

The genesis of religious thought in childhood

III. An Attachment-theory perspective

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RESUMO: A Teoria do Apego, descrita por John Bowlby, é uma teoria de base bio-etológica com as seguintes características principais: (a) o bebê tem, primariamente, um sistema biossocial de conduta, (b) esse sistema se desenvolve para manter a proximidade do bebê com seu principal cuidador, (c) o apego ao cuidador protege o bebê de efeitos predadores e outros perigos. Ainda que Bowlby tivesse uma formação psicanalítica formal, ele era basicamente diferente da psicanálise oficial por insistir na importância da validação da teoria por meios empíricos e extra-clínicos. Serem humanos, em qualquer idade, enfrentando situações alarmantes – guerra, terror, doença, divórcio – geralmente mostram a necessidade de encontrar figuras de apego, sejam humanas, sejam divinas. Apegos seguros são enormemente importantes para o desenvolvimento psicológico. Bowlby, basicamente, estudou a apego entre a criança e seu cuidador, definindo a figura de apego como “a mais forte e mais sábia”, configurando a relação assimétrica antes citada. O relacionamento com Deus, contudo, é um apego criança/adulto com duas características especiais: (a) ele é permanentemente assimétrico (para os padrões normais), sendo Deus a “quintessência do poder e da sabedoria do outro”; (b) a inexistência das relações sexuais. A Teoria do Apego aparece como um modelo promissor para entender a gênese do pensamento religioso na criança.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: teoria do apego; apego a Deus; criança; pensamento religioso.

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Introduction

The third, and last, part of this trilogy (Sousa et al., 2001a; Sousa et al., 2001b) is related to Attachment theory. In 1993 a conference (Goldberg et al., 1995) was held in Toronto to honor John Bowlby, the founder of Attachment theory, died in 1990. Bowlby had a psychoanalytic training, but “[he] was a rare figure in the psychoanalytic community for his insistence on the importance of empirical and extraclinical validation of theory” (p.1). He had an interdisciplinary point of view of the clinical fact, and such perspective was an imprinting of all his studies.

A brief overview of attachment theory and research

John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), a psychoanalyst of the British Society, developed an alternative theory to the widespread British psychoanalytic object-relations theory. He postulated a bio-ethological-based theory, the Attachment theory (AT) with the main following characteristics: (a) the baby primarily has a biosocial behavioral system, (b) that evolves to maintain the proximity of the baby to its primary caregiver, (c) attachment to the caregiver protects the infant from predation and other dangers (Kirkpatrick, 1995). Orthodox psychoanalysts understood this theory as completely distant from Freudian original motivational (psychic energy) model and regarded Bowlby’s ideas as pertaining to others domains different of psychoanalysis.

Bowlby’s model is a dialectical one. The baby emits some signals, such as crying, or clinging. These signals (more or less) activate mother’s (or substitute) responses, which in turn influences subsequent infant behavior. The dialectical circle is “closed”, creating a permanent inter-active system of reciprocal influences. According system functioning the baby will develop different qualitative-quantitative forms of attachment. Optimal functioning is the basis for *secure attachment* to the mother. Secure attachment means: (a) the mother is perceived as a reliable source of protection, (b) the infant is confident to explore the environment if the circumstances are normal, (c) if the baby is in the presence of threat it will seek for proximity and comfort to the mother. “. . . The mother serves alternately as a secure base *and a haven of safety* for the infant” (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p. 115, emphasis added).

If the system functioning is less than optimal it opens the possibility for *insecure attachments*, whose *two* main types are: the *avoidant type*. In this case, the baby seems to regard the mother as neither a secure base for exploration nor a haven of safety. The second main type is the *anxious/ambivalent type*, which is characterized by an episodically alternate of proximity- and comfort-seeking behavior with anger and resistance. These anxious/ambivalent babies appears to be more anxious

in general terms and less confident to explore the environment in the mother's presence.

All types of attachment behavior are based on the *strange situation paradigm*, which means that researchers carry on with their observational method through the submission of the infant to a brief experience, facing a strange person. Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) showed that classifications of attachments based in experiments with the strange situation are "fairly stable between one to six years of age" (quoted by Kirkpatrick, 1995, p.115-6). The early fundamental attachment of the infant to the caregiver seems to develop *internal working models* or *schemata of attachment relationships* that are relatively stable across time, although these internal models of attachment are able to be modified – thanks heaven – by significant emotional experiences (such as psychotherapy) or changes in life situation (such as love ties). It is important to emphasize that the patterns of attachment are able to perpetuate themselves *across generations*, from mother to child, as well as, early relationship patterns are carried forward to later close ties, in the same direction as postulated by psychoanalysis.

The attachment bond must be differentiated from a generic form of love or any other close kind of relationship. For Ainsworth (1985) the secure-base and haven functions are distinguishing and characteristic of attachment bonds. This kind of relationship "include the provision of feelings of comfort and security, the role of the attachment figure as both a haven of safety (in the presence of threat) and a secure base for the exploration (in the absence of threat), and the distress or protest occasioned by potential or actual separation from the attachment figure" (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p.116).

Kirkpatrick's hypothesis: to conceive religion as an attachment process

Haven of Safety – The basic idea is that religious belief is a manifestation of the adult human attachment system, as it is also observed in primate species and in human infants. In front of any kind of alarming events or in the presence of threat (or actual separation) of separation from the attachment figure the attachment system is activated. People generally turn to God –as an attachment figure, provider of a haven, unfailing presence– under stressful circumstances or in time of crisis. "God can serve as a substitute attachment figure when a spouse or other attachment figure is lost" [. . .] "it is worth noting that, in most theistic religions, separation from God is the most horrific threat imaginable. In many Christian belief systems, it is the very essence of hell" (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p.119).

God as an attachment figure – "Contrary to the Freudian hypothesis [. . .] God is evidently perceived as more similar to one's mother than to one's father or, alternatively, to one's preferred parent [. . .

] if the preferred parent represents the primary attachment figure, which seems a plausible assumption, it is the image of this parent that God should most resemble” (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p.123). The outcomes of empirical research (using factor-analysis or cluster analysis methods) in the field are consistent with the attachment theory interpretation summarized above.

Is attachment model adequate to study religious thought?

The first step to prove attachment theory as an adequate framework for the investigation of love, specially romantic love, was Hazan & Shaver’s study in 1987. It is not an isolated affirmation that love experience and religious experience present a direct concordance. Kirkpatrick (1995, p.130) remind us that the late William James, in 1902, compared "the process of religious conversion with that of ‘falling in love’". In the same direction this contemporary author quoted several assumptions comparing conversion with love: "falling in love with Jesus", "religious emotion [expressing] itself in the language of human love", "a romantic God-the-lover-in Heaven image among young children’s descriptions of the deity" (p.130).

It is very probable that attachment process is one of the main aspects of love, and in that context the same we can think about religion conversion, attachment process, and falling in love. "The worshipper-God relationship, like the infant-mother relationship, is typically asymmetrical in the sense that the roles of caregiver and care receiver are clearly defined and relatively constant across time" (Kirkpatrick, 1995, p.130).

Bowlby basically studied child-caregiver attachment, defining the attachment figure as the "stronger and wiser other", the asymmetrical relationship cited above. But this a probable bias in the analysis of adult attachment where relationships with peers are much more symmetrical, at least in a conscious level. The relationship with God, however, is an adult attachment with two special characteristics: (a) it is permanently asymmetrical (in normal patterns), being God "the quintessential stronger and wiser other"(p.131); (b) the inexistence of sexual relationship (although some charismatic leaders of some new religions, and eventually in perversions of some traditional religions, may include explicit sexual practices in religious behavior).

An attachment-theory perspective

Kaufman (1981) in his book *The theological imagination: Constructing the concept of God* was one of the first theologians to recognize the applicability of the theory of attachment to understand belief in God (Kirkpatrick, 1992/1997). Before him, Reed in 1978, had referred that “every form of attachment behaviour, and of the behaviour of the attachment-figure, identified by Bowlby, has its close counterpart

in the images of the relationship between Israel (or the Worshipper) and God which we find in, for example, the psalms” (p.14, quoted in Kirkpatrick, 1992/1997, p.117). Kaufman (1981) appears to have a convergent position arguing that secure attachments are tremendously important for psychological development. As it is easily observable human beings are always fallible attachment figures and this is why an absolutely adequate attachment figure—God—is needed in all ages. Theoretical models for the understanding of religion present a variety of theses, but they frequently agree that religion is childish, immature, and unhealthy, as it has been proposed by Freud and several other researchers. Bowlby, in contrast with the traditional Freudian position, emphasizes that to seek for protection and security from the other (as an attachment-other) is a healthy necessity at any age.

Human beings facing alarming events—war, terror, disease, divorce—generally show the need to find attachment figures, being human or divine.

Bowlby, Winnicott, and Bion

Attachment theorists, such as Holmes (1995), pointed that when Bowlby clearly abandoned Kleinian metapsychology, Donald Winnicott was much more cautious and ambivalent, in the aim to maintain a certain proximity with the Kleinian paradigm. Winnicott (1971) had argued that the mutual recognition of infant and parent depends on the active aggression drives of the infant directed to the parent, and the parent’s “survival” to infant’s attack, correcting in this way the child’s destructive fantasy. For Bowlby, loss, or fantasized “destruction”, especially in the early years of life is a catastrophic event that can, at best, be coped with by an elaborative mourning. For Winnicott, on the contrary, to deal with inevitable inadequacies of parents’ care is an impulse to creativity and growing up.

In Bion’s model of mother-infant relationship the concept of *maternal reverie* the mother is a supportive continent for infant’s anxious fantasies that are worked through the mother’s mind. “Compared with the mutual Einsteinian “holy curiosity” of Bowlby’s model of mother and baby, Bion’s mother is more passive, gnostic bearer of the painful truth of forever being separated from prelinguistic, pure experience” (Holmes, 1995, p.33).

“Broadly speaking there are two polar views of the nature of the psychoanalytic process. In what might be called the *esoteric vision*, the analytic task is the uncovering of a hidden reality to which the analyst, through his/her training and initiation, is privy and of which, with analytic help, the patient may begin to get a glimpse. The transference here is a vehicle for elucidating and eliminating the distortions of this reality that neurosis throws up, with the analyst a priestly guide into the mysterious underworld. In the *constructivist vision*, to which, had he conceived it in these terms, Bowlby would, I believe, have subscribed,

the task of therapy is deepening existing reality, rather replacing it with some secret truth. Transference here is [. . .] '[a] slice of life, intensified yet made manageable by the constraints of the analytic frame', with the analyst a coexplorer of a shared psychic space (Holmes, 1995, p.33).

We feel this brief comparison between Bowlby's ideas and two outstanding object-relations analysts' as a useful tool for understanding convergences and divergences between psychoanalysis and attachment theory.

Concluding remarks

The great advantage the attachment model presents is the possibility of the construction of empirical designs. This postmodern trend is important for the development of research in the religious domain with children and with adults. Recent advances in the study of adult attachments patterns open new ways for the understanding of attachment with God. Authors of different theoretical affiliations (for example, psychoanalysis *and* attachment-theory) are coincident that *secure attachment* is an important factor for development. The fact is that believing in God opens to the believer a permanent possibility to encounter a totally available Being across time. The importance of attachment theory remains in its focus on empirical research and the extra-clinical validation of the theoretical points.

ABSTRACT: John Bowlby postulated a bio-ethological-based theory, the Attachment theory (AT) with the main following characteristics: (a) the baby primarily has a biosocial behavioral system, (b) that evolves to maintain the proximity of the baby to its primary caregiver, (c) attachment to the caregiver protects the infant from predation and other dangers. Although Bowlby had a formal psychoanalytic training he was basically different of the official psychoanalysis by his insistence on the importance of empirical and extraclinical validation of theory. Human beings at any age, facing alarming events—war, terror, disease, divorce—, generally show the need to find attachment figures, being human or divine. Secure attachments are tremendously important for psychological development. Bowlby basically studied child-caregiver attachment, defining the attachment figure as the "stronger and wiser other", the asymmetrical relationship cited above. The relationship with God, however, is a child/adult attachment with two special characteristics: (a) it is permanently asymmetrical (in normal patterns), being God "the quintessential stronger and wiser other"; (b) the inexistence of sexual relationship. AT appears to be a promising model to understanding the genesis of religious thought in the child.

KEY-WORDS: attachment theory; attachment to God; child; religious thought

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