

**FREUDIAN SLIPS:
LIVE LOVED - THE
PSYCHOLOGY AND
THEOLOGY OF LOVE**

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Love lies at the heart of our humanity and of God's divinity. This article will look at love, human and divine through the lens of psychology and theology, in particular, the lens of Attachment theory, which has been described as the psychology of love, and Trinitarian theology, the lens through which we will look at divine love. What insights can be gained from these two disciplines that can challenge us, the church, to truly be a community of love?

INTRODUCTION TO ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory is a powerful account of the formation of relational bonds that provide for physical survival and psychological security throughout our lifespan.¹ One of its basic tenets is that attachment hunger, or our longing to experience a deep emotional connection to an "other," is universal and is as legitimate as physical hunger and as vital for our psychological well-being as food is for our physical well-being.² Therefore, the desire to be attached in relationships is normal and remains with us throughout our lives, and is not some childhood dependency that we outgrow. John Bowlby, the father of Attachment theory, says that throughout our lives we are prone to monitor the physical and emotional whereabouts (accessibility and responsiveness) of those to whom we are most attached.³

Another important principle in Attachment theory is the concept of Internal Working Models (IWM),⁴ which develop from early interactions with our care-givers, guiding our feelings, thoughts and expectations in later relationships.⁵ Researchers found that if a child is securely attached then their IWM would predispose them to see themselves as lovable and others as trustworthy and accessible to care for them. If insecurely attached, the child's IWM may lead them to believe they are not worthy of love

and are not able to trust others,⁶ often resulting in low self-esteem. Bowlby knew that, more universally than the trauma of separation and loss, it was the ongoing, everyday interactions of children and their parents that shaped psychological development.⁷

Bowlby found that if we are attached to someone, we will naturally seek proximity to them in times of trouble; they will provide a "Safe Haven" experience of soothing and reassurance after distress. If we feel securely attached to someone, it provides a "Secure Base" from which to explore the world. If we are separated from our loved one/attachment figure, and have no way of getting back to them, we will naturally feel anxiety or anger.⁸ If we suffer the loss of attachment (i.e. death) it will naturally result in grief. This is a helpful framework to understand common feelings like anxiety, anger, grief and sadness.

Since Attachment theory is a research based framework for understanding how we become who we are as relational beings, it offers a scientifically grounded basis for understanding the suffering and vulnerabilities that bring clients to therapy⁹ and the struggles that church members go through.

With the new developments in neuroscience, we have come to understand that we are hardwired for connection. Our relationships shape our biology as well as our experiences.¹⁰ It is the power of being with others that shapes our brains.¹¹ According to Badenock "science now confirms that relationships shape our brains at the beginning of life, and certain relationships can continue to repair our wounded minds throughout the lifespan."¹² If there is this relational potential to heal wounded minds, what part is the church community playing in this aspect of God's kingdom work? Or does this level of healing just happen on the *chaise longue* in the counselling office?

According to Goleman, the brain-to-brain link allows our strongest relationships to shape us, which also represents a double-edged sword: "nourishing relationships have a beneficial impact on our health, while toxic ones can act like slow poison in our

1 Maureen Miner, "Back to the Basics in Attachment to God: Revisiting Theory in Light of Theology," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35 no. 2 (2007): 112–22.

2 David Wallin, *Attachment Theory in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford, 2007).

3 John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss. Vol.1, Attachment* (London: Hogarth, 1969); Jeremy Holmes, *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993).

4 IWM are sometimes referred to as Internal Behavioural Models (IBM) as they often guide and shape our behaviour.

5 Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*; Jon G. Allen and Peter Fonagy, *Handbook of Mentalization-based Treatment* (Chichester; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2006); M. Main and J. Solomon, "Discovery of an Insecure Disoriented Attachment Pattern: Procedures, Findings and Implications for the Classification of Behaviour," in *Affective Development in Infancy*; eds. T. Brazelton and M. Yungman (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986).

6 Main and Solomon, "Discovery."

7 Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*.

8 Ibid.; John Bowlby, *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); John Bowlby, *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

9 Wallin, *Attachment Theory*, 35.

10 Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks, 2006).

11 Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships* (New York: Norton, 2006), 9.

12 Bonnie Badenock, *Being a Brain-Wise Therapist: A Practical Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology* (New York: Norton, 2008), 13.

bodies.”¹³ What about the health of our souls? How does spirituality fit into this picture?

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the spiritual dimensions of Attachment theory, namely developing measures for attachment to God,¹⁴ as well as the effects of spirituality on neurobiology.¹⁵ How do these insights from Attachment theory fit with Trinitarian theology? Since humanity is made in the image of a triune God, and since, in Volf’s words “the Father, Son, and Spirit are in an interdependent relational dance which involves mutual giving and taking within the bounds of a safe relational system,”¹⁶ what insights can be gained from Attachment theory to help us fully grasp that the Trinity is the safest Attachment system?

HUMAN RELATIONALITY AND TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

A relational understanding of humanity, informed by Attachment theory, places the desire for relationship, or attachment hunger, at the core of our created nature. If, as Volf asserts, “I am who I am in relation to the other,”¹⁷ then, as Balswick *et al* point out: “it is only as I choose to engage in reciprocal, securely attached relationships with others that I, and those I encounter, are more able to fully explore, and become, the unique selves we were each created to be.”¹⁸

From this perspective, humanity takes on a new depth as we see it in the context of our created need to love and be loved. As Grenz points out, “people are created as ‘persons-in-relationship,’ in the image of a relational God.”¹⁹ Since we are created in the image of this relational God, “as *imago Dei*, humanity

then turns to encounter and embrace as the Trinity encounters and embraces.”²⁰

Kruger expands on this when he says, “God lives as Father, Son and Spirit in a rich and glorious and abounding fellowship of utter oneness. The Trinitarian life is a great dance of unchained communion and intimacy, fired by passionate, self-giving and other-centred love, and mutual delight.”²¹ This is the kind of love that Volf talks about when he says, “the self-giving love of the trinity is... the divine self-donation for the enemies and their reception into the eternal communion of God.”²²

This self-giving love of the Trinity is what heals the broken attachment between us and God and between us and our neighbour. In “Trinitarian Vision” Kruger states:

[i]n the life and death of Jesus the Holy Spirit made his way into human pain and blindness. Inside our broken inner worlds the Spirit works to reveal Jesus in us so that we can meet Jesus in our own sin and shame, and begin to see what Jesus sees, and know his Father with him.²³

This means we get to be included in Christ’s attachment/deep emotional love relationship with the Father through the Spirit. This resonates with Benner’s view that, “as I bring my true self-in-Christ to relationships... what the other person encounters is not just me but Christ in me.”²⁴

What if we live in anxious attachment to God? Then, Benner points out,

if you assume God looks on you with disgust, disappointment, frustration or anger... the central feature of any spiritual response to such a God will be an effort to earn his approval. Far from daring to relax in his presence, you will be vigilant to perform as well as you possibly can. The motive for any obedience you might offer will be fear rather than love, and there will be little genuine surrender. Surrender involves relaxing, and you must feel safe before you can relax. How could anyone ever expect to feel safe enough to relax in the presence of a God who is

13 Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 12.

14 Miner, “Back to the Basics”; M. Miner and M. Dowson, “Spiritual Experiences Reconsidered: A Relational Approach to the Integration of Psychology and Theology,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 40 no. 1 (2012): 55–59.

15 Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from Leading Neuroscientists* (New York: Random House, 2010); W. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

16 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 181.

17 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 91.

18 Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstynne King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 31.

19 Stanley J Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: a Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 327.

20 Ibid, 328 ; see also Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998); Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

21 C. Baxter Kruger, “The Trinitarian Vision: A Summary,” in *Baxter’s Ongoing Thoughts*, 2012. Online: <http://baxterkruger.blogspot.co.nz/2012/09/summary-of-trinitarian-vision.html>. Accessed 13 June 2013.

22 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 23.

23 Kruger, “Trinitarian Vision.” Accessed 13 June 2013.

24 David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 52.

preoccupied with their shortcomings and failures?²⁵

What kind of a vision of God as a safe attachment figure does our theology portray? What about the incarnational community of the church? Is it a safe relational system? Does the church embody this deeply safe relational system that the Trinity enjoys and we are included in? Is it a safe village of attachment? Do we really trust in “that great love that was there for us before we experienced any rejection and that will be there for us after all rejections take place.”²⁶ Our greatest invitation to exist and be embraced comes from the Trinitarian God. The heart of the gospel is that we get to participate in Jesus’ relationship with the Father through the Spirit. The gospel is not so much about you inviting Jesus into your heart, but about Jesus including you in his *deep secure attachment* relationship with the Father and the Spirit. If that attachment can be deeply internalised, not just as head knowledge but at a deep neurological and embodied place, then “nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).

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²⁵ Ibid, 17–18. In Attachment terminology Benner’s expression “daring to relax” would be called coming to psychological rest in a secure attachment to a significant other.

²⁶ Ibid.