

Who has faith (in attachment theory)?

A Review of Attachment in Religion and Spirituality: A Wider View. By Pehr Granqvist (2020, Guilford Press).

Fonagy and Campbell (2015) have predicted a revolution in attachment theory. They see the theory as clunky and outdated, focused on a limited number of questions and underpinned by outdated assumptions about human evolution and culture. This prediction comes at a fateful moment, and is perhaps a response to this moment: the retirement of a generation of researchers taught by the field's founders, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth and the ascension of a new set of research leaders. For Fonagy and Campbell, if attachment theory is to continue as a generative research programme two achievements are necessary. First, the programme will need revision to take into account contemporary understandings of human evolution and culture. Second, the programme will need to demonstrate its comparative benefits in potential spheres of application. Does attachment theory have the dynamic potential to generate this shift? Will it reward continued investment and elaboration by researchers?

Such changes, if they are to occur, will be a collective accomplishment by a new generation of research leaders. Yet one source of belief in the continued vitality of the research programme is suggested by *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality*, by the Swedish psychologist Pehr Granqvist. Granqvist is in direct line of intellectual descent from the founders of attachment theory: he completed his postdoctoral research under Mary Main, one of the first graduate students of Mary Ainsworth. *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality* represents a major innovation on this established tradition. It is also an intellectual descendant of William James's "Varieties of religious experience". In particular, Granqvist's book provides an updated, explanatory take on James's more than century-old distinction between the religion of the healthy-minded and the religion of the sick soul.

Attachment in Religion and Spirituality surveys and integrates more than twenty five years of research by Granqvist and others on people's attachment to divine figures. The book also uses the case of religion to propose revisions to mainstream attachment theory. These innovations represent an exciting contribution, and *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality* has surprises at every turn. It is also, frankly, among the most lively and accessible pieces of scholarship I have read. The chapters and the narrative flow of the book are well organised and coherent. Anyone could pick up this book and enjoy it.

Attachment in Religion and Spirituality starts by clearly setting out the case for the importance of its topic to the wider discipline of psychology, in recognition that religion and spirituality are sometimes seen as peripheral concerns. This was not always the case. Stanley Hall, the founder of this journal, was centrally interested in the psychology of religion. However interest in the psychology of religion waned in the twentieth century during the reigns of behaviourism and the cognitive revolution. Yet there has been increasing interest over recent decades in the interaction between cultural and individual-level processes. Religion and spirituality speak directly to this interest. And while psychological research on religion has at times suffered from methodological limitations and theoretical naivety, research in this area has matured to the point that it can credibly speak to the wider discipline and beyond. One of the breakout works, signalling this growing maturity was *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion* by Lee Kirkpatrick in 2005. Kirkpatrick and Granqvist have been close collaborators, and both use attachment as an overarching theory to link particular findings to conclusions relevant to the wider discipline of psychology. However one of the interesting features of *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality* is precisely its careful criticisms of Kirkpatrick's work. In particular, Granqvist addresses a variety of forms of religious life and religion-

like aspects of culture more generally, unlike Kirkpatrick whose model was centrally oriented by Christianity. And Granqvist also regards human evolution as shaped by the potential for cultural learning, with a stronger interaction between biology and culture than conceived by Kirkpatrick's evolutionary psychology approach.

To Granqvist, religion and spirituality are of interest as a way of exploring the interaction between cultural and individual-level processes. The first three chapters of the book focus on human psychological processes; the second three on individual differences. Chapter 1 presents among the most sustained update to attachment theory in light of evolutionary biology since the foundation of the theory by Bowlby. Granqvist proposes that Bowlby's account of evolution was unnecessarily narrow in conceptualising humans as adapted to a single kind of environment. Granqvist agrees with those such as Jay Belsky who have argued that individual differences in attachment may reflect evolutionary repertoires for responding to various kinds of environments, and for calibrating responses to threat. He theorises that besides providing protection, the proximity to the caregiver achieved by these strategies has served humans as an important platform for cultural learning, including religious traditions and identities. Granqvist attempts to give due consideration to biology and culture, and their interaction. This leads to the claim in Chapter 2 that divine and religious figures can be attachment figures of a non-corporeal kind, sought for feelings of closeness under conditions of threat, even if physical proximity seeking is not feasible. Even if attachment is considered a biologically pre-primed motivational disposition, it can take figures as its target that have only a cultural, rather than a physical, existence. Granqvist surveys evidence that divine and religious entities may be sought as a safe haven under conditions of alarm, where the cultural conditions make such entities available to serve this role, and where individual socioemotional development makes available expectations about safe haven accessibility.

Chapter 3 discusses the nature of attachment in the context of religious attitudes and beliefs, attending to different developmental periods across the lifespan. Granqvist emphasises that there is certainly no simple causal line between early attachment and later religious attitudes and beliefs. After all, some form of attachment behaviour is shown by other primate species, who do not evidently show religious and spiritual behaviour corresponding to that of humans. However early attachment relationships are thought to influence an individual's expectations about themselves and their social relationships – above all, whether an individual anticipates that others will be available as a safe haven under conditions of distress or alarm. Granqvist argues that these expectations are implicated in later social attitudes and beliefs, including regarding divine figures or religious communities as safe havens. Use of divine figures as a safe haven might be expected in religious cultures. However Granqvist cites results from studies showing that many 7-12 year olds report feeling close to God during emergencies or when lonely, even in highly secularised countries such as Finland. He suggests that the extrapolation of images of safe havens from early attachment figures to other entities such as God or institutions is facilitated by normative developmental processes that make early attachment representations available for symbolic redeployment.

Chapters 4-6 consider individual differences that theory and research has suggested can shape the symbolic redeployment of expectations about safe haven availability in religious life. Chapter 4 is a clear and well-organised exposition of the theory of individual differences in attachment. Briefly, in secure attachment, it is anticipated that the other will be available as a safe haven under conditions of distress or alarm; in insecure attachment, this availability cannot be presumed with confidence. Chapter 5 considers the "correspondence pathway", in which attachment security with caregivers contributes to religious belief and practice if these caregivers are themselves religious, and contributes to an image of religious entities or the religious community as available as a safe haven

when needed. The chapter reviews evidence for this pathway from cross-sectional, retrospective, quasi-experimental studies, and from two prospective longitudinal studies. This includes Granqvist's own work over more than twenty years, using experimental and other paradigms. For instance that an increase in the use of God to regulate distress was observed following subliminal separation primes among adult believers who had reported sensitive experiences with parents. In Chapter 5 Granqvist offers a sophisticated theoretical account of the "correspondence pathway", showing how attachment processes can link and integrate with social learning. This is a consequential integration, since classic attachment theorists such as Ainsworth opposed attachment to social learning, in arguing that children may seek their caregivers when distressed not solely due to reinforcement, but even when they are punished for doing so. Granqvist agrees with Ainsworth that attachment should be distinguished from social learning, but identifies that they can work together to produce the "correspondence pathway". In this chapter, Granqvist also presents the first of three sets of clinically relevant case studies, which bring flesh and blood to the book's group-based, nomothetic research reviews.

Chapter 6 addresses the "compensation pathway". Here, religious entities and religious communities may be sought by individuals who have not found a safe haven in their early relationships. Granqvist again reviews evidence from various sources for this pathway, and offers the proposal that religion may be sought out as a compensatory source of emotion regulation when other strategies have failed or are failing. Here, religious entities and religious communities may offer a surrogate safe haven, where no other safe haven is perceived as viable, in promising feelings of safety and regulation. As such, Granqvist proposes that religion will be selected as a surrogate more often when individuals are in a position to hear and believe such promises. Where such promises are less likely to be heard or believed, for instance in a secularised society, he suggests that individuals are then more likely to select other surrogate safe havens, giving the examples of opiates, pets and material objects. The feelings of safety and regulation offered by surrogate safe havens may, Granqvist acknowledges, be real and meaningful, even reparative of attachment insecurity. However, he offers his suspicion that, when such reparation occurs, it is achieved by contributing to trusting human relationships, for instance with the community of believers in the case of religious practice. It is in the context of a supportive religious or spiritual community that activities such as prayer, mysticism or study can have a sustainable safe haven function, and contribute to an individual's overall security.

Chapters 7 and 8 consider the role of attachment processes in the relationship between religion and mental health. Chapter 7 uses attachment theory to make sense of moderators of this relationship. Granqvist argues that contextual factors associated with recurrent activation of the attachment system such as stress, risk and violence will increase the strength of associations between religion and mental health. So will, he argues, factors such as the extent of social welfare support, which predictably reduce family stress, risk or violence at a population level. He also observes that the aspects of religious belief and practice that are most reliably linked to mental health are also those associated with provision of a safe haven, suggesting that attachment-related processes may be mediating the relationship between religion and mental health. Though he fully acknowledges that there are other mediating factors less linked to attachment, such as provision of personal meaning and an ethical code. Chapter 8 examines the role of dissociation in noninstitutional forms of spirituality. This is one of the strongest chapters in the book, and highlights the advances Granqvist's psychology of religion makes over Kirkpatrick's earlier work, in providing a framework that can address various forms of religious and spiritual practice and identity. Cohort studies at Harvard and Minnesota have found disorganised infant attachment – a form of insecure attachment – associated with later dissociative symptoms. On the basis of this link, Granqvist contends that attachment

disorganisation in early childhood may contribute to noninstitutional forms of spirituality, as mediated by the tendency to dissociation. He discusses empirical results from his own laboratory which reveal that disorganised states of mind regarding loss and trauma in adults predicted New Age spirituality and mystical experiences three years later, accounting for around 5% of variance. This relationship could be accounted for on the basis of the tendency to enter states of intense absorption. By contrast, disorganised states of mind were not associated with involvement in institutionalised religious practice. Granqvist emphasises that, in accounting for 5% of variance, attachment processes should be regarded as relevant, but certainly not determinative, for noninstitutional spirituality. This is a characteristic reflection: across the book generally, Granqvist is concerned to assign the proper causal weight to attachment, neither over-estimating nor under-estimating its contribution to religious life.

Chapter 9 draws comparisons between an attachment theory approach to religion, and other theoretical perspectives in the psychology of religion. The most interesting comparisons are with Terror Management Theory and with psychoanalytic theory. The former is well aligned with the ideas presented by Granqvist, and he carefully identifies the points of difference. Granqvist's discussion of psychoanalytic theories of religion is notable especially for his reflections on how his stance has developed in response to criticisms by psychoanalytic theorists of religion over the decades. Whilst psychoanalytic theories are regarded by Granqvist as often unfalsifiable and rarely empirically supported, the comparison has led him to acknowledge the limitations of attachment theories of religion, and of attachment theory more generally. These remarks, by a scholar in direct line of intellectual descent from the founders of attachment theory, are of sufficient note to warrant direct citation: "I am less optimistic about the prospect of attachment theory to replace the psychoanalysis of religion than I was... This is because of attachment theory's conceptual boundaries, its rudimentary defense mechanisms, and the attachment research habit of "cross-tabulating" people into types (secure versus insecure and organized versus disorganized), despite no individual being reducible to a type. Although these features have indisputably contributed to attachment theory's prosperity as an empirical research program, the attachment framework remains somewhat schematic and impoverished as applied at the individual level." Such remarks signal Granqvist's qualified faith in attachment theory: *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality* both considers the psychology of religion in light of attachment theory and research, and reconsiders attachment theory and research in light of the psychology of religion.

This reciprocal set of goals underpins Chapter 10, which presents a novel evolutionary framework for conceptualising the role of attachment within the psychology of religion. Granqvist argues that early attachment relationships can be expected to have provided both protection and learning in human evolutionary history. The nature of these early experiences can be anticipated to shape representations relevant to religion, such as safety and trust. This includes aspects of embodied cognition, which may affect experiences of ritual life. The qualities of the attachment relationship are also likely to shape whether the child experiences the claims of their caregiver about religious matters as relatively trustworthy or untrustworthy. This proposal entails two intertwined processes, then, in the transmission of religious identity across generations. First, where an individual has been cared for by sensitive caregivers, they can be expected to extrapolate benevolent religious entities. Second, this process will be matched and reinforced by trust in the account of caregivers, when this account is also of a benevolent divine being.

In the final chapter, Granqvist extends his account to secular communal, cooperative life, given that this is likewise organised around mythologies in analogous ways to religious practice. He reports on exploratory work his research group has conducted using priming studies, examining whether the

welfare state can prompt feelings of security, based on the idea that welfare states and religions provide competing but functionally equivalent insurance set-ups. So far, the results have suggested that priming participants to think about the welfare state does not prompt feelings of security. However Granqvist's study only examined effects of priming the welfare state in the abstract for individuals in the general Swedish population. The results might be expected to be different for individuals who are especially reliant on the welfare state to help them with adversity, and if the particular programme offering this help – rather than the welfare state in general – were primed. The book closes with a call for a new discipline, the psychology of welfare systems, to help answer questions raised by the transition from religion to secularism in parts of the western world, and particularly in countries with strong welfare systems.

Overall, *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality* is a terrific read, and a thought-provoking contribution to both discussions in the psychology of religion and to scholarship on attachment. But much more than a creative integration of two subdisciplines, the book will interest readers from across the field of psychology, given that Granqvist's concerns encompass topics as varied as individual differences, communal processes, evolutionary theory and the politics of the welfare state. The success of *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality* speak well to the ongoing vitality and relevance of attachment theory, even after half a century since the model was introduced by Bowlby. Though Granqvist also notes significant limitations in existing theory and methodology, made salient by the application of attachment research to the psychology of religion. It will be exceptionally interesting to see, in future work, whether or how Granqvist is able to address or circumvent these limitations.

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