Religion, Place and Attachment: An Evaluation of Conceptual Frameworks

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Introduction

Adult attachment theory provides an evolutionary perspective from which to explore the attachment behavioural system and its broader psychological implications across a lifespan (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Cicirelli, 2004). This framework of social relationships examines how repeated attachment experiences with important people in one's life form internal working models that serve as cognitive frameworks which are generalized to anticipate the nature of future relationship expectations (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). The attachment working model is key to human development (Ainsworth et al., 1978), in that it forms the mental representations for evaluating future surrogates to which/whom the individual is drawn to as targets for seeking and maintaining proximity, safe havens in times of distress, and the secure base for exploring the broader environment. Proximity to an attachment surrogate

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is likely to occur when the emotionally attuned communication with a previous attachment figure may have been lost either due to the death of a loved one, geographical and emotional separation, or the perceived insensitivity of an attachment figure (Cicirelli, 2004). Adult attachment theorists (e.g. Cicirelli, 2004; Counted, 2018; Counted & Watts, 2017; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Sroufe, 2005) and neuropsychologists (e.g. Fuster 1997a, 1997b; Luna, Garver, Urban, Lazar, & Sweeney, 2004) are in harmony that attachment can be formed with imaginary objects that are not physically present due to the maturation of cognitive processes in adults, compared to infants, which enable them to maintain closeness with invisible objects of attachment just by the mere knowledge of their whereabouts.

Such relationships can be formed due to the lack of confidence in the availability of an attachment figure, thus leading to developing an attachment with another figure/object with the potential of assuring a sense of felt security. This chapter argues that in the event where the individual lacks confidence in the availability of an attachment figure, a new relationship can be formed with a religious or spatial object of attachment. I further contend that there is a fluid relationship between objects of attachment (Divine entity: God, Allah, Jesus, Mary, Budha, Krisna, etc.; geographical place: one's country, residential neighbourhood, nature, the resources of a setting), such that individuals drawn to a religious figure as an attachment surrogate are likely to be in a dual relationship with place as an object of attachment. This is such that the sense of spiritual attachment might be functionally tied to the individual's attachment to a place and vice versa. This understanding can be enriched through further theoretical exploration, as will be made clearer in this chapter.

Relationship Experiences with God

In the last two decades, spiritual attachment has been conceptualized as largely part of the biological function of the attachment system in which seeking and maintaining proximity with a protective attachment (religious) figure is prioritized (Counted, 2016a, 2016b; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, & Hill, 2009; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Sim & Loh, 2003). As an important subject central to most monotheistic religions (e.g. Christianity), spiritual attachment is prioritized by religious believers when maintaining a personal relationship with God as they represent God as an attachment figure, having

the characteristics of a safe haven and secure base. The attachment component in having a relationship with God also connotes an idea that reiterates 'the centrality of the emotion of love in people's perceived relationships with God and in religious belief systems' (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 918). Religious attachment reflects the normative ways in which people evaluate and experience their spirituality in terms of developing proximity to a Divine entity, turning to the Divine as a response to loss, and perceiving God as a target for security (Counted, 2016a, 2016b; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Sim & Loh, 2003). This can also apply during spiritual struggles when the attached individual experience emotional insecurity through expressing divine avoidance and having anxiety about God (Ano & Pargament, 2014; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

As a growing area in the psychology of religion literature, research in religious attachment has become one of the most researched topics in the field. Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) first reported a correlation between global attachment patterns and religious attachment. Hart, Limke, and Budd (2010) examined the links between attachment with romantic partners and faith development. Joung's (2006) treatment of women's faith experiences suggested the same trend of faith development, indicating an association between women's interpersonal relationships and their religious experiences. These studies show that relationship problems with human attachment figures are related to faith development in one form or another through a sense of spiritual connection (also see Beck & McDonald, 2004; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Sim & Loh, 2003). This kind of spiritual attachment has been described as a 'care-giving faith' development in which the attached individual emphasizes the importance of needing care and emotional support in their faith experience (Counted, 2016a). This religious perspective examines how God fulfils the role of a Divine attachment figure in relation to believer–God proximity and struggles (Ano & Pargament, 2014; Counted & Miller, 2018).

People–Place Relationship Experiences

Having proposed that adults develop attachment with protective and imaginary figures due to their increased cognitive abilities (Cicirelli, 2004; Counted, 2018; Counted & Zock, 2019; Luna et al., 2004), I also argue that people–place relationships can take similar forms of affective development. This is because topical objects like geographic places fulfil the attachment relationship role in addition to, or instead of, God (Counted,

2018; Counted & Watts, 2017; Counted & Zock, 2019; Scannell & Gifford, 2014). This is largely attributed to the function of the maturational aspects of cognitive development in adults, which infants do not have, thus allowing adult individuals to carry out mentally stimulating tasks such as processing speed, voluntary response suppression and working memory (Hale, 1990; Diamond & Goldman-Rakic, 1989; Fischer, Biscaldi, & Gezeck, 1997; Luna et al., 2004).

The affective development in people's experiences of place in environmental psychology circles has been used to position places as more than just geographic locations with concrete features. Places are distal dynamic contexts of social interaction that contribute to spiritual well-being and interconnectedness (e.g. Counted & Watts, 2017; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Stokowski, 2002). Most importantly, the concept of place has been discussed as a multidimensional construct that can be synthesized into three functions: emotional attachment, cognitive development and behavioural dependence (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). As an attachment setting, place is discussed in terms of its material and geographic pull, emphasizing how people may form a positive bond with the spatial features of a place (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Low & Altman, 1992; Seamon, 2012). Secondly, place can also be discussed in terms of how it influences the individual's identity and cognitive development, or produces what Seamon (2012) refers to as *genius loci*. This aspect of place involves how the individual mirrors the character and lifestyle of a place at a personal level (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). Thirdly, as a multidimensional construct, place involves some sort of conative, behavioural commitment on the lifeworlds, routines and natural attitudes of place, or people-in-place, showing how individuals depend on the resources of a place (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Seamon, 2012; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981). These three dimensions of place have been conceptualized as sense of place (SOP) attitudes, which express the social psychology of place-specific attitudes in terms of 'beliefs, emotions, and behavioural commitments' (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006, p. 317).

Convergent or Divergent Parallels

While juxtaposing 'place' and 'God' as important objects of attachment in day-to-day life, I want to further propose that relationships with these objects overlap with the tenets of interpersonal attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). For example, in interpersonal attachment, infants develop an

attachment to a primary caregiver whereas adults are drawn to geographical places in environmental psychology literature (Low & Altman, 1992) and to Divine entities in the psychology of religion literature (Cicirelli, 2004; Counted, 2016a, 2016b; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). This section will explore how adult attachment relationships mirror the criteria of interpersonal attachment: proximity-seeking, safe haven, secure base and separation anxiety.

Proximity. While infants develop proximity to a caregiver through clinging and crawling towards them in interpersonal attachment (Bowlby, 1969), proximity to place may be achieved through purchasing a home in a particular city, displaying photographs of an important place of vacation (Ryan & Ogilvie, 2001), travelling to a place on a regular basis (Kelly & Hosking, 2008), visualizing a place (Newell & Canessa, 2018), or even refusing to evacuate a place (Billig, 2006; Donovan, Suryanto, & Utami, 2012). Proximity to God is also achieved through religious behaviours that draw the individual closer to God, such as fasting, prayer, devotionals, meditation, reading sacred texts and religious participation (Counted, 2016b; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Felt Security. In addition to the above, objects of attachment such as place and God offer a sense of felt security and safety just as caregivers in interpersonal attachment (Counted, 2018, 2019; Counted & Zock, 2019; Scannell & Gifford, 2014). For instance, one's place of residence can be perceived as a safe haven and less-dangerous for its residents (e.g. Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003; Lewicka, 2010), in the same way trust in God can be a great secure base and a source of hope and comfort for religious believers (Krumrei, Pirutinsky, & Rosmarin, 2013). Most people would likely want to return to their homes after an exposure to danger in the workplace or schools because of their perceived function of their home as a safe haven while some might turn to God in prayer for protection after such exposure. These relationships help the attached individual to cope with the reality of life stressors and frightening events as they turn to their surrogates as safe havens. When such relationship has been established, it offers a secure base from which to model one's identity as the individual master their object of attachment.

Separation Anxiety. Loss of attachment in an interpersonal context can lead to separation distress and psychopathology in infants. This is also the

case in people–place and believer–God relationships where separation distress may occur following the loss of important people in a place or the loss of one's SOP through natural disaster, migration and displacement (Cox & Perry, 2011), thus resulting in feelings of grief, alienation and disorientation. This can also be seen in the fear of losing one's relationship with God or feeling abandoned by God in a religious attachment context (Counted, 2016a, 2016b), often leading to spiritual struggles and discontentment (Ano & Pargament, 2014). The positive effects developed with specific Divine entities and certain geographical places embody similar attributes seen in interpersonal attachment that assure a sense of safety, security and emotional meaning for the individuals involved (Bowlby, 1977; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Morgan, 2010).

Intersections of Religious and Place Attachment: Three Conceptual Models

Attachment Pathways. To further explain the intersection between religion and place from an attachment theoretical perspective, the individual differences in terms of the correspondence and compensation models of the attachment-religion framework are discussed (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). These models are based on the emotional regulation theory which is used to understand the interaction between attached individuals and their attachment surrogates based on their internal working models (representation of the self in relation to others). This framework shows how relationships are undertaken to effect changes in one's emotional states through seeking and maintaining proximity with an object of attachment. The correspondence model of attachment, for example, shows how individuals transfer their existing or previous attachment working model onto a new relationship with a surrogate (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2005). In other words, if the individual is insecure in their existing or previous relationship they are likely to experience similar insecurity in a new relationship (Counted, 2016a). However, with a history of secure attachment the individual is likely to model similar positive representations with a surrogate attachment. In terms of the compensation model, the individual seeks a new relationship because of the loss of attachment or negative experience in a previous or existing relationship (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2005). In other words, the individual seeks a new relationship with God, or to

place, to compensate for an unhealthy relationship with a human partner, for example (Counted 2016a, 2016b).

Motivational Systems Model. Another conceptual framework that could be helpful for understanding the relationship between religion and place is the motivational systems approach which has been proposed in a recent work as the circle of place spirituality (CoPS) model (Counted, 2018; Counted & Zock, 2019). This approach, drawing on the work of Lichtenberg, Lachman, Fosshage (2009), conceptualizes the interplay of religion and place by exploring the interaction between the attachment-affiliation and exploration-assertion motivational systems. As a premise, the CoPS model (see Fig. 3.1) demonstrates how the relationship between religious and place attachment is shaped in a circular movement pattern where the religious believer turns to and from two attachment objects. For example, maintaining proximity to God while at the same time shifting attention towards exploring place as another object of attachment, or the opposite: maintaining a relationship with place while seeking attachment to God. The argument here is that individuals are likely to form attachment and at the same time explore a relationship with another object of attachment (e.g. a place, a Divine entity, etc.) based on certain motivational factors
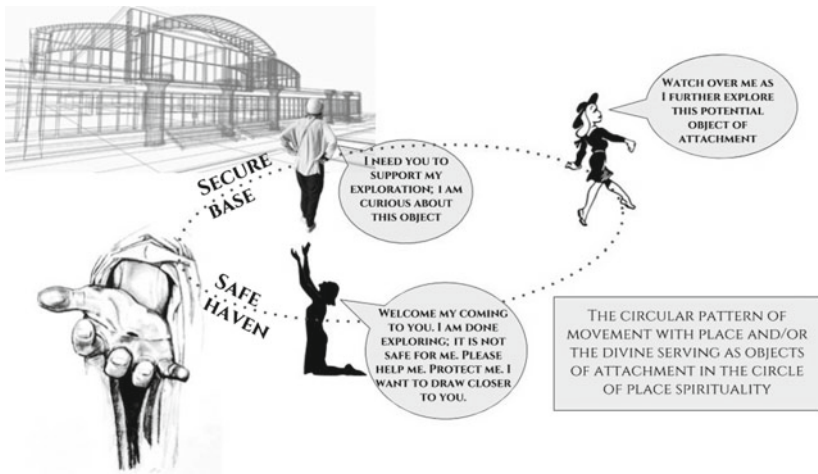

Fig. 3.1 The circle of place spirituality (© Victor Counted)

such as their personal feelings, tastes, intentions, drives, emotions, needs and opinions.

In the event that the CoPS exploration-assertion motivational system is activated, the individual explores a relationship with a place, either out of curiosity, or to better understand the place of their attention, even though they may already be in a secure relationship with God. However, while attachment breakthroughs begin with curiosity, the aim of the attachment-affiliation motivational system is to maintain proximity with the object of attachment in the event that the attachment system is activated due to a perceived threat to the environment. The CoPS model is well-documented in some recent works (e.g. Counted, 2018, 2019; Counted, Possamai, McAuliffe, & Meade, 2018; Counted & Zock, 2019) and have been criticized by Brulin and Granqvist (2018).

Self-Ecological Model. Another theoretical perspective is the ecopsychology theory used by Kamitsis and Francis (2013) in positioning spirituality as a correlate of nature connectedness and a mediator of the relationship between attachment to place and psychological well-being. Kamitsis and Francis argue that the individual ecological self is activated in response to experiencing the natural environment during the search for spiritual interconnectedness. This experience emboldens the individual's perception of the self from an individualistic perspective to a broad spectrum of images of the self that includes all life forms, spiritual transcendence, ecosystems and place itself (Bragg, 1996; Kamitsis & Francis, 2013). Place experiences may, therefore, affect the individual's sense of spiritual interconnectedness or attachment to the sacred. In other words, the individual is drawn to both a place and the sacred simultaneously as objects of attachment or relate to one object based on the relationship experience with the other. Trigwell, Francis, and Bagot (2014) summarize the link between religious and place connectedness as an ecopsychological process in which 'the well-being of humans and the well-being of nature are interwoven into a biocentric sense of self, whereby well-being is experienced through a spiritual interconnectedness with all things' (p. 243). Counted and Watts (2017) envision this ecological view of attachment in their treatment of place attachment in the Bible, examining the role of sacred places in religious life and arguing that attachment to place can be an embodied form of spirituality that transcends attachment to a specific place.

Religion and Place in Attachment Perspective

What makes the interaction between religion and place an attachment experience? To answer this question, the CoPS diagram (see Fig. 3.1) is used to illustrate how religious attachment experiences may be related to place attachment experiences, showing how attached individual may seek refuge and security in-between two objects of attachment. I argue that the intersection of religion and place, based on the three conceptual frameworks discussed in the previous section, provide a triad vision for understanding the link between religious and place attachment in terms of the criteria of attachment processes such as: (a) proximity to an object of attachment, (b) felt security (perceiving the object as a secure base and safe haven) and (c) turning to the object during moments of separation anxiety for answers (in the case of a religious figure) and clarity (through exploring a new place). These criteria are discussed in this section in relation to the three identified models above.

Seeking and Maintaining Proximity. First is the proximity factor in attachment experiences. Attached individuals are drawn to their objects of attachment and this lived experience is also feasible with geographical places and religious figures. In terms of the correspondence vs. compensation models of attachment, proximity-seeking behaviour is the functional attribute of attachment experiences where individuals are either drawn to an object because of a negative experience in another relationship or model previous attachment attributes in a new relationship (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

This might be different in the motivational systems approach to attachment and exploration. For example, proximity to an object may be experienced through motivational cues in the forms of intentions, emotions, needs, motives, drives, beliefs and so on (Counted, 2018). There is no specificity to motivation (Branscum & Senkowski, 2019); thus this is to say that the motivational drive that one feels towards an object when performing a specific behaviour (e.g. attachment-affiliation or exploration curiosity) may also be contingent on the individual's contextual needs at the time of such search. It may also be the case that objects of attachment do not have equal attachment advantage in one's life since one may feel more compelled to turn to God, compared to going for vacation for their emotional regulation. Therefore, in order to understand the motivational systems approach

to attachment experiences, it is recommended to consider one's motivation to form an attachment with any affective object.

The self-ecological perspective provides a broader incentive for proximity with objects of attachment and is considered to be part of the self process of finding itself in the world. Essentially, the argument here is that meaning-making implied by a sense of proximity to the sacred can impact significantly on psychological aspects of wellbeing through proximity to nature as an aspect of place. This self-ecological perspective is shared by Kamitsis and Francis (2013) who argue that the individual's inner experience and spiritual depth are attained through their sense of proximity to the sacred via engagement with and exposure to place. This gives meaning to existence as a source from which the positive effects of attachment experience with place are derived, thus allowing the attached individual to transcend beyond the present context.

A Sense of Felt Security. Second is the feeling of felt safety experienced with an object of attachment perceived as a safe haven when exposed to danger or as a secure base from which/whom the individual models their own identity and mastery of life conditions. Objects of attachment are perceived as refuges of safety when exposed to danger or threat when the compensation model is activated, thus serving as a safe haven for protection and security. The correspondence model of attachment on the other hand is the pathway for exploring how a relationship with an object of attachment can be perceived as a secure base from which attached individuals explore or master their broader environment and stretch their individual growth. Both the correspondence and compensation attachment pathways are trajectories for experiencing a sense of felt security with one's object of attachment.

The set goals of attachment affiliation in the motivational systems model is often determined by one's drives. This is where the CoPS model comes in, arguing for the role of motivation in achieving a sense of felt security through attachment experiences (Counted, 2018). In other words, the first step to experiencing felt security is identifying the motivation that is propelling the need for attachment with a particular object since it determines how the attached individual use their environment and what intersubjective contexts (e.g. personal feelings, intentions, conditions, tastes, opinions, beliefs, drives, etc.) inform their exploration curiosity and attachment

needs. Intersubjectivity has the potential to draw the individual's involvement with an object of attachment, thus experiencing a sense of felt security in the process of such experience. One's intersubjectivity in relation to social, cultural, political and religious contexts can be the primary motivation that triggers seeking and maintaining attachment to religious figures and geographical places, with the end goal of achieving a shared sense of security.

On the other hand, the self-ecological perspective shares the same view on the role of social connectedness with place, thus aiming at experiencing spiritual security through one's union with the sacred, with oneself and with all things through exposure to and engagement with nature. This perspective is well-documented, with research showing that people with greater sense of attachment to place also reported a stronger spiritual connection (Counted, 2019; Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Hence, exposure to and engagement with nature, an aspect of place, can be conceptualized as a source and context for individuals seeking to experience a sense of spiritual connection with the sacred.

Responses to Separation Anxiety. Lastly is the separation void in relationship experiences which objects of attachment fill. Seeking and maintaining proximity to religious figures and geographical places can become a source of comfort and security for attached individuals and separation from such objects can often lead to distress, anxiety and grief. According to Ainsworth (1985), responses to separation anxiety from an object of attachment is one of the defining components of attachment, where individuals drawn to an object share concern over losing their attachment bond. Determining whether geographical places and religious figures met this attachment attribute is difficult. However, the potential of a true separation from God by most religious believers is an eschatological question—at which point the believer spends their afterlife either with God or separated from God based on their deeds on earth. In terms of place, separation from a geographical place is quite unlikely; place does not die, it is not mobile, change its address or file for separation. Separation from place is usually seen when dwellers evacuate a place because of a natural disaster or relocate to pursue an opportunity elsewhere.

Attached individuals may compensate for a previous relationship experience or transfer their model of attachment onto a new relationship in order to explore a new relationship with an object that will fill the void of

their separation experience. Divine entities and geographical places can be responses to separation anxiety experienced with human partners. However, this relationship is formed based on one's motivational drives and attachment needs. On the other hand, the self-ecological model helps us to understand how the attached individual experience union with the self and one's environment, which are likely to yield to spiritual connection and fulfilment. This sense of interconnectedness with the self and the sacred, through attachment to place/nature, enhances human flourishing (Trigwell et al., 2014) and meaningfulness (Cervinka, Roderer, & Hefler, 2012), and disruption of such connectedness can lead to disharmony with the self. Thus, making those who are in union with place to find a sense of purpose and meaning through such inseparable connections.

Conclusion

This chapter explored how the place context and attachment to geographical elements are significant factors when studying psychological functions of religion. Although religious figures and geographical places can both serve as alternate security systems, individuals seeking and maintaining attachment with these objects do so based on their attachment needs and history, motivational drives and intersubjective contexts, and exposure to or engagement with the natural environment. Three main conceptual frameworks have been discussed in relation to the role of religion and place as objects of attachment in everyday life.

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