

Book Review

An Odyssey over Attachment and Religion

A review of Lee A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*. New York: Guilford Publications, 2005. 400 pp.

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This densely argued book is a report on a personal odyssey, which turns out to be representative of recent and important developments in the psychology of religion. This voyage starts with the work of a British psychoanalyst, who more than fifty years ago created, single-handedly, one of the most influential theories in present-day research on personality development.

What has been known as the British school of psychoanalytic object-relations theory represents the psychoanalytic study of the nature and origins of interpersonal relations, and of the nature and origins of internal, unconscious, structures, deriving from interpersonal contacts and experiences. Present interpersonal relationships are regarded as the reactivation of past internalized relations with others. Psychoanalytic object-relations theory theorized (or speculated) on the internalization of interpersonal relations, their contribution to normal and pathological personality development, and the mutual influences of internal fantasies and the reality of interpersonal relations. To the uninitiated, the term object relations theory is somewhat misleading, because the theory mostly deals with the elaborate and passionate *internal* world of the child (and its projection). Personality is formed through object relations patterns set up in early childhood, stabilized in later childhood and adolescence, and then fixed during adult life, and reflected in transference patterns. The functioning of adult personality depends on the maturity of one's object relations.

Between 1930 and 1950, British psychoanalysts were involved in a major civil war between groups identified either with Anna Freud or with Melanie Klein. The war was about how we should think about the psychological world of the human infant. The war may still be raging on in some circles, but there was also the Independent Group, which stayed away from the Freud-Klein battles, and included such names as D.W. Winnicott, W. R. D. Fairbairn, and John Bowlby.

Bowlby was destined to chart a new and revolutionary course, and he is the only psychoanalyst whose ideas have been taken up enthusiastically by academic psychology, to become the cornerstone of a burgeoning field of research. While his psychoanalytic colleagues devoted their considerable brain power to speculating about the internal experiences of children by listening to adults, he offered a new framework for observing children and parents, beyond the confines of the mythological consulting room. In line with object relations theory, but with a new emphasis on panhuman experiences and innate tendencies, Bowlby's attachment theory

proposed that the infant's early experiences with caregivers determined the internal working models (IWMs) that were central to individual personality formation. If object relations theorists rejected the importance of the Oedipal stage (years 3-6) in favor of the pre-Oedipal first 2 years of life, Bowlby did not want to deal with anything erotic in the child's early life. There were other priorities; firstly mere survival. The human baby is hard-wired, as we say today to seek a caretaker and find security as soon as it comes out of the womb. This search is either met with success, leading to a sense of security (in most cases) or fails with lifelong insecurity as a result.

Reading Bowlby, one realizes that he was first a psychoanalyst, and a true Freud scholar, but he wanted to combine psychoanalysis and evolutionary ideas, using the term 'ethology' in the 1950s. In his own words, his main departure from everything his colleagues stood for is as follows: "No variables have more far-reaching effects on personality development than a child's experiences within the family. Starting during his first months in his relation to both parents, he builds up working models of how attachment figures are likely to behave towards him in any of a variety of situations, and on all those models are based all his expectations, and therefore all his plans, for the rest of his life" (1973, p. 369).

The notion of the internal working model (IWM) was in line with earlier object relations formulations, but Bowlby's attachment IWM includes beliefs about self-worth, about trusting others, and about closeness in intimate relationships. The mother's sensitivity to the infant's needs is a condition for the formation of a secure attachment. Security in attachment leads to competence, autonomy and sociability later on. The notion of the family as the secure base from which the developing child is able to explore the world with confidence is central. Bowlby's ideas, with his emphasis on ethology and the innateness of the baby's clinging to a caretaker, drew much attention as soon as they were presented to the world in the 1950s. This was one case where a theory created by an outsider moves to the center of the academic world.

In the 1960s, a test measuring secure (or insecure) attachment in young children was designed. The Strange Situation (STS), where a child aged 12 months and above is separated, and then re-united with its mother, has been widely used to assess attachment patterns. Quite wisely and counter-intuitively, it is the child's reaction when re-united, not when separated, which reflects security or insecurity. Secure infants seek contact or greet the parent at a distance with a smile or wave. Avoidant infants avoid the parent. Resistant/ambivalent infants either passively or actively show hostility toward the parent.

Later on, various questionnaire measures for assessing IWMs in adults were developed, independently of the STS, which is used only with children before age two. Secure adults find it relatively easy to get close to others. Avoidant adults are somewhat uncomfortable being close to others, and Anxious/ambivalent adults may want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away. Secure adults find it relatively easy to get close to others. Avoidant adults are somewhat uncomfortable being close to others, and Anxious/ambivalent adults may want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.

Since the 1980s, research correlating IWMs with a wide range of behaviors has been carried out by psychologists all over the world. Beyond developmental psychology, attachment has been correlated with employee behavior, political attitudes, leadership styles, and marital interaction, among other things. The term 'attachment' has become so fashionable that we now hear of attachment disorders and of various "attachment therapies" some of which should be approached with extreme caution. This merely indicates the extraordinary success of Bowlby's theoretical framework and its unique impact.

Lee Kirkpatrick, seeking early on a new theoretical stimulus for the psychology of religion, has been the pioneer in applying attachment theory to religious behavior, and has devoted most of his professional career to it. His conceptual starting point was "...perceptions of having a personal relationship with a parent-like deity, can well be understood as manifestations of an evolved psychological system called the *attachment system*" (p. 16). Then, as we look at variations in early experiences and IWM formation, we can predict the resulting patterns of religious beliefs: "To the extent that religion really does involve the activation and operation of the attachment system, individual differences in attachment experience should be related to individual difference in religious belief" (p. 125). Research has shown that individuals who described their mothers as cold and distant were more likely to have had religious conversions, and that such conversions should be viewed as a fantasy compensation for an attachment deficit

At the group level, different parenting styles are related to cultural differences in religious beliefs: "One kind of parenting, by virtue of the (universal) design of the attachment system, reliably produces behavioral patterns of IWMs of one variety, which lead...to certain ways of thinking about God and the perception of some kind of God-beliefs as plausible and believable and others as implausible and unbelievable; another kind of parenting reliably produces a different pattern. Which kind of belief about God has the most staying power in a given culture depends largely on whatever particular attachment schemata are prevalent or normative in that culture, which in turn depends on the kinds of early attachment experience people typically experience in those cultures"(p. 125). Here we go back to the culture and personality school in anthropology, which carried out similar research in the 1950s, with fascinating results. The attachment approach specifies other behavioral antecedents and provides possibly more precision.

The question of cultural differences is one of the sore points in this book. Kirkpatrick believes that his research, carried out in the United States, which starts with believers' fantasies about attachment to the image of "God" or "Jesus", is somehow relevant only to Christianity. It seems that in this case Kirkpatrick is too modest, and sells the attachment framework short. Fantasies of personal relationship with a parent-like deity or supernatural agent can be found all over the world in all traditions. Love, devotion, and submission fantasies are commonly found in so-called "ancestor worship" systems, Buddhist systems, Hindu systems, or among the followers of Jim Jones. Such patterns of submissive identification seem to be panhuman and must have grown out of our evolutionary history.

Kirkpatrick's change of course as a researcher and thinker occurred when he discovered evolutionary psychology. What he realized then was not that attachment theory was wrong, but that it had its limitations. Attachment could explain only some aspects of religion, while other aspects of religion "can be explained in terms of other (i.e. than attachment) psychological systems" (p. 16). From that point on he joined the evolutionary psychology movement, and the cognitive-evolutionary approach to religion, as articulated by Boyer and Atran, whose works has been reviewed here before (Beit-Hallahmi, 2002, 2003). The basic argument of this approach is that religion results from the basic architecture of the human mind, and that is a by-product and not an adaptation. The cognitive-evolutionary framework is much broader than that of attachment theory, and the author concludes (and hopes) that it will provide the psychology of religion with the theoretical arsenal it had been seeking for a long time. I can only concur with this conclusion and this hope.

References

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