receives from general psychology, as well as about its lack of integration with it (Batson, 1997; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996). The situation with lack of respect is about to change favorably, as seen, for instance, in more attention devoted to religion in general psychology textbooks (see Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). One important reason the psychology of religion has existed as an isolated and neglected subdiscipline in psychology is because it has lacked empirically corroborated theories and research programs that are well anchored in general psychology (Batson, 1997). The current change can similarly be partly attributed to the adoption of such theories and programs, which have been shown to be applicable to a wide range of religious beliefs and behaviors, for example, coping theory (Pargament, 1997), attribution theory (Hood et al., 1996), evolutionary psychology (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2004), and behavior genetics (e.g., D’Onofrio, Eaves, Murrelle, Maes, & Spilka, 1999).

One of the classic areas in the psychology of religion concerns early relational underpinnings of religiosity. This area is dominated by the “depth” approaches, which in one way or the other are based on a psychoanalytic foundation. As with psychoanalysis in general psychology, however, this area developed much on its own, remote from other developments in the empirical psychology of religion. An aim with the present article is to provide a critical examination of the depth approaches. It will be argued that the shortcomings of these approaches are severe enough to warrant a different point of departure for the study of the relational underpinnings of religiosity. Moreover, it will be illustrated that departing from attachment theory may remedy the situation and advance the integration also of this area of study with general psychology, while retaining some of the key insights of the depth approaches. The article begins with a few clarifying terminological notes, followed by the two main sections, the critique of the depth approaches, and the description of an emerging attachment theoretical alternative.

TERMINOLOGICAL NOTES

The depth psychology of religion is used interchangeably with “psychodynamic” approaches to religion. The depth approaches have a common emphasis on early relationships and/or some type of domain-general drive(s) as shaping what are partly unconscious representations of parents and self, which will subsequently have ramifications for how the individual’s religiosity, particularly the individual’s God representation, develops. The term psychodynamic is used to denote perspec-
tives encompassing each of the following postulates (Westen, 1998): (a) much of mental life is unconscious; (b) mental processes operate in parallel (i.e., conflicts may be present); (c) stable personality patterns begin to form in childhood, and childhood experiences play an important role in their development; (d) mental representations of the self, others, and relationships guide people’s interactions with others and influence psychological symptomatology; and (e) personality development involves learning to regulate sexual and aggressive feelings, and to move from an immature, dependent state to a mature, interdependent one.

According to this relatively broad definition, attachment theory will be included under the general psychodynamic umbrella term, even though it has little to say about such drives of sexual or aggressive nature implied in the fifth postulate. The term *traditional psychodynamic* refers to perspectives that encompass not only all of the above elements but also the postulate of one or more of the following concepts: Id, ego, superego, libido, Eros, Thanatos, oedipal conflict, psychosexual or -social stages, fixation, object representation, transference, and the traditional defense mechanisms. Hence, attachment theory will not be subsumed under the traditional psychodynamic label (see subsequent discussion).

Use of the terms *natural science* and *humanist science* conforms to the common practice of distinguishing between two broad prototypes of intellectual endeavors. The central issue for distinguishing between these prototypes is not the subject matter but the manner in which representatives go about seeking knowledge. The natural science prototype is characterized by a nomothetic approach aiming at explanation and prediction of empirical regularities in the psychology of religion, usually by means of quantitative methodology and statistical inferences. Epistemologically, natural science tends to be based on the correspondence theory, that is, on the presupposition that true knowledge derives from accurate observations of the external world. This tradition conforms to the standard scientific program of mainstream empirical psychology. The humanist science prototype denotes intellectual endeavors characterized by an idiographic approach aiming at understanding the meaning of unique processes in individuals or groups, usually through qualitative/hermeneutical methodology and often case study designs. Epistemologically, this tradition is based more on the coherence theory, that is, on the assumption that true knowledge derives from an internally consistent and coherent network of theoretical postulates. Hence, this tradition corresponds more closely to disciplines such as history and literature than to psychology as an empirical science. Curiously, this tradition also encompasses the traditional psychodynamic accounts of religion, despite the fact that psychodynamic theories can be used differently in mainstream psychology (e.g., Wallerstein, 1986; Westen, 1998), as illustrated by attachment research.

Finally, religiosity denotes the individual’s way of representing, behaving, thinking, experiencing, and feeling—in more global terms, of relating to—whatever is perceived as divine. This definition is narrow in excluding other than indi-
vidual aspects of religion, but it is also broad in including all aspects of the individual’s way of organizing herself or himself in relation to what is perceived as divine.

A CRITIQUE OF THE DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

In this section, the traditional psychodynamic conceptualizations of religion will be criticized, with a particular emphasis on the perspectives of Freud (1913/1919, 1927/1964a, 1939/1964b), Erikson (1958, 1959, 1963), Rizzuto (1979, 1991), and Jones (1991). This is not an exhaustive list of psychodynamicists’ views on religion (see also, e.g., Jung, 1938; McDargh, 1983; Meissner, 1984; Pruyser, 1968). In line with the aim, however, the selection reflects perspectives that deal with the functional and structural connections between religiosity and early child–parent relatedness. In addition, the list reflects the typical historical development that has occurred in psychodynamic theorizing, from Freud’s original psychoanalytic model, via ego psychology (Erikson, 1958, 1959, 1963) and object relations theory (Rizzuto, 1979, 1991), to Kohut’s (1971) theory of self-development (Jones, 1991). A reason for selecting representative approaches to be criticized in some detail, instead of generalizing across them, is to appropriately consider each of the analyses as an individual creation. However, most of the points are equally applicable to the depth approaches not presented, and none of these escapes all of them.

Strengths

Collectively, the traditional psychodynamicists of religion should be credited for founding the study of the relational underpinnings of religiosity, which has been, and might continue to be, a theoretically important area in the psychology of religion. Individually, in the view of the author, Freud’s legacy to the psychology of religion was threefold. God, like parents, serves psychologically protective functions for the believer (but more for some than for others; Freud, 1913/1919). The believer’s relationship with God is linked, somehow, to personal experiences with the earthly father (but also to mother). Finally, what took place in the distant, phylogenetic past (or its conditions, to phrase it accurately) is important to comprehend in order for a fuller understanding of the present, including the religion of mankind (Freud, 1913/1919, 1939/1964b). Erikson (1958, 1959, 1963) left the legacy of formulating an important and testable hypothesis: Are favorable circumstances in the child’s relationship with his or her mother conducive to later development of faith in the adult child? In addition, Erikson gave (1959, 1963) attention to some of the specifics of the early relationship with the mother thought to affect subsequent faith development. Rizzuto’s (1979) analysis also left important contributions, which are amenable to empirical scrutiny. It highlighted the contribution
of both the maternal and paternal objects for the formation of the individual’s God representation; it emphasized the importance of both the private and public sources of the God representation; and it suggested that the God representation may serve mentally integrative functions for the individual. Finally, Jones (1991) in many ways served the psychodynamic study of religion well, moving its assumptions and emphases close to where a modern, empirically oriented relational psychology would take it. He demarcated it from the earlier sexual-drive approaches. He suggested a shift from the preoccupation with the representation of the object God to a focus on the affective relational bond with the sacred. Perhaps most important, he departed from an assumption that what is stored in the child’s representations is not merely fantasy, but real-life experiences.

**Weaknesses**

Despite the merits noted, the problems with each of the depth approaches are severe, some of the most serious of which will be highlighted. The emphasis is placed on theoretical problems, whereas methodological shortcomings, though serious enough, will be dealt with in less detail. It will be argued, finally, that even though some findings have emerged in seeming support of the depth perspectives, such are accommodated just as well by other theories, one of which this article will eventually discuss.

*Incompatibility with or isolation from the biological sciences and the theory of evolution by natural selection.* One major weakness of the traditional psychodynamic perspectives, in particular their application to religion, is their dubious relation to the biological sciences, with their integrating theory, the theory of evolution by natural selection. The original psychoanalytic framework, and many of its successors, are at odds with current thinking in these sciences. The reason for this is, in part, that the motivational account of psychoanalysis departs from a drive or psychical “energy” framework, modeled on the physical sciences of the 19th century, whereas that of the biological sciences often stems from a control systems perspective, encompassing evolved domain-specific mechanisms rather than global drives (see Hinde, 1970). Irrelevance, rather than incompatibility, in relation to the motivational model of an evolutionary science seems true of more recent psychodynamic perspectives that are not built on a drive motivational framework (e.g., the theories of Stern, 1985, and Kohut, 1971). However, irrelevance in relation to the only scientific theory known to provide an explanation for the origin of mankind may be almost as serious.

It is common among evolutionists to claim that a full understanding of a phenomenon demands not only the delineation of its ontogenetic origins and immediate causation but also an explanation for why a species acquired it in the first place, that is, its phylogenetic origins and ultimate causation should be delineated as well
(e.g., Buss, 1995; Hinde, 1970). Apart from Freud (1913/1919, 1939/1964b), traditional psychodynamic theorists have shown a striking disinterest both in phylogenetic processes and ultimate causation in general and the ways in which these may be relevant for understanding the development of religion in particular. In addition, when such accounts are present, they should not be in opposition to the principles of natural selection, which brings us to Freud. Freud never clarified, presupposing the actual existence of a primal murder, how an object representation, based on latent memory traces, could be inherited across generations. Unless contemporary evolutionary theory has made a mistake in discrediting the notion of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, he was probably utterly wrong in assuming heritability of memories, not to mention latent memories. Related to this is the fact that, as with the notion of global drives, the notion of “ontogeny as recapitulating phylogeny,” which clearly influenced the Freudian account of religion (Shafranske, 1995), is not taken seriously in the biological sciences. Had Freud elected to favor the Darwinian, as opposed to the Lamarckian, account of evolution, the situation “with psychoanalysis remaining permanently beyond the fringe of the scientific world” (Bowlby, 1973, p. 403) could have been avoided, but he would consequently have had to recast his theory along different lines.

This may seem to many psychologists as a piece of unfair critique, because no purely psychological theory seems to accommodate both ontogenetic and phylogenetic processes and both immediate and ultimate causation. Precisely for this reason, evolutionary psychology, built on the principles of natural selection, is emerging as an integrating paradigm both in general psychology (e.g., Buss, 1995) and in the psychology of religion (Hinde, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 2004). It would be of advantage to the fitness of any theory not to be in opposition to the theory of natural selection, and preferably, as is the case with attachment theory, to be built on its foundation.

**On broad stages of psycho-socio-sexual development, fixation, and the operation of defense mechanisms.** Each of the depth approaches assumes the existence of broad stages of psycho-sexual or -social development. Except in the cases of some biological and motor developments, the notion of discrete stages of development, particularly psychosexual stages, has long since fallen out of favor in developmental psychology. It is more common now to think of development as taking different pathways, partly depending on early experiences, like railroad tracks branching off from a central station (Bowlby, 1973; Waddington, 1957). Also, closely tied to the notion of stages of development is the assumption that when development has unfolded unfavorably, the individual remains “fixated” at the stage associated with developmental trauma. Fixation is supposedly evident in the operation of defense mechanisms, some of which are thought to be of primary importance also in the depth conceptualizations of religion. The emphasis on stages of development, fixation, and associated defense mechanisms has resulted
in different identifications across the depth theorists of which stages that are foundational for the aspects of religiosity of interest, with Freud (1913/1919, 1927/1964a) emphasizing the oedipal period, and Erikson (1958, 1963), Rizzuto (1979), and Jones (1991) highlighting different pre-oedipal periods. Assumptions of a key period for the development of religiosity are both arbitrary and unnecessary. Suffice it to say that early experiences with parents affect the religious pathway that the developing child will follow. Similarly, the postulate of defense mechanisms should be recast along different theoretical lines that do not presuppose psychological energy, stages of development, or fixation (see Bowlby, 1969). Hence, one of the most important tools, that of defense mechanisms, is of limited usefulness when carved out of the current material.

**The demarcation criterion.** Even though researchers disagree on the extent to which Popper’s (1959) falsificationist program for conducting science should be followed, in testing theories, most seem to agree that it is important that predictions can be derived about what is to be expected and what is not in the external world of events (this is not to say that other less succinctly formalizable criteria are not involved as well; see e.g., Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970). The postulate of defense mechanisms sets restraints on the falsifiability of the depth accounts of religi- tion. This is so partly because of the way in which they are inferred, namely so as to leave the conditions (e.g., types of past experiences with parents) leading to their operation unspecified. For instance, although Freud (1913/1919) noted that the male individual’s relationship with God “oscillates and changes along” (p. 147) with his relationship with the earthly father, he never specified which kinds of experiences with the earthly father resulted in which kinds of experiences in relation to God. That is, he failed to specify what would cause only some (male) individuals to utilize the relevant defense mechanisms in such a combination as to create his infantile need for cosmic rescue, despite the supposedly universal existence of inherited memory traces. Ironically, it may therefore be concluded about some of Freud’s (1927/1964a) doctrines, to use his own words directed against religious doctrines, that “just as they cannot be proved, so they cannot be refuted” (p. 164).

Rizzuto’s (1979) analysis suffers from a similar problem of near irrefutability:

Objects who originally provided a referential framework for the formation of the God representation can move, through defensive maneuvers, into any of the following positions in relationship to God: (1) direct continuity between one and the other [continuity] … ; (2) direct opposition to each other so that they are either antagonistic or at the opposite poles of the representational gamut [discontinuity]—God is giving while parents frustrating, or parents are idealized while God is seen as an object to be avoided; (3) a combination in which some aspects of God are lined up with the parents and others oppose them. (p. 89)
Hence, regardless of alternative (i.e., continuity, discontinuity, a combination), the God representation is driven by “defensive maneuvers.” In the absence of specifying the conditions under which each defensive maneuver is to be expected, Rizzuto’s analysis is fool proof, and fails to be scientifically informative.

In suggesting that basic trust is the cornerstone for faith, and that the God relationship should be viewed through a transferential lens, Erikson (1959, 1963) and Jones (1991) fare better in terms of refutability. Both presumably predicted continuity between representations of self, others, and God, so that a person with favorable experiences with parents develops faith and a corresponding God relationship.

The content of mental representations: Real-life experiences or fantasy?
The absent descriptions of which experiences lead to the operation of particular defense mechanisms may not be so problematic for some depth theorists, particularly object relation theorists (see Kirkpatrick, 1995), given their conclusions that the content of the representations stem from the child’s fantasy (e.g., Klein, 1932; Winnicott, 1953). This absence is, however, problematic for theorists, such as Bowlby (1969), Kohut (1971), and Stern (1985), who held the content of the representations as reasonably accurate reflections of the real experiences that the child has had in relation to the caregivers. This latter assumption is, moreover, strongly supported by empirical research (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997), showing parental sensitivity to child signals to predict the child’s mental representations, as inferred based on the child’s way of organizing his or her behaviors around the parent.

A note on parsimony. A common theoretical limitation of the depth approaches concerns parsimony. The situation is most clear with respect to the Freudian analysis. In its complexity of primal murder, repression of the crime, totem sacrifice and representation, inherited latent memory trace (in need of another stimulus for the return of the repressed), transformed libidinal energy, oedipal conflict, formation of the superego, ambivalent object representation of earthly father, and a particular combination of defense mechanisms, the Freudian account of the formation of the God representation is far from parsimonious. The analyses of Erikson, Rizzuto, and Jones fare better. However, both Erikson (1958, 1959, 1963) and Rizzuto (1979, 1991) presupposed domain-general drives, stages of development, fixation, oedipal conflicts, and a particular combination of defense mechanisms to account for the development of faith and of the God representation, respectively. As noted, many of these constructs are unnecessary, making the analyses overly complex, as well as unfortunate, given their theoretical foundation.

Some remaining theoretical shortcomings, and a critical note on the development of “postmodern” epistemology. A serious problem common to the depth theories of religion is that, in spite of their complexity, their implication
for religiosity in its totality is so limited. Although Freud (1913/1919, 1927/1964a, 1939/1964b) dealt both with rituals and representations, Rizzuto (1979, 1991) delved mainly into the latter, whereas Erikson (1959, 1963) was exclusively concerned with faith, and Jones (1991) with the God relationship. A sound theory of religion should have more general implications, particularly given that different aspects of religiosity are highly related. Another common problem is that, although it is well known that the image of both parents are related to the image of God, and that God image typically encompasses both maternal and paternal attributes (e.g., Birky & Ball, 1985; Godin & Hallez, 1965; Nelson, 1971; Vergote & Tamayo, 1981), the depth perspectives fail to make sense of the influence of one parent, most notably Freud of mother and Erikson of father. As Rizzuto was concerned only with the child’s early relationship with the mother, she should not be in a position to assert, as she did, that the father relationship is important in shaping the God representation.

As for additional shortcomings of the individual contributions, a problem with Freud’s (e.g., 1927/1964a) approach was that it was so value laden as to be disrespectful to its topic of inquiry. Related to this is the fact that his emphasis on the mature adult as an autonomous and independent being, as opposed to the child’s and the religious individual’s “dependency,” has fallen out of favor among most psychodynamicists, who view the mature adult as interdependent (Bowlby, 1973; Kohut, 1971; Stern, 1985). Freud’s independence emphasis was also probably partly responsible for his blindness to nonneurotic forms of religiosity. A remaining shortcoming of Rizzuto’s (1979) analysis is that, in spite of the good intention, object relations theory is not a framework well suited for understanding the public origins of religiosity (e.g., Geels & Wikström, 1993). Instead, other theories, with a clearer relation to principles of social learning and socialization, are needed (see Richters & Waters, 1991, for the case of attachment theory).

A final critical note against Jones (1991) is that he seemed to be taking Kohut’s (1971) and Stern’s (1985) notions of the fundamental interrelatedness—as opposed to Freud’s emphasis on the ideal autonomy—of the human self into new, wholly irrelevant domains, namely those of epistemology, philosophy of science, and metaphysics. According to Jones, “Newer models of transference” are namely “part of the movement away from the Newtonian world picture that governed science in Freud’s day” (p. 32). Instead, in a passage that could have been written by any postmodern fraud (e.g., Sokal, 1996), Jones declared that

Especially in the interpersonal sphere (although quantum mechanics suggests this is also true of the physical world) there is no reality apart from our relation to it … With the myth of objective reality refuted, analyzing the transference shifts from uncovering reality to interpreting it. (p. 23)

Hence, the depth psychology of religion has come full circle, from the contention that religion is illusory (Freud, 1913/1919, 1927/1964a, 1939/1964b) to the declara-
tion that objective reality is likewise (Jones, 1991). Following Jones’s insistence on taking the psychodynamic study of religion from an Enlightenment science ideal to the intellectual smokescreens of postmodern narrativism, with its epistemological hegemony—to use a popular expression—of celebrating a nonobjective science (e.g., Gill, 1979; Spence, 1982), would likely prevent the psychodynamic study of religion to move from its isolated, encapsulated state, and counteract its integration with the empirical psychology of religion and with general psychology as a whole. According to my relation to reality, it would be preferable were scientists (save, perhaps, some quantum physicists) to proceed with the assumption that there is a reality that is reasonably independent of their own senses.

**Methodological shortcomings.** To save space, five methodological problems, common to all depth approaches to religion, are presented under this rubric. The first of these is the difficulty of operationalizing the central psychodynamic concepts. This difficulty is particularly acute for defense mechanisms such as regression (whether or not in the service of the ego) and projection (Freud, 1927/1964a; Rizzuto, 1979), but also for basic trust and mistrust (Erikson, 1959, 1963), transitional space and transitional object (Rizzuto, 1979), and transference (Jones, 1991). Moreover, there are virtually no hints in the depth analyses as to how individual differences should be operationalized. The same holds for both parental behaviors and the child’s relationship with parents. To operationally define phenomena such as “the return of the repressed” and “latent memory trace” (Freud, 1913/1919, 1939/1964b) seems to be even more difficult. This means that, even though Erikson’s (1958, 1959, 1963) and Jones’s (1991) accounts are better off in terms of yielding predictions than are Freud’s (1913/1919, 1927/1964a, 1939/1964b) and Rizzuto’s (1979), this does not mean that those predictions can be tested. In contrast, it seems practically impossible to make observations of the key phenomena of the depth accounts of religion. Thus, their empirical fruitfulness cannot be determined satisfactorily.

Second, virtually all empirical work conducted in the service of the depth perspectives has been unsystematic, relying on a few, mostly unrepresentative cases or biographies, often drawn from clinical contexts. Impressive in depth as some of these case studies are, one is left wondering both whether unstudied cases would also fit the schemes, presuming that it is possible not to, and whether alternative interpretations of the studied cases can be ruled out. Hence, both the internal and external validity of the depth analyses are potentially severely restricted. Third, the analyst may have generalized backward from the inferred current God representation and relation to the patient’s past representations and experiences (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 1995), in which case the conclusion that they are somehow related is hardly surprising. This scenario is particularly likely for Jones (1991), who used both the individual’s internalized relations to shed light on how (rather than if) his or her affectional bond to God is made out of them, and the affectional bond to God
to shed light on the individual’s internalized relations. Fourth, the methodology of
the depth approaches has been marked by idiosyncrasy; that is, standardized meth-
ods have not been used across cases and studies. Replication attempts are therefore
difficult. Finally, no criteria have been presented for how to determine that two or
more phenomena (e.g., representation of parent and God) are related at an accept-
able degree of statistical probability. Therefore, some understanding of the relation
between the representations of secular and divine partners in the unique cases stud-
ied may have been obtained, satisfying the purported aim of the humanist ap-
proach, but no generalization to the psychology of religious beliefs and behaviors
beyond these unique cases is possible.

What about empirical findings “supporting” the depth perspectives? Besides the biographical and clinical case studies conducted by the originators of the
depth perspectives, a number of studies addressing similar issues and employing
more of a natural scientific approach have been performed. These studies have
mostly been correlational and examined relations between participants’ ratings of
parents and God (e.g., Birky, & Ball, 1985; Godin & Hallez, 1965; Nelson, 1971;
Tamayo & Desjardins, 1976; Vergote & Tamayo, 1981). Although these studies
have supported relations between images of parents and God along the lines sug-
gested by Erikson’s (1959, 1963) notion of basic trust as a prerequisite for faith,
Rizzuto’s (1979) hypothesis of representational continuity, and Jones’s (1991)
transference analysis, they are subject to shared method variance as well as to
self-report biases (e.g., social desirability). In addition, such findings are compat-
ible with other theories as well, such as with socialization (e.g., Spilka, Addison, &
Rosensohn, 1975) and attachment theory. In fact, two cross-cultural studies (Lamb-
ert, Triandis, & Wolf, 1959; Rohner, 1986), none of which relied on self-reports,
yielded analogous results, although undertaken within other theoretical frame-
works (e.g., parental acceptance-rejection theory). Compatibility with other theo-
ries (e.g., the compensation hypothesis in attachment theory; see subsequent dis-
cussion) holds as well for Ullman’s (1989) oft-cited quasi-experimental study on
conversion and the quality of relationships with parents, which was set out as a
“psychoanalytic study.” In other words, although results from external research
have pointed in the direction of some conjectures of the depth perspectives, they
should not necessarily be seen as part of their “database” (cf. Grünbaum, 1984).

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ATTACHMENT ALTERNATIVE

Conclusion, or Why Other Theories Are Needed

Despite the strengths noted at the outset of the critical evaluation, and in view of
the shortcomings reviewed, the assertion of Hood et al. (1996) seems well
founded:
Although these psychoanalytic theories can offer rich sources of ideas and insights into religious development … (1) they have not generated much empirical research; (2) the relevant research that has been carried out has been compromised by the difficulties inherent in operationalizing and testing some … concepts; and (3) the conclusions of related studies are somewhat ambiguous and contradictory. (p. 65)

For these reasons, the depth accounts have fallen out of favor in the natural science branch of the psychology of religion, yet have been quite influential in the humanist branch. Judging from the standards of a natural science of religion, however, there is something inherently flawed in a theoretical program from which falsifiable predictions cannot be derived and tested, either because the program is foolproof or because its constructs cannot be operationalized. Psychologists of religion therefore do well in turning their attention to theories that not only pass the test in relation to the challenges reviewed but that also retain some of the key insights of the traditional depth approaches of religion.

Divergences Between Attachment Theory and the Depth Perspectives

It was noted at the outset that one aim of this article was to show that departing from attachment theory might potentiate the integration also of this area with general psychology. Indeed, attachment theory moved out of psychoanalysis precisely because of some of the reviewed weaknesses (Bowlby, 1969, 1973), just as its application to religion grew out of a dissatisfaction with the depth approaches (Granqvist, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 1995). However, the relations between the traditional psychodynamic perspectives and attachment theory are complex, and space considerations prevent a more detailed description (for some authoritative treatments, see Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Fonagy, 1999).

A brief description of divergences are in order, though. In distinguishing attachment theory from the traditional psychodynamic perspectives, Bowlby (1969) gave attention to four differentiating characteristics of relevance in this context. First, he argued for the need of prospective designs as opposed to the reconstructive designs of psychoanalytic work. Second, he favored direct observations of the behavior of children, including normal children, in real-life situations, as distinguished from data obtained in the treatment of patients. Third, he drew attention to data on animals’ behaviors in similar situations as those thought to be important for human development, as well as to the ethological concepts utilized to explain such behaviors. Finally, in postulating an “attachment behavioral system,” designed by natural selection in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness to secure the survival of relatively helpless offspring by keeping them in proximity to their stronger and wiser caregivers, Bowlby replaced the psychical “energy” or drive motiva-
tional model of psychoanalysis with a model drawn from control systems theory. This latter model was, and still is, common among contemporary evolutionists.

Moreover, and as noted also by Kirkpatrick (1995), attachment theory is more narrowly and precisely defined than the traditional psychodynamic perspectives. Rather than being about “close relationships” in general (e.g., Fairbairn, 1943) or speaking of a general human need for “relatedness” (e.g., Mahler, 1972), attachment theory concerns a specific type of relationship where one stronger and wiser individual is discriminated from others as being the primary provider of security in stressful situations. Similarly, an assumption in attachment theory is that it is particularly in such situations that the caregiver’s sensitivity in responding to the child determines the child’s representations of self and others, or “internal working models” (IWMs). This is in contrast to more broad conceptions of “good” and “bad” objects (e.g., Fairbairn; Mahler) and of more global self-other representations as in Stern’s (1985) representations of interactions that have been generalized, which are supposedly not exclusive to the realm of attachment.

In addition, there has been an emphasis on empirical research and operationalizability in attachment research. Following Bowlby’s normative lead, Ainsworth et al. (1978) created a standardized laboratory situation, known as the Strange Situation (SS)—since then one of the most widely used methods in developmental psychology—to study different patterns of infant–caregiver attachment, as evident in the infants’ way of organizing their behaviors in relation to caregivers following attachment system activation (i.e., separation and reunion). The SS has been extensively validated, for instance in that attachment security has been linked to precipitating observations of caregiver sensitivity and to a diverse array of indices of subsequent socioemotional development (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). The study of attachment in adulthood has also rapidly expanded during the last 15 years, again potentiated by the construction of well-validated measures, most notably the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996; Hesse, 1999).

Attachment Theory and the Depth Approaches in Relation to Religiosity

Attachment theory has more recently been applied in the psychology of religion, and a number of studies testing relations between religiosity and attachment have now been performed (for the latest theoretical and empirical reviews, see Granqvist, 2003, 2005; Granqvist & Dickie, 2006; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2004). Although most of this research can be accused of a kind of naive realism in relying on self-reports of attachment, which take the content of participant responses at face value, a recent study using the AAI (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2002), which does not rely on the content of self-reports, replicated virtually all of the previous findings. In addition, recent experiments have found at-
attachment system activation (through subliminal separation exposures) to lead to an increased wish to be close to God compared to a control exposure (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004), which is difficult to explain in terms of self-report bias.

On the whole, the findings obtained in the attachment and religion studies converge surprisingly well with some of the conjectures offered in the depth analyses of religion. The Freudian emphasis on the defensive/protective function of religion has been supported (e.g., in findings indicating that religiosity helps alleviate distress) but found to be particularly true for individuals with insecure attachment characteristics (the compensation hypothesis). In addition, the reasoning, present in Erikson’s, Rizzuto’s, and Jones’s analyses, of some sort of correspondence between models of self/others and God, has similarly found support in that individuals with secure characteristics have a more loving God image and people with more insecure characteristics view God as more distant (IWM-correspondence). Also, Rizzuto’s notion of the public origins of religion has been supported in the attachment studies by findings of correspondence between offspring and parent religiosity, although qualified by a higher degree of correspondence for individuals with secure, as opposed to insecure, attachment characteristics (socialized correspondence). Finally, the hypotheses of religiosity as potentially serving some sort of mentally integrating functions (again present in Erikson, Rizzuto, and Jones) have been supported by preliminary findings in the AAI study, showing that some of the participants who were independently estimated to have suffered past attachment adversities with parents, and who used religion to compensate for states of insecurity, were currently coherently organized, or “earned secure,” with respect to attachment.

The critical point in favoring an attachment approach is thus not that the depth analyses are wrong in their assumptions, when such can be deciphered, of relations between secular and divine relationships. What is more important is that attachment research has a sounder theoretical basis, is more well corroborated and anchored in mainstream psychology, and therefore more promising for accomplishing integration with general psychology as well as with other developments in the empirical psychology of religion, such as coping theory (Pargament, 1997; see Granqvist, 2002) and the evolutionary psychology of religion (see Kirkpatrick, 2004). Note also that, because of their plasticity, it is easy in hindsight to find convergence with some of the depth conjectures. In addition, an advantage of the attachment framework is that it can yield reasonably specific a priori predictions, and that the study of relations between secular and divine relationships can undergo scientific progress based on incoming empirical feedback that signals the need for revisions and refinements of hypotheses. Moreover, insofar as both parents function as attachment figures for the child, which is typically the case, attachment theory, unlike the traditional depth approaches, can make sense of the fact that the relationships with both parents are important in shaping the individual’s God image. Finally, the attachment analysis of reli-
region is not restricted to any one aspect of religion but concerns several dimensions (i.e., experiences, behaviors, conversions, beliefs, rituals) that are governed by the believer–God relationship.

Attachment Theory in Relation to Natural and Humanist Science Considerations

In closing, I want to address the possibility that scholars in the humanist branch of the psychology of religion may feel that too much weight has been placed on criticizing the depth approaches from a natural science perspective, or a Newtonian version of science, as Jones (1991) might refer to it. The final reason, to be noted, as to why attachment theory is favored is because it also makes understanding, not only explanation and prediction, possible. The potential for understanding stems from an emphasis on the organization, or pattern, or even “meaning” of behavior (Sroufe & Waters, 1977) and thought processes (Main, 1991, 1993). Nowhere is this more evident than in AAI coding, which primarily relies on an examination of coherence (e.g., internal consistency) of discourse, and not on its empirical referents as occurring outside of the interview context. Hence, Main (1993) explicitly acknowledged that the coding process is hermeneutical, resting on the principles of coherence, rather than empirical in nature and resting on a correspondence epistemology. However, after having made the classifications, the researcher moves out of the internal restraints of the hermeneutical circle, or the world of the humanist scholar, and into the natural scientist’s real world of empirical events and regularities. The ability to utilize “the best of both worlds,” and to move flexibly between the two, is, in essence, one of the principal strengths of attachment theory. Psychologists of religion are encouraged to take advantage of this and its other strengths in pursuing their further interest in the relational underpinnings of religiosity.

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