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# GOD AS A SECURE BASE: ATTACHMENT TO GOD AND THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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This study was an attempt to determine if God might provide a secure base for theological exploration. It was predicted that those displaying secure attachment with God would be more willing to “explore” their theological “world.” Participants were 117 undergraduate students who completed measures of attachment to God, Quest religious motives, and Christian orthodoxy. Overall, the study supported the experimental predictions. Specifically, the participants in the study who saw God as a “Secure Base” were more engaged in theological exploration and were more tolerant of Christian faiths different from their own. These same subjects also reported more peace and less distress during their spiritual journey. Yet, despite their exploration, these participants fully embraced the core doctrines of Christianity. Overall, these results suggest that the attachment paradigm might significantly illuminate research involving religious maturity, apostasy, and religious intolerance.

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Over the last ten years, growing attention has been devoted toward understanding God as an attachment figure. This literature has grown rich in both theory and empirical support (Granqvist, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, 1992; McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy, 2004; TenElshof & Furrow, 2000). Assessment instruments have also been developed to assess relationship with God from both the attachment (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002) and object-relations perspectives (Hall & Edwards, 2002). The attachment-based measures allow for relationship with God to be described as an attachment style using dimensional (e.g., Brennan, Clark, and Shaver,

1998: Avoidance of Intimacy and Anxiety about Abandonment) or categorical (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990: Secure versus Dismissing versus Preoccupied versus Fearful) models.

Much of the empirical research in this area has attempted to address the Compensation versus Correspondence question concerning relationship to God. That is, is relationship with God best viewed as compensation for deficient caregiver bonds? Or, do attachment styles remain stable (i.e., Do they correspond?) across all attachment domains? Currently, the research appears to suggest that seeking out a relationship with God (e.g., conversion) may have compensatory motives (Granqvist, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998). However, once the relationship with God is established, prior attachment styles may begin to exert themselves in this new, albeit supernatural, relationship (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Brokaw & Edwards, 1994; Hall & Brokaw, 1995; Hall, Brokaw, Edwards, & Pike, 1998; McDonald, Beck, Allison, Norsworthy, 2004).

## *The Attachment Bond*

In Ainsworth's (1985) classic formulation of the attachment bond, she delineated four criteria: Maintaining proximity with the attachment figure, using the attachment figure as a secure base for explorative behavior, regarding the attachment figure as a haven of safety, and experiencing anxiety when separated from the attachment figure. Using these criteria, Kirkpatrick (1999) has argued that relationship with God can be described as an attachment bond. Specifically, Kirkpatrick (1999) draws parallels between commonly reported experiences with God and the four attachment criteria. For example, Kirkpatrick notes that believers are often motivated to be “close” or “near” to God: a clear indication of proximity maintenance. Further, in times of distress, God is sought out as a haven of safety. Also, feeling

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distant or separated from God can lead to emotional distress for the believer.

### *God as a secure base*

However, when we turn to the final attachment criterion, God as a secure base of exploration, there seems to be no obvious parallel with the believer's experience. In what kind of "exploration" is the believer engaged? In childhood, we see the secure base dynamic clearly: A securely attached child roams freely and without anxiety as long as the child knows where the caregiver is located. As we mature, this "location" becomes abstracted as "home," a place that gives the adolescent the courage to take risks and pursue new challenges. Lacking a secure "home" we become more cautious and tentative in life.

How might this secure base dynamic manifest itself in a relationship with God? First, a secure attachment with God could translate into expansiveness within the human sphere. Specifically, God often is perceived as a source of support and strength. Thus, with God's aid and support, the believer reaps the confidence to face new challenges. This facet of the believer's experience is best captured by what may be one of the most frequently cited New Testament passages: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

However, risk taking and courage within the human sphere might not capture all of what is meant by "exploration" in light of this supernatural attachment. Exploration might also manifest itself within the metaphysical sphere in that relationship with God is perceived to be a uniquely *supernatural* relationship. Thus, explorations of the supernatural realm might also be affected by the quality of the attachment bond with God. How might a supernatural exploration proceed? Within the experiential and emotional sphere of religious life, experiences might be sought after or explored in prayer, worship, or practice of spiritual disciplines. Within the cognitive sphere of religious life, theological beliefs might be explored. That is, a believer might explore deeper or alternative theological formulations of her faith. It is this *theological* exploration that was the focus of the present study.

### *Theological exploration*

*Theological exploration and Quest motives.* The issue of theological exploration has, in its own right,

been extensively investigated. A leading paradigm in this literature has been Daniel Batson's construct of *religion as quest*. Beginning in the 70s, Batson and colleagues (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993) have argued that previous models of religious motivation have failed to assess facets of religion (e.g., complexity, readiness to face doubt, self-criticism, knowing incompleteness, tentativeness, a continuing search for truth) that are generally recognized as important features in mature religious persons. To remedy this situation, Batson has proposed a religious motivation called "Quest" which emphasizes theological and/or metaphysical exploration. According to Batson (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993), Quest captures a religious orientation that involves three facets: (a) The feeling that doubt is a positive experience; (b) a willingness to change religious views across the lifespan; and (c) the presence of existential questions which stimulate religious inquiry. Clearly, the Quest construct captures much of what was described earlier as "theological exploration." That is, facets of Quest involve religious *curiosity*, *effort* spent in exploring different theological ideas, and an *openness* to new religious ideas. These facets of Quest—theological curiosity, effort, and openness—have been isolated and measured by recent efforts devoted toward understanding and assessing Quest as a multidimensional construct (Beck, Baker, Robbins, & Dow, 2001; Beck & Jessup, 2004; Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1989). Although not all facets of Quest are related to theological exploration (see Beck & Jessup, 2004), theological curiosity, effort, and openness are associated with both initiating and maintaining a far-ranging theological quest throughout life. Thus, the Quest attributes of curiosity, effort, and openness were selected in this study to be indicative, but not exhaustively descriptive, of theological exploration.

*Theological exploration and attachment.* It is expected that if theological exploration is associated with secure attachments with God, the "quest" should generally proceed in a peaceful, even joyful, manner. This is not to say that secure seekers will never experience periods of felt separation or alienation from God. "Dark Nights of the Soul," as described by St. John of the Cross, will typify even the richest and deepest spiritual journey. What is suggested here is that the spiritual quest of secure seekers is not experienced as distancing from God nor likely to anger or upset God. We should recognize that theological inquiry can be anxiety-inducing. Many believ-

ers feel that questioning doctrine or changing theological beliefs could provoke the anger of God. This study is suggesting that the securely attached seeker will be relatively freer from this anxiety compared to the seeker's insecure counterparts. A securely attached theological explorer would be able to discuss new, potentially radical, theological ideas without the fear that this inquiry could anger God. Conversely, given their fears of abandonment, it is predicted that insecure seekers would be less likely to take the risks of theological inquiry, fearing that questioning dogma might lead to being rejected by God.

However, a deep understanding of attachment theory would suggest that another attachment style, other than secure attachment, would also be associated with prolonged anxiety-free exploration: Avoidant, or dismissing attachments. Thus, research investigating theological exploration must determine if the searching is motivated fundamentally by a healthy attachment to God (secure attachment) or the *failure to attach* to God (dismissing attachment). This is a crucial distinction. Theological inquiry can often be the precursor of apostasy (i.e., the loss of faith) or heresy (i.e., rejection of core Christian beliefs).

Some have speculated that avoidant attachments with God do ultimately produce agnosticism (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1999). And yet, theological curiosity, as the Quest literature suggests, is also associated with mature faith. Superficially, both groups (the securely attached seekers and the future apostates) may seem to be displaying faith "problems" as they question and explore theological ideas. However, the two groups would seem to be radically different. The securely attached would rarely, if ever, sever the bond with God. By contrast, the avoidantly attached, due to their lack of emotional investment in the attachment figure, would be much more willing to sever the bonds of dependency upon God, an action which might ultimately culminate in unbelief. Thus, any examination of theological exploration must be careful to discern spiritually healthy searching from seekers who are, in all reality, simply walking away from the attachment figure.

### *The Present Study: God as a secure base for theological exploration*

This study was an attempt to determine if attachment theory might illuminate individual differences in theology and theological inquiry. Specifically, the

study posed a simple question: Does God provide a secure base for theological exploration? Following attachment theory it was predicted that individuals displaying a secure attachment to God would be more likely to engage in theological exploration and that this exploration would be relatively free from anxiety and worry. An alternative way to frame this hypothesis is that those displaying fearful or preoccupied attachment styles would be less likely to engage in theological exploration, presumably because their concerns about abandonment (attachment anxiety) motivate them to stay "closer to home" (although attachment anxiety might not be the only reason). Finally, it was also important in this study to determine if theological exploration was due to secure rather than dismissing, or avoidant, attachment styles.

## METHODS

### *Participants and procedure*

Participants were 117 undergraduate students enrolled in classes at Abilene Christian University. The sample included 59 males and 58 females. The mean age of the participants was 18.05 years ( $SD = 1.65$ ). The dominant religious affiliations represented within the sample were: 71% Church of Christ, 13% Non-denominational, 6% Baptist, and 3% Catholic. Participants completed measures of attachment to God, Quest dimensions, and religious orthodoxy.

### *Assessment instruments*

*Attachment to God Inventory.* The Attachment to God Inventory (AGI; Beck & McDonald, 2004) is a 28-item self-report scale that assesses the attachment dimensions of Avoidance of Intimacy and Anxiety about Abandonment in relationship with God. The AGI is similar to the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale developed by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) that was developed to assess these same attachment dimensions in adulthood romantic relationships. The two dimensions of Anxiety and Avoidance could also be dichotomized to produce the classic four-fold attachment typology: Secure, Preoccupied, Dismissing, and Fearful. The 14 items on the AGI-Anxiety subscale (e.g., "I often worry about whether God is pleased with me."; "I fear God does not accept me when I do wrong.") generated, in this sample, an alpha coefficient of .85. The 14 items on the AGI-Avoidance subscale (e.g., "I prefer not to depend too much on God."; "I just don't feel

a deep need to be close to God.”) generated, in this sample, an alpha coefficient of .88.

**Batson's Interactional (Quest) scale.** The version of Batson's Interactional Scale used in this study was his most recent 12-item measure (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). The Interactional Scale is a self-report scale where participants rate their item endorsement on a 1 to 9 Likert scale. Although summed to create a single score, Batson's measure was intended to assess three dimensions: (a) Readiness to face existential questions (e.g., “God wasn't very important to me until I began to ask questions about the meaning of my own life.”); (b) perception of doubt as positive (e.g., “It might be said that I value my religious doubts and uncertainties.”); and (c) openness to change (e.g., “As I grow and change, I expect my religion also to grow and change.”). In this sample the Interactional Scale yielded an alpha coefficient of .75.

**The Multidimensional Quest Orientation Scale.** The Multidimensional Quest Orientation Scale (MQOS; Beck & Jessup, 2004) was developed to provide a multidimensional assessment of the Quest construct. The MQOS has nine Quest-related dimensions. In this study only three of the MQOS subscales were used: Ecumenism, Exploration, and Religious Angst. The Ecumenism subscale consists of eight items that assess the degree to which a person accepts other Christian groups (e.g., “I don't think one Christian faith is any more correct when compared to the others.”). The Exploration subscale consists of six items which assess the degree of effort the person has expended in exploring religious faith (e.g., “In my effort to seek after God I have spent a lot of time studying the teachings of religions around the world.”). Finally, the Religious Angst subscale consists of six items that assess the amount of emotional distress the person has experienced during their faith development (e.g., “I have often felt lost and alone during my spiritual journey.”). In this sample, the Ecumenism, Exploration, and Religious Angst subscales generated alpha coefficients of .88, .85, and .85 respectively.

**Christian Orthodoxy Scale.** As a measure of orthodoxy for the Christian religion, the Christian Orthodoxy Scale (COS; Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982) was used. The COS is a 24-item scale that assesses the degree to which someone accepts beliefs central to Christianity (e.g., Jesus was the Son of God, Jesus was resurrected, Jesus performed miracles). The COS uses a self-report format where respondents rate their degree of belief or disbelief

along a 6-point continuum (-3 = *strongly disagree* to +3 = *strongly agree*). In this sample the COS generated an alpha of .93.

## RESULTS

### *Correlational statistics*

The zero-order correlations between the AGI-sub-scales, Quest, and orthodoxy ratings are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, many of the experimental predictions were supported. Specifically, both AGI-Anxiety and AGI-Avoidance scores were negatively associated with MQOS-Exploration scores. That is, securely attached individuals (low attachment avoidance *and* anxiety) reported greater efforts in exploring the theological “world.” This trend TREND OF WHAT? was further supported by the negative association observed between the AGI subscales (but only AGI-Anxiety significantly) and the MQOS-Ecumenism scores. Specifically, securely attached (and some dismissing attachments) participants were more accepting and tolerant of Christian groups different from their own. An alternative way to see this same trend is that fearful and preoccupied attachments with God were associated with *less* acceptance and tolerance of different Christian groups.

Also noted in Table 1 is that the theological exploration associated with secure attachments appeared to be accompanied by relatively little emotional distress. That is, AGI-Anxiety and AGI-Avoidance scores were both positively associated with MQOS-Religious Angst scores. This indicates that only the securely attached described their religious life as relatively peaceful and joyful.

As noted earlier, it is important to distinguish between the “exploration” done by the securely attached and the “rejection” displayed by those exhibiting dismissing attachment. This distinction can best be observed in the associations between the AGI subscales and the orthodoxy ratings. It was observed that the AGI-Avoidance subscale was negatively associated with orthodoxy ratings. Thus, those with dismissing attachments, such as greater avoidance of intimacy with the attachment figure, were more likely to reject core Christian beliefs. Conversely, the securely attached and the preoccupied attachments were more likely to endorse core Christian beliefs.

### *Path analysis*

To further explore the relationship between attachment to God, theological exploration, and

**TABLE 1**  
*Correlations between AGI subscales and the Quest and orthodoxy measures*

"Exploration" measure:	Attachment to God Dimensions	
	AGI-Anxiety	AGI-Avoidance
Orthodoxy	.32**	.27**
Interactional Scale	.13	.14
MQOS-Exploration	-.28**	-.30**
MQOS-Ecumenism	-.20*	-.13
MQOS-Religious Angst	.46**	.21*

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

orthodoxy, a path analysis was conducted. The specific issue was to determine if secure attachments might indirectly lead to apostasy or heresy. That is, might secure attachments, by promoting theological exploration (as seen in Table 1), *indirectly* promote apostasy or heresy (i.e., rejection of core Christian doctrine)? A path analysis is an excellent method to assess questions concerning these kind of indirect effects.

To accomplish this analysis, two separate regression analyses were conducted. In the first analysis, AGI-Anxiety and AGI-Avoidance were used to predict MQOS-Exploration scores. In the second analysis, AGI-Anxiety, AGI-Avoidance, and MQOS-Exploration scores were simultaneously used to predict orthodoxy scores. Standardized path coefficients (standardized betas) and disturbance variance estimates ( $1 - R^2$ ) are presented in Figure 1. Overall, AGI-Anxiety and AGI-Avoidance accounted for 13% of the variance in MQOS-Exploration ratings ( $F_{2,102} = 7.38, p < .01$ ). AGI-Anxiety, AGI-Avoidance, and MQOS-Exploration ratings accounted for 21% of the variance in orthodoxy scores ( $F_{3,101} = 8.68, p < .001$ ). As can be seen in Figure 1, greater AGI-Avoidance and AGI-Anxiety scores predicted decreased exploration. This pattern is consistent with the trends observed in Table 1: Secure attachments predicted increased theological exploration. In the second part of the model, only AGI-Avoidance was a significant predictor of orthodoxy. Specifically, the avoidance of the attachment figure was associated with a greater rejection of core Christian doctrine.

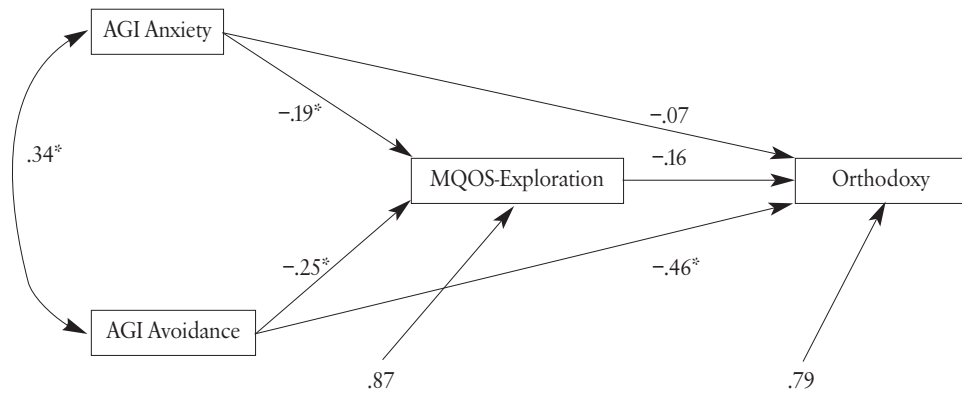
Table 2 presents the decomposition of the direct and indirect effects of AGI-Anxiety, AGI-Avoidance, and MQOS-Exploration ratings upon orthodoxy. As can be seen in Table 2, neither AGI-Avoidance nor AGI-Anxiety ratings had indirect effects via MQOS-Exploration upon orthodoxy ratings. Simply put, secure attachments, although producing increased theological exploration, did not indirectly produce greater rejection of the Christian faith.

In general, then, the path analytic results indicated that secure attachments were associated with greater theological exploration but that this increased exploration did not indirectly lead to a rejection of the Christian faith. By contrast, attachment avoidance was associated with both *decreased exploration* and *decreased orthodoxy*. That is, dismissing attachments did not seem engaged with or interested in exploring their theological "world." Rather, persons with dismissing attachments appeared to be simply rejecting Christianity. Briefly summarized, secure attachments were associated with theological *curiosity* and *orthodoxy*, whereas dismissing attachments were associated with theological *disinterest* and *heterodoxy*.

## DISCUSSION

### *Summary of results*

Does God provide a secure base for theological exploration? Our tentative answer to this question is "yes." Secure attachments, in our sample, tended to be associated with increased theological exploration and tolerance for different Christian groups. Further,



Note:  $*p < .05$ .

**Figure 1.** Path coefficients and disturbance variance estimates for AGI-Anxiety, AGI-Avoidance, MQOS-Exploration, and Christian orthodoxy ratings.

this exploration appeared to be relatively anxiety-free. Finally, despite the exploration and tolerance, securely attached individuals did not stray so far as to reject core Christian doctrine. These persons “wandered,” but kept a clear sense of where “home” was, theologically speaking. By contrast, attachment avoidance was associated with rejection of Christian orthodoxy. This rejection did not appear to be the product of theological exploration, but seemed, rather, due to a disinterest in the theological enterprise.

Flipping these trends on their heads, the data suggested that fearful attachments were associated with decreased theological exploration. Also, fearful and preoccupied attachments were less tolerant of different Christian groups. Why might this be? Note that both the preoccupied and fearful attachments display increased anxiety about abandonment. That is, they fear that God might not accept or love them. Children displaying these types of “insecure” attachments in the Strange Situation tend to stay close to the caregiver, forgoing the opportunity to explore the environment. These children prefer “security” over “exploration.” Might a similar dynamic be involved in attachments to God? As suggested earlier, theological inquiry can be anxiety-inducing. For many Christians *orthodoxy* (right belief) is as important as *orthopraxy* (right practice). Thus, many Christians believe that failures of orthodoxy can produce a rejection by God. Given that theological inquiry is a game played with potentially ultimate

stakes, it should come as no surprise that the insecurely attached might be less inclined to question or critique the prevailing notions of their faith community. However, we must be cautious in inferring the motives behind the lower exploration and tolerance ratings for preoccupied and fearful participants. Future research is needed. However, if this suggestion proves correct, attachment theory might provide one explanation regarding the sources of religious dogmatism and, perhaps, intolerance. The dogmatic and intolerant might be the most insecurely attached to God. Given that religious dogmatism and intolerance are growing concerns in our world, this issue seems well worth further investigation.

### Limitations

To date, the literature on attachment to God has focused almost exclusively on Christianity. Consequently, little is known about how the attachment paradigm might describe relationship with God in other monotheistic (e.g., Judaism, Islam) or polytheistic religions (e.g., Hinduism). Research is needed in this area. In a similar vein, variations of attachment within Christianity require more attention. For example, Beck and McDonald (2004) found some evidence that different religious groups might display different proportions of attachment styles. Little yet is known about why or how a certain faith community or tradition might affect attachment to God. Given that most of the participants in this

**TABLE 2**  
*Decomposition of direct and indirect effects for AGI-Anxiety, AGI-Avoidance, MQOS-Exploration, and Christian orthodoxy ratings*

<u>Causal variable</u>	<u>Endogenous variable</u>	
	<u>MQOS-Exploration</u>	<u>Orthodoxy</u>
<u>AGI-Anxiety</u>		
Direct effect	-.19*	-.07
Indirect effect via MQOS-Exploration		.03
Total effect	-.19*	-.04
<u>AGI-Avoidance</u>		
Direct effect	-.25*	-.46*
Indirect effect via MQOS-Exploration		.04
Total effect	-.25	-.42*
<u>MQOS-Exploration</u>		
Direct effect		-.16

Note: \* $p < .05$

study were from the Churches of Christ we are hesitant to generalize our findings to other Christian traditions. Replication in a more diverse population is needed. Finally, given the correlational nature of the design, the conclusions regarding apostasy are very conjectural. It is not certain that dismissing attachments will ultimately produce apostasy. Nor can we be completely certain that the exploration engaged in by the securely attached would not, over time, erode their faith. Only longitudinal work in this area can resolve these questions.

**Conclusions**

This study provided preliminary support for the notion that God might provide believers with a secure base for theological exploration. Participants in this study who saw God as a “Secure Base” were more engaged in theological exploration and were more tolerant of Christian faiths different from their own. These same subjects also reported more peace and less distress in their spiritual lives. Yet, despite their exploration, these participants fully embraced the core doctrines of Christianity. In sum, these results suggest that the attachment paradigm might significantly illuminate research involving religious maturity, apostasy, and religious intolerance.

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