

# Attachment Theory & Image of God

Rev. Dr Sahaya G. Selvam, sdb



**Institute of Youth Studies  
Tangaza University College, Nairobi**

[www.sahayaselvam.org](http://www.sahayaselvam.org)



# Attachment Theory

- Originally proposed by Bowlby (1958), attachment theory attempts to explain and predict social interaction between adults in terms of patterns in the childhood relationship with care-givers.
- Attachment is an inborn system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence and organize motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant care giving figures (Bowlby, 1969).
- Attachment is proper to mammals and based in the limbic system of the brain.

# Attachment Theory

- The attachment and bonding between mother and baby begin before birth (Verny, 2002).
- The early attachment involves primarily mother-child, but also extends to anyone close to the child such as nurses, fathers, siblings, and others who have significant impact on the child (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).
- It is widely understood that the character of a person's early attachments is a significant factor in the formation of adult styles of interpersonal relating (Ainsworth, 1985).

# Ainsworth's Contribution

- Ainsworth collected data in Uganda and Baltimore using what she called 'the strange situation' experiment on mother-child interaction.
- Findings showed three distinct patterns of attachment behaviour:
  1. Secure Attachment
  2. Avoidant Attachment
  3. Resistant Attachment
- Later researcher have termed it 'insecure' or ambivalent types (Goldberg, 2000).

# Attachment Theory & Psychology of Religion

- Kirkpatrick (1997, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990) has argued that attachment theory offers a meaningful framework for the psychology of religion.
- Kirkpatrick and others (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Granqvist, 1998; Murken & Namini, 2007) extend this to one's relationship with God and religion. God (or other deities) may act as an attachment figure to a believer either as an extension of, or as a substitute for, relationship with parent figures or lovers.

# Attachment to God

- Securely attached individuals possess positive working models of themselves and others; they come to view God in a similar manner as a reliable, secure base with where one can have an enduring personal relationship (Kirkpatrick, 2005).
- On the other hand, insecure individuals may develop an attachment to God or other divine figures as surrogates for unsatisfactory human attachment figures they have had in the past (Kirkpatrick, 2005).
- Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) found that people who have an insecure-attachment history were more likely to have experienced sudden religious conversion and were also more religious in general.

# Correspondence Vs. Compensation

- Two possible outcomes are posed to explain attachment to God: correspondence and compensation (McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy, 2005).
- Correspondence hypothesis presupposes that the relationship to God will be the continuation of individual's relationship with the care-giver (Hall, T. W., Brokaw, B. F., Edwards & Pike, 1998).
- Compensation hypothesis presupposes that their relationship with God would be an attempt to compensate for the avoidant caregiver (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990).

# Preferred Vs. Opposite sex Parent

- The image of God is also found to be more closely related to the preferred parent, and having some reliance on the image of the parent of the opposite sex (Tamayo & Desjardins, 1976; Nelson & Jones, 1957; Godin & Hallez, 1964, as cited in Hyde, 1990, pp. 83-97).
- The components of the parental figure attributed to God are also often determined by culture, and not individual psychology (Hyde, 1990, p. 91).



# Preferred Vs. Opposite sex Parent

- Louvain series of studies, headed by Antoine Vergote, suggests that there is a greater propensity for maternal characteristics of God, especially among males, and thus questioning Freud's concept of God being related to the primeval father (Vergote & Tamayo, 1981; Vergote & Aubert 1972, as cited in Hyde, 1990).
- However, data from Zaire in Africa, among other countries showed "divine image is closer to the father image" (Tamayo & Desjardins, 1976, p. 133).