Loving and Being Loved

A Social Trinitarian Evaluation of the Theory of Adult Attachment to God

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Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person’s work has been used with due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Signature: .................................  Date: ..............................

Patrick D. R. Innes
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Abstract

This study explores themes from Social Trinitarian theology to evaluate Attachment Theory, particularly in relation to adult attachment to God. Attachment Theory conceptualises the formation of infant to care-giver bonds and how these form psychological structures that are used in relationships from infancy through to adulthood.

While Attachment Theory is found to be verifiable, research in attachment to God is found to lack a coherent theological framework. Further, it suffers from possible methodological problems that make the data confused to some degree. Despite these problems, the research offers interesting insights about attachment to God.

Social Trinitarian theology provides some strong evaluations, which support the idea that attachment to God is possible. Using a Social Trinitarian framework is shown to provide a plausible theological approach for using Attachment Theory in relation to adult attachment to God. It also opens up possible solutions for resolving the problems in the data by suggesting that research to date might be theologically inadequate when it measures converted and non-converted people in their attachment as the same. It also raises challenges for the formation of spiritual directors, particularly that formation that sees human experience as equal in status to Biblical revelation. Social Trinitarian theology challenges this equal status and places a priority on Christian Scripture. Finally, this study cautions against the teaching of Attachment Theory to Spiritual Directors without a careful trial first. It also suggests that future new resources for the supervision of Spiritual Directors could be developed to help directors to examine difficulties that they may encounter in their practice.
Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 The context of this study: who is the researcher?
This study is motivated by three significant factors in my life; my personal experience, my theological perspective and my sense of God’s call. It is a continuation of my formal academic studies in spiritual direction. However, it also forms a part of the wider shaping of my sense of personal vocation, which I will briefly elaborate. I hope by describing these three areas of influence, readers will be helped in orienting themselves to this project.

1.1.1 Area one: significant shaping life experiences
What life experiences do I bring? The most significant is my family of origin. Through a period of difficult emotional upheaval in my late teens, I went through a four–year period of intensive therapeutic care with a highly skilled family therapist. Apart from the happy benefit of a more emotionally integrated approach to life, the legacy that I bring to this study is the appreciation of the highly significant part that family of origin plays in forming the adult person.

1.1.2 Area two: significant theological perspectives
My structured theological formation has been distinctively Evangelical. My undergraduate training introduced me to disciplines such as exegesis and systematic theology. Initially enamoured with these new skills, I soon found that I needed other skills to make sense of
individuals’ stories of faith and life. I began to see the need for the abstract nature of much of the Christian ‘knowledge’ to be grounded in concrete realities that people face. These realities more often than not involve the psychological responses that arise in us in reaction to life. It seemed to me that in the incarnation, Christ grounded himself in our lived experience. This has acted as a model of how my theology needs to be developed. That is, it needs to be grounded in and account for the every day realities of my own and other’s lives. I have found Social Trinitarian theology to be one such grounded approach. I will explore why in later chapters.

1.1.3 Area three: vocational influences

During my postgraduate training in spiritual direction, my formation process allowed me to re-examine my family of origin from a more theologically reflective perspective. It was suggested to me by the formation team in my course, that I might find it fruitful to explore what others have said about the connection between human attachment style and the way a person relates to God.

Upon exploration, Attachment Theory seemed to have an elegance that provided a theoretical framework for understanding many of the issues that arose in my practice. Purporting to explain how people come to make relationships and how they operate in those, I wondered what implications it might suggest for my ministry and formation as a spiritual director. I have found the insights of Attachment Theory helpful in understanding my primary relationships in life: those with my parents, my wife, my children and my God. Others have found it helpful too, but have noticed that there is something lacking in the theory if we are to meaningfully apply it in a Christian context.

1.2 Background and Need for the Study: what is the research about?

Attachment Theory is an established, observable theory of how infants form attachments to their primary caregivers. It also predicts and explains certain adult patterns of relationship formation that flow from these primary infant bonds.

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1 I use this word to indicate the emphasis in my undergraduate training upon the assumption that correct knowledge will lead to transformation. Rooted as it is in the Enlightenment divide between objective truth and subjective experience, it carries with it the problems of seeing experience and also emotions as inferior. In addition, it also assumes that God only mediates himself to our intellect and not directly to our emotions.

2 As I say elsewhere, I have found Miner’s (2007) insights and critique very helpful in arriving at a structure for this project.
Recently, researchers have proposed that these infant-to-adult correlations also illuminate patterns in adult attachment to God. Certain infant attachment patterns in combination with family religiosity seem to predict the particular ways adults relate to God.

However, critical to this proposal, the writing on attachment to God has no developed theological framework. God has been allocated to status of “Attachment figure par excellence” (Hall 2007, 20). Questions such as whether God can be known, how humans and God might interact, what it is that people are attaching themselves to when they say ‘God’, have not been asked or answered. The exploration and development of a theological framework would enhance the use of Attachment Theory in Christian ministry and academic study, particularly in my own discipline of spiritual direction.

1.3 The purpose of the study: why this particular research focus?
I have chosen a Social Trinitarian approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, I hope to avoid unspecific generalisations about God and limit the scope of this thesis to Christian attachment to God. Secondly, having as its strong starting place the proposal that God is a mutually loving Trinitarian community, it may provide some fertile and robust theoretical understandings through which to use the findings of Attachment Theory meaningfully. Such a social, theological approach will be helpful if it allows more nuanced and informed communal and psychological applications to Christian pastoral issues (Miner 2007, 114).

This project aims to examine some theological themes of recent Social Trinitarian theologians in order to evaluate research on adult attachment to God, drawing implications for the theory and practice of spiritual direction. In addition, I propose to explore the following hypotheses and theses:

- That Attachment Theory is a defensible theory of human relationships
- That it has application in the area of adult attachment to God
- That Attachment Theory, as applied to adult attachment to God, currently lacks a clear or developed theological framework and that this may limit its further in-depth use for interdisciplinary study of the interaction of people and God from Christian perspectives
- That Social Trinitarian thinking might offer one such framework
- That such a framework might bring to light some new possibilities and
limitations in the research and application of Attachment Theory to explain Christian attachment to God.

### 1.4 Methodology and limits of this research

#### 1.4.1 Limitations

There are dangers when introducing or seeking to apply a new theoretical system. There is no grand unifying theory of human behaviour. A study such as this, which seeks to cover a vast range of research in a relatively brief scope runs several risks, a few of which are noted below.

First is that of reductionism. This is mistaking the studied theory as a ‘silver bullet’ to solve all human ills. While this study will seek to propose that Attachment Theory is one of the main ways we can understand human interactions, even that it should be considered one of the main pillars of a psychological understanding, it also needs to respect the limits of the use of the theory.

The second is the risk of using data. Data is just that. It is a collection of averages for a group of subjects. People in the real world do not always fit the data as neatly as we might hope. These limitations will be explored later.

Thirdly, any attempt to describe God from the human perspective and with human terms, by definition is a limited exercise. I will talk more about specific limitations to this study in each relevant section below.

A final limitation is that of the language of gender used in much of this project. At times the reader will encounter the use of ‘mother’. I have chosen to use this term quite deliberately in an academic environment where inclusive language has long become the norm. This is for several reasons. Much of the early research into infant attachment was done into the mother-child bond. This reflected gender biases of both the researchers and the times that the studies were done. Much research has not considered the role of the father and that is regrettable.

As will be seen, the end result of parenting is that a child develops a particular attachment style. A detailed examination of whether it is derived from the mother, father or more likely a combination of both (where both are present) is outside the scope of this study. But the
reader should be aware that when ‘mother’ is used it means just that and indicates that behind this usage the study being referred to only accounts for the mother’s effect. Where ‘primary care-giver’ is used, the reader can assume that the whole effect of parenting is in view, either in the study being referenced or in my own thinking. Where ‘father’ is used, the study cited is looking at the father’s role. Despite these biases, the studies have been shown many times over to be reliable\(^3\) indications of the styles of attachment that people will develop as adults. For the purposes of this study, what is important is that a particular attachment style arose and was caused by a certain style of parenting. It is hoped that in the future a broader picture will be painted of the role of both parents.

1.4.2 Methodology

This study is a theological evaluation of a psychological theory. The researcher will conduct a review of the literature on Attachment Theory followed by an examination of key themes from Social Trinitarian theology. Two chapters will follow this: one on Social Trinitarian contributions to the issues raised in the literature review of Attachment Theory and another on contributions to the theory and practice of spiritual direction. A short section of concluding remarks will draw the project to a close.

\(^3\) See Feeny and Noller (1996) for a thorough analysis of the scope and reliability of attachment studies.
Chapter Two

Literature Review: Attachment

2.1 How do we become who we are?

“How do we become who we are? (Karen 1998, 1)”. Parents seem to have some intuition that how they parent effects how their children will turn out as adults. This is why they do many of the things they do as parents. They expect that they will have some effect on their children. The question of how much effect and what happens in the early years of a child’s life has been the raw material for much psychological enquiry. This has particularly been so with adults experiencing some form of psychopathology.

2.1.1 The orphanage experience

Psychopathology and the actual experiences of patients initiated the discovery of Attachment Theory. Early twentieth century child psychiatrists noted a disturbing trend amongst their patients: the emotionally detached child. These children were unable to make affectional bonds. Combined with this, doctors struggled to combat high infant mortality rates in orphanages, where seventy percent in the first year of admission was common. Poor hygiene, nutrition or infections were suspected. However, as these improved, the rates did not: children still wasted away. During their decline, the children exhibited symptoms like
adult despair, depression and lost hope (Karen 1998, 19).

Researchers noted that declining children thrived when they left the institution and were placed in warm nurturing families. Slowly, researchers began to explore the importance of a warm, stable and nurturing environment\(^4\). However, the academically accepted thinking that care for children did not need to include emotional warmth would smother this flickering spark of insight until the arrival on the scene of a young English doctor named John Bowlby. He would fan this spark “into a flame” (Karen 1998, 25).

2.1.2 *Problems in psychoanalytic theory noticed*

At the age of thirty-three, Bowlby, the father of Attachment Theory was working as a child psychiatrist. He noted that although psychoanalysis had done much to point out that the “child is the father to the man (sic) (Karen 1998, 26)”, it had done little to research what actually happens to a child in early life. In one of his first papers he proposed two sources of trauma that would have profound influences on children. First, was the absence of the mother and second, the mother’s negative emotional stance toward her child (Bowlby 1940).

Psychoanalysis did not pay direct attention to the effect of parents on their children. To explain neurosis in his female patients, Freud had abandoned his theory that sexual abuse in childhood was the source of trauma. Contentiously, he proposed that children were governed by powerful unconscious drives. One of these was erotic desire, which children focused on the parent of the opposite sex. This was the genesis of his theory of the Oedipal complex. The patient’s neuroses were based in the tensions and guilt that these feelings aroused in the child and carried through to adulthood (Karen 1998, 35-39).

The effect of this position was far-reaching and fundamental to the development of psychoanalysis. Since then the connections between the parent’s emotional problems and the child’s were and have been separated and unexamined theoretically. The *actual* events of the child’s life were diminished and subordinated to the fantasy life of the child. The state of play during the first four decades of the twentieth century was that the thought that the *actual* experience of the child had any effect was considered by the main psychoanalytic theorists to be academically shallow and naïve (Karen 1998, 38).

\(^4\) For a good but sobering summary of the early culture, events and statistics on infant mortality see Karen, 1998, 1-25.
2.1.3 The problem with Freud

However Freudian practitioners were experiencing a gap between theory and clinical experience. They noticed that early relationships were a strong feature of the problems that they were treating. Case studies reported the impact of early relationships but the bias towards the child’s supposed fantasy life prevented substantial theorising.

Object relations theorists such as Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott and Ronald Fairbairn, social theorists such as Eric Fromm, developmental theorist such as Erik Erikson and much later, family therapy, all flourished in this clinical gap (Karen 1998, 38).

While Bowlby was part of this movement he alone saw the need for a scientific understanding of what happens in early life as opposed to a psychoanalytic view of the importance of the internal fantasy of the neurotic adult, which he saw as inadequate for building a theoretical understanding of how we become who we are.

2.2 Infant Attachment

2.2.1 A parting of the ways: Bowlby’s starting point

Attachment Theory is fundamentally different from mainstream psychoanalysis. Freud rarely used direct observation of infants in his theorising. His search for theoretical understandings of human relationships repeatedly led him to the significance of early childhood trauma for the formation adult of psychopathology. However he never moved from the observation of adults to children. His theorising on what had happened in early life was based on data that had been reconstructed from adult subjects.

Bowlby however worked from a different stance. He noticed that traumatic separation from mother leads to either anxiety or detachment upon return of the mother. Further, those suffering psychoneurosis and other emotional disturbances as adults presented either as anxious, detached or a compound of these behaviours. As a result he chose the observation of these behaviours in young children as his starting point (Bowlby 1971, 24).

2.3 Four Characteristics of Bowlby’s approach

In the development of a scientific approach, Bowlby elaborated four distinctive features in his method. They are:

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5 For a comprehensive review of the literature, see chapter two of his first volume ‘Attachment and Loss’, 46-57.
A prospective approach
Which moves from event to consequence(s)
Using direct assessment of young children
Which is correlated to animal data.

2.3.1 Prospective approach
Bowlby proposed using data from observing how very young children behave in given situations. Then, using this data to extrapolate forward he hoped to describe predictable patterns of outcomes that were linked to adult behaviours. This reversed the psychoanalytic priority from adult pathology to actual childhood events. See (Bowlby 1971, 24) for a detailed explanation.

2.3.2 Events linked to consequences
Bowlby suggested that psychoanalysis should mirror scientific study of pathology, which rather than start at the symptom and worked backwards, started with the pathogen and worked forward in order to discover all the effects of a particular agent. For example, in the case of tuberculosis, if one works back from chronic lung disease to the tubercule, the effect upon other organs will be missed. This, he calls the “manifold sequelae of a particular pathogenic agent (Bowlby 1971, 24-25)”.

2.3.3 Direct assessment of young children
Attachment Theory examines the actual behaviour of young children as its primary data. Further, as we age, we increase our ability to restrict our behaviour. Therefore the younger the subject of research, the more likely their behaviour will indicate their current mental state (Bowlby 1971, 26).

2.3.4 Animal data correlation
Finally, Bowlby used ethology – the observation of other species’ behaviour, specifically in “response to the presence or absence of their mother” (Bowlby 1971, 27) – because it deals with the formation of intimate social bonds and the disorders that happen when this process is disturbed in animals. Bowlby was looking for a legitimate scientific framework through which to study the issues of childhood trauma and ethology provided the best match (Bowlby 1971, 28).
Bowlby observed, through a literature review of studies in primate bonding that primate babies preferred proximity and warmth, not food. For example, Rhesus monkeys were observed to prefer a cloth covered wire manikin of their mother to one that only provided food, but didn’t look anything like their mother. Readers may recall photos of Harry Harlow’s experiments on baby monkeys clinging pathetically to a cloth covered wire frame in the shape of a monkey, while nearby, a teat in an uncovered wire manikin is available. See examples:

(Arima 2008)

This was the solid scientific foundation that helped Bowlby’s initial theoretical proposal to be explored, verified and propagated. His psychoanalytic thoughts became accessible to developmental psychologists and these in turn have continued to verify the incredible importance of his theory almost seventy years after he first started to wonder about emotionally detached children.

2.4 What does attachment behaviour look like?

Attachment is the formation of a particular system of behaviour in a child in response to its
primary caregiver. Primarily the attachment system is made up of (1) the carer’s behaviour, (2) the child’s response to that behaviour (called proximity seeking), (3) the carer’s response to that behaviour and finally (4) the child’s response to that. The learned response from this process is the child’s attachment style. This complex sounding process can be simply diagrammed as follows:

![Diagram of the Attachment Process](image)

**FIGURE 3:** The Attachment Process

It is at point four in the cycle that the potential for a pattern of attachment style becomes possible. It can be seen that there is a rhythm to the formation of a style of attachment. This is known as a feedback loop. One big event can set up an attachment style, but frequently it is the result of an ongoing cycle of events that repeat, reinforce and confirm the attachment style that the child develops.

### 2.4.1 What purpose does the attachment system serve?

For Bowlby the attachment system is an evolutionary adaptation that maintains proximity of the child to the caregiver (Karen 1998, 90). Ainsworth was the first person to observe this proximity behaviour in a systematic way. She observed that attachment functions in two ways to aid the exploration of the surrounding world. First it acts as a *safe haven* from which to go out, and second it is a *secure base* to return to for reassurance and comfort (Ainsworth et al. 1978, 314-315)[6]. These two features will become important to our research into attachment to God.

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2.5 The results of attachment system development

2.5.1 The development of internal working models
Bowlby explained that the attachment system is a number of things working in concert. The first of these are known as internal working models or mental models. He proposed that each child develops a working model of themselves and others. This model contains expectations of how others will respond to them and an acquired perception of how acceptable or unacceptable he or she is in the eyes of their attachment figures (Bowlby 1973, 203).

2.5.2 The importance of accessibility and responsiveness
Second, important experiences are placed upon these mental models. Chief of these are the child’s forecasts of the responsiveness and accessibility of their primary attachment figures should the child look to them for support. These forecasts are based on both how confident the child is that an attachment figure is readily available and how anxious the child is that the attachment figure “will not be available – occasionally, frequently, or most of the time (Bowlby 1973, 203)”.

This availability must be a ready and warm response that matches a baby’s needs. Further, to be appropriate, it must affirm and not be anxious about the baby’s emotional response, particularly when the baby is anxious at separation or reunion. It is vital that anxiety is met with sensitive warmth for the baby to form a secure attachment (Bowlby 1973, 201).

2.6 Ainsworth’s finding’s on the outcomes of attachment
Ainsworth’s contribution to the study of attachment cannot be understated. Until her research, attachment research was hypothesising and drawing its evidence from studies that others had done with other purposes in mind. In her first study of infants, she inadvertently stumbled upon the attachment behaviour being formed that she had learned about while under Bowlby’s tutelage. Until then the actual formation of attachment behaviour had not been observed. In fact many in the psychoanalytic community thought that this would be impossible. However, Ainsworth’s meticulous observations, measurements of types and durations of behaviour produced results.

Later she replicated her results by intentionally looking for attachment behaviour from the start of a new study. Researchers spent seventy-two hours in the home of each child who was in the study. Then she developed a simple, but accurate, laboratory test that she applied
to the same subjects who had already been studied and classified according to their attachment style. This laboratory test was called the ‘Strange Situation’, in which the child and mother were introduced to a playroom and then a sequence of seven events occurred which involved the departure or arrival of the mother or a stranger in different combinations while the child remained in the room.

Ainsworth identified three types of attachment. These were correlated between the home observations and the strange situation. Significantly now, instead evaluating a child for seventy-two hours over a year, researchers could replicate the strange situation, which took twenty minutes, knowing that it reliably reported the attachment style of the child and would parallel their home life.

Karen summarises these behaviours in the following ways:

- **Secure** – . . . sought their mother when distressed, . . . seemed confident of her availability, . . . were upset when she left them, . . . eagerly greeted her upon her return, and . . . warmly accepted and were readily comforted by her soothing embrace
- **Avoidant** – . . . who seemed to depend less on their mother as a secure base, . . . sometimes attacked her with a random act of aggression; . . . were far more clingy and demanding than the secure children in the home environment, and who, despite in some cases being just as openly upset by mother’s departure in the Strange Situation, showed no interest in her when she returned
- **Ambivalent** – . . . tended to be the most overtly anxious, . . . who, like the avoidant, were also clingy and demanding at home, . . . who, like the secure, were upset when abandoned by the mother in the Strange Situation, . . . but who despite wanting her desperately when she returned, arched away angrily or went limp in her embrace, so that they could not be soothed (Karen 1998, 172).

### 2.7 Is Attachment stable?

Is attachment stable? Bowlby claimed that the mental models that a child develops are central to personality. By inference then, they are fairly stable. A sample of the longitudinal studies from infancy through the early elementary school years (Dontas, Maratos, Fafoutis, & Karangelis, 1985; Erikson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 1985; Waters, Wippman, & Sroufe, 1979) supports stability of attachment. As we shall see below, this continuity raised the likelihood that a person’s attachment history would shape their style of romantic attachment (Hazan and Shaver 1987, 512).
2.8 Criticisms of Attachment Theory

There were and still remain critics of Attachment Theory. Despite the criticisms, it has withstood critical enquiry and has been strengthened where these criticisms were justified. Among those that we need to pay attention to, we find in very broad terms that these criticisms fall into two camps and two time periods.

The first were early objections to Bowlby from 1950 to arbitrarily 1979. These objections were based around his theoretical framework, method and lack of evidence. Some were misunderstandings of what he was saying through a lack of careful close reading, or a reluctance to accept that food or erotic desire were not central drives as Freud had proposed and that Bowlby was therefore mistaken to use ethology and to centralise his theory and the need for warmth and proximity.

Later were criticisms that were more hostile attacks than academic review. These can be generalised into two groups; those who found Bowlby’s findings politically unpalatable because they had implications for not putting children into early day-care, and those who were committed behaviourists that insisted on a genetic basis for most issues. For example, Kagan, a vocal critic of Attachment Theory, held that the avoidant lack of emotional display in the strange situation is not because they are insecure, but because they are becoming rugged little individuals (Karen 1998, 329).

However against Kagan, Sroufe and Waters (1977, 8) found that avoidant infants exhibited cardiac acceleration in response to separation, while showing no overt display of distress. In addition, unlike secure infants, avoidant infants did not show a deceleration in heart rate during play following the reunion. Bartholomew notes that the apparently innocuous focus on play and inanimate objects observed in avoidant infants may be a form of displacement behaviour. These results suggest that the behaviour of avoidant infants is “active avoidance rather than precocious social maturity (Bartholomew 1990, 157)”.

2.9 Link to future issues: Romance and God

Around the time that Bowlby’s three volume work was released, psychology was attempting to re-examine love. Love had been dismissed as a recent European concept arising in the Romantic period (Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw 1988, 69). But a number of studies

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7 Karen (1998) has many sections describing and critiquing the various attacks upon attachment theorist’s work. See chapters 8 and 19 – 22 for an insightful account of the defence of Attachment Theory and the deep personal animosity that critics of it conducted their approach with.
overturned this stance and psychologists began to look at love as a psychological phenomenon that was universal in its cultural occurrence. Researchers realised that Attachment Theory might have something to say about adult love.

**Adult Attachment Romantic Attachment**

2.10 *Love is in the air: A theory grows up*

The most pivotal of these is Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) work that was the first to conceptualise romantic love as an attachment process. The importance of the conceptual leap from infant to adult attachment cannot be understated. By empirically linking infant attachment and adult relational behaviour, researchers could understand much adult pathology in the light of actual experiences of early childhood. In addition, they opened the possibility of researching adult attachment to God.

2.11 *What the postman saw: results of various surveys*

In conducting a number of surveys returned by post, Hazan and Shaver found that the best predictors of adult attachment type were respondents’ perceptions of the “quality of their [childhood] relationship with each parent and the parent’s relationship with each other (Hazan and Shaver 1987, 516)” Patterns of adult romantic attachment occurred in the same percentages found across infant populations (Campos et al. 1983). Further attachment styles had unique, predictable clusters of emotions and experiences. In addition, the subjects’ self-reporting on their adult relationships with their parents added weight to the idea that infant attachment correlated with adult romantic attachment (Hazan and Shaver 1987, 521). These findings are critical in making the link between infant attachment and adult attachment. Many other studies have confirmed their findings. See Feeney and Noller (1996) for the most comprehensive review of adult attachment research available.

2.12 *Problems uncovered: the return to Bowlby’s initial thesis.*

Hazan and Shaver’s early studies had anomalies in their data. These appeared around the avoidant category, *some of which would give contradictory reports of their parents.* We will examine this below. See Hazan and Shaver (1987, 523) for details. The researchers explained away these inconsistencies despite the findings being contrary to their predictions and conflicting with the remaining avoidant subjects. This would turn out to be a critical methodological error.
Bartholomew noted that key features of Bowlby’s theoretical system had gone unnoticed and untested. She focussed on Bowlby’s idea that the infant develops mental models of the self and others. She realised that Bowlby’s concept of mental models could be simply understood as either negative or positive of self and others, giving four possible combinations (Bartholomew 1990, 162).

She observed that Bowlby’s thesis was supported by adult data with the exception of the avoidant type, which showed ambiguity. Examining the work of Hazan (1987) and Shaver et.al. (1988) she noticed that the adult avoidant category gave contradictory data – first in the interview process indicating a low need for relationship, then in a self-report some indicated a strong felt-need for relationship, but still exhibited some avoidant behaviour (Bartholomew 1990, 159-160). This was contradictory. She proposed that a single avoidant-detached category may obscure conceptually separable patterns of avoidance in adulthood. Moreover, although Bowlby (1973) suggested that working models differ in terms of images of self and others, no study has considered all four categories that are logically derived by combining the two levels of self-image (positive vs. negative) with the two level of image of others (positive vs. negative) (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991, 227).

Accordingly, she hypothesised two types of adult avoidant behaviour: “individuals who desire close attachments but avoid them out of fear, and individuals who claim to neither fear nor desire close attachments (Bartholomew 1990, 162)”. 
She illustrated this four-category model in the following way:

![Diagram of attachment styles]

**Model of Self**

*Dependence*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive (Low)</th>
<th>Negative (High)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy</td>
<td>Preoccupied (Main) Ambivalent (Hazan) Overly dependent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Model of Other**

*Avoidance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive (Low)</th>
<th>Negative (High)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>Fearful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of Attachment Dismissing (Main) Counter–dependent</td>
<td>Fear of Attachment Avoidant (Hazan) Socially avoidant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 4:  Styles of adult attachment (Bartholomew 1990, 163)

2.12.1 *Bartholomew’s model explained*

If, for example, we look at two of the attachment styles we will understand how the overall model is to be understood.

In the model above, the *avoidance* and *dependence* dynamics in brackets represent relational behaviours. The *secure* subject has both a positive model of self and other. That is illustrated by their relational behaviour, which is low on both the *avoidance* and *dependence* scale. They do not behave with high levels of avoidance or dependence on those they love. The *fearful* subject is the opposite. They operate with negative models of self and others. They have high levels of *dependence* and *avoidance* behaviour. This may seem contradictory in the *fearful* style, but this is exhibited by their strong need for *dependence* and their strong fear about *avoidance* of others at the same time. Unfortunately, for 85% of this small segment of the population (less than 20%) this highly conflicted behaviour is brought about by severe abuse (James 2002, 171).

To help explain the variations in terminology, the words ‘Main’ and ‘Hazan’ in brackets are the researchers who defined the terms alongside their names. All agree on the characteristics of these terms but feel the need to have their own terms. Terms in bold are Bartholomew’s...
and are to be preferred as they aptly describe the way the subjects feel about their relationships – that is the operation of their internal working models. See Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991, 227-228) for a more detailed explanation of these four quadrants. Interestingly, just as her research in adults was about to be published others began to notice this fourth style in infants (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991, 241). Even though Ainsworth had not reported it, it was an idea whose time had come.

This research was a critical breakthrough because Bartholomew sorted out the contradictions in the early data. It also strongly critiqued the earlier method and showed the stronger way forward scientifically. It reminded attachment researchers of the heart of Bowlby’s theoretical framework – the internal working model. It was also another important validation of Bowlby’s theory. Nearly thirty years after he had proposed these four types of internal working model, Bartholomew brought them to light. It is interesting to note that even when the early adult attachment researchers were looking for Ainsworth’s three attachment styles they found four – they just didn’t realise it.

Attachment Theory had plausibly demonstrated the effect of parenting upon the whole range of human relationships. It was a logical next step to explore its applicability to the larger questions of relationship – relationship with God.

2.13 Attachment to God

The origins of our concepts of God have been speculated by psychologists for decades. Freud supposed that we generalise images of our fathers to God. However, other theories have arisen in competition with Freud (Spilka, Addison, and Rosensohn 1975). Spilka (1975) found little support for the explanations provided by Freud, Adler, Social Learning Theory and Self–Esteem theory for the origins of our concepts of God. Until the arrival of thinking about Attachment Theory and religion, psychology struggled to find a theoretical framework that facilitated solid meaningful study of religion.

Lee Kirkpatrick was the beneficiary of Shaver’s work linking infant and adult attachment. Shaver supervised his doctoral work at the time Shaver’s work on romantic attachment was gaining prominence. Kirkpatrick was at the intersecting points in the history of attachment research into the relationship between parents, self and God. The fruit was ripe and he picked it.
2.13.1 Kirkpatrick’s Attachment Theory approach to the psychology of religion

Before the 1990’s, research into the psychology of religion had been hampered by a lack of integration with mainstream psychology and the research that was done lacked a strong theoretical framework. Kirkpatrick proposed that Attachment Theory offered solutions to these two problems and that God acts as an attachment figure in the way Bowlby’s theory explains that adult attachment figures act. For the Christian faith,

the availability and responsiveness of an attachment figure, who serves alternately as a haven and a secure base, separation from whom would cause considerable distress, is a fundamental dynamic (Kirkpatrick 1992, 6).

Further, he notes that the religious person faces the issues of life with faith in the availability, presence, accessibility and even protection of God (Kirkpatrick 1992, 6).

Kirkpatrick’s very limited and only theological framework is the work of Kaufman. Kaufman saw the importance that secure attachments played in human health and noted that human attachment figures were inevitably flawed. In contrast he proposed that “the idea of God is the idea of an absolutely adequate attachment-figure” (italics mine) (Kaufman 1981, 67 quoted in Kirkpatrick 1992, 7). We will discuss below the problems with this view as a starting point, but for the moment will note that Kaufman works with a mediated form of God (Miner 2007, 114). That is, that God is an idea.

Kirkpatrick rejects attempts to explain religious behaviour as based upon fear. Freud and others represent religion as some deficiency in the adherent. They begin with a biased starting point that religious behaviour is immature and an expression of pathology. Attachment Theory replaces biased terms like ‘regression’ and ‘dependency’ that explain religious behaviour, with less loaded terminology and frameworks (Kirkpatrick 1992, 8). In addition Bowlby has shown that “seeking protection and security from an attachment figure under threatening circumstances is a normal and healthy activity at any age” not a sign of pathology (Kirkpatrick 1992, 8).

Kirkpatrick errs when he considers Schleiermacher’s fundamental conception of “the feeling of absolute dependence” to be based upon fear (Kirkpatrick 1992, 7). For Schleiemacher, this is a universal principle that lies in all humanity and is the explanation for religious behaviour. See Schleiermacher (1989, 131-140 & 142) for a detailed outline of his thesis.
Miner in turn is partially mistaken in her critique of Kirkpatrick. She implies that he uses Schleiermacher’s conception, but he seems to reject it with phrases such as “One problem with these deficiency models” and “Attachment Theory, in contrast replaces these concepts.” and finally, “Activation of the attachment system is seen as a normative response to normative fears, rather than an immature, regressive response to neurotic fears (Kirkpatrick 1992, 8)”. Theological examinations of attachment to God research are virtually non-existent and Miner is the first to raise the lack of theological framework in Kirkpatrick’s work, if slightly incorrect in her reading of him.

2.14 How Might Attachment to God function?
As we saw above, attachment figures are used in two primary ways; one as a haven of safety and second as a secure base. How might attachment to God reflect these two functions?

2.14.1 God as a Haven of Safety
Kirkpatrick has a number of hypotheses:

1. That if religious behaviour is attachment based, it will be chosen by people in similar types of conditions that would activate human attachment systems – crisis and anxiety (Kirkpatrick 1992, 8)

2. Bereavement will lead to an increase in religious behaviour and belief where the attachment figure lost is a significant one (Kirkpatrick 1992, 9)

3. In relation to conversion, he proposes that this happens in increasing frequency during times of confusion and distress (Kirkpatrick 1992 10).

Convincing evidence is found for this in a detailed review of the literature that goes back to just before the twentieth century (See Kirkpatrick 1992, 8-10). People experience an increase in religious behaviour and feelings during war, while undergoing complex medical procedures and bereavement. In addition, many conversions happen during or just after a personal crisis and this seems to be the main force behind the well-documented prevalence of conversion during adolescence (Kirkpatrick 1992, 10).
2.14.2 God as a Secure Base

Bowlby’s concept of the attachment figure as a secure base from which to explore the world is a fruitful theoretical grid for other religious behaviour. It has been observed that the Christian sense of God’s unfailing presence and nearness is a significant psychological phenomenon. The emotional assurance from this has never been satisfactorily explained psychologically. Attachment Theory’s secure base concept provides an explanation of this behaviour (Kirkpatrick 1992, 11-12).

2.14.3 God as an Attachment Figure

Kirkpatrick’s research indicates that God acts as an actual attachment figure. He shows that the main research has contradicted Freud’s idea of God as an idealised father figure, but instead has demonstrated empirically that God is an idealised primary attachment figure. These studies are strongly consistent with Bowlby’s attachment concept (Kirkpatrick 1992, 13).

Further, in-depth factor analytic studies have found that attachment plays a central part in people’s faith. Some of the terms for these factors follow:

- Loving
- Kindness
- Comforting
- Personal
- Accessible
- Protective
- Supporting
- Available
- [One] who gives comfort
- A warm-hearted refuge.

These and others in the literature support the argument that Attachment Theory is a major theoretical framework for explaining the human experience of the Christian faith. In concluding his review of these studies Kirkpatrick notes, “It would be difficult to write a list of characteristics that better describes an ideal attachment figure (Kirkpatrick 1992, 13)”.
2.15 What about religious behaviour?

2.15.1 Religious behaviour as attachment-related behaviour

Religious behaviour can be conceptualised as attachment behaviour. Keeping in view the two types of early infant attachment behaviour (proximity seeking – clinging, moving towards the attachment figure, cuddling etc, and signalling – vocalising, raising hands etc), research shows that these behaviours modify over time. Older children grow to only need visual or verbal reassurance. Later as they grow into adulthood, the knowledge alone that an attachment figure is potentially available, even when not present, is sufficient (Kirkpatrick 1992, 14).

The reduction in the need for physical contact and the development of this state of belief in the availability of the attachment figure sets up the possibility that attachment theory can be extended to include belief in God (Kirkpatrick 1992, 14).

As attachment behaviour, prayer reflects the underlying assumption that God is personal, available and directly accessible through prayer. Importantly, it also acts in both the (1) secure base and (2) haven of safety dynamics. Prayer can act as a comfort in crisis (haven of safety) or as a reference point to explore the wider world in the assurance of being in God’s love or will (secure base) (Kirkpatrick 1992, 15).

2.15.2 A closer examination of religious attachment behaviour

We have seen above that religious behaviour can be conceptualised as attachment behaviour. However, a closer look at particular types of behaviour in different groups of subjects highlights variances in beliefs and development that Kirkpatrick says can be attributed to “significant relationship experiences” (Kirkpatrick 1992, 16).

2.15.3 Religious behaviour as compensation

Those insecurely attached may seek surrogate relationships to compensate for their lack of experience in secure attachment. Kirkpatrick points out that the literature shows that a high proportion of converts have a history of strongly conflicted relationships with parents. See findings section below for more.

2.15.4 Religious behaviour as correspondence

However compensation is not the only dynamic that occurs. Bowlby emphasised that our
mental models remain fairly constant during our lives. Kirkpatrick suggests that a person’s experience of relationship with God and his or her worldview would share some characteristics with their earliest parental relationships (Kirkpatrick 1992, 18). We shall see results from Kirkpatrick studies that support this idea.

2.16 The findings on attachment to God

Until research into attachment to God, Attachment Theory had provided a reliable, strong river of data. Adolescent, adult peer, romantic relationships and even work styles had all been meaningfully correlated to infant attachment style.

However when examining attachment to God, it is as though the river of data has become a delta. A myriad of pathways is presented in the literature, many crossing each other briefly, but few converging – presenting a highly inconsistent picture. See Hall (2007, 20-21) for a thorough review of the inconsistencies. Not one study fully supports another. In addition, new dynamics in attachment have been uncovered, but not consistently.

Hall (2007) identifies two separate polarities working in this confused data. The first is the degree to which attachment to God acts as either correlation to infancy or compensation for insecure infant attachment. There is no clear pattern except to say that strong evidence is found for both, but that the studies contradict each other. The second polarity is between low and high levels of parental religiousness. Again the data is highly confused. Sometimes it predicts attachment to God style and other times it does not affect it at all.

There is a great need for the findings on attachment to God to be brought into a consistent whole. Attachment Theory could be highly beneficial for the study of religion, with implications for practices in the Christian life such as pastoral care, spiritual formation, counselling, leadership development and theoretical investigation of church life. However, the attempts to bring consistency so far have not worked. A number of possible problems that may be interacting to cause this will now be outlined.

2.17 Possible problems in method - failure to account for Bartholomew’s research

As has been pointed out above, Kirkpatrick fails to integrate or interact satisfactorily with Bartholomew’s critique of a three-category model.
His early work was done before Bartholomew’s was published. However, Kirkpatrick fails to acknowledge or interact with it in later studies bar one. This is a lapse. This weakness is partially redressed in his 1998 paper. Interacting with Bartholomew in only a minimal way, Kirkpatrick tests the validity of his 1990, 1992 and 1997 papers and explains (correctly) that it will be helpful to examine what motivates attachment to God using the 2x2 dynamic of Bartholomew. While an improvement methodologically it is still flawed, and these problems are not highlighted in the paper. A closer reading of this paper shows that:

1. Kirkpatrick portrays his method as congruent with Bartholomew’s. However, Bartholomew’s fundamental critique of Shaver and Hazan’s first work, that Kirkpatrick is entirely dependent upon, is that the self report method and interview method (that they combine) delivers unreliable data that conflicts with itself. This conflict is what led her to uncover the four-attachment styles in the first place. She convincingly demonstrates that a detailed attachment interview is the only reliable measure of attachment. So convincing is her argument that consideration should be given to abandoning self-report using three styles in further research.

2. Kirkpatrick appears to mistakenly presume that his attachment types are the same as Bartholomew’s. They are similar, but they are significantly different. Kirkpatrick’s label for avoidant is clearly placed on the wrong category in his chart (Kirkpatrick 1998, 963). His description fits Bartholomew’s Dismissing category not her Fearful type, which shares few of the classically avoidant indicators.

3. Further, by casually aligning his label for secure and anxious/ambivalent with Bartholomew’s Secure and Preoccupied he glosses over the fact that they are arrived at by different methods as we noted above. They represent a different group and proportion of the population. Bartholomew, in showing that the method matters, demonstrates that the lack of a suitable category forces a section of the research sample into the other three categories and that social desirability affects the self-report method. That is, that her new category gives certain people, who previously chose one of the first three categories because it was the nearest description to their experience, a ‘place to go’ as it were and they migrate from each of the ill-fitting three other categories because the new fearful type best describes their experience.

At this stage, not one researcher in the attachment to God field has seen the implications of this and all still follow Kirkpatrick in using a three-category model approach. In addition,
much research still follows a self-report mode of collection even though strong interview instruments have been developed, for example Main’s adult attachment interview (Main and Goldwyn 1988).

A further problem seems to be an inconsistent use of samples and measures. There is a need for larger, non self-referring samples that examine all attachment dynamics. Research has already found that parental religiousness combined with gender plays a significant role in adult attachment to God. However, there are no studies that adequately explore all these dynamics together in the one method. The result is a mosaic of findings with significant gaps. As noted above, Hall (2007) provides an excellent survey of the disarray in the findings.

2.18 Theological assumptions that might bring weakness

2.18.1 Theological input could shape religious behaviour
Type of theological understanding could also be a factor in shaping adult attachment to God. The image of God that we are presented and internalise could be a strong shaper of our attachment style. Strong forces are brought to bear to encourage people to conform to communal images of God, particularly in the early stages after conversion or as a child in a religious family. This is not to say that infant attachment does not play a part. Systems theory has shown that communities have a way of sensing what it is that drives a person and using that to form them into the group consciousness. Attachment might be incorporated into such a process.

2.18.2 Are all religious positions and behaviours scientifically the same in terms of measurement?
All attachment research assumes that behaviours and belief such as prayer, atheism and conversion are all equally comparable. However, this is not clear. It will be argued later, that in terms of Christianity, two ontologically different groups of people can be identified, separated by a conversion experience. This gives three states of personal experience that attachment might operate differently in: pre–conversion, conversion itself and post–conversion. This may account for the conflicting ways in which attachment seems to operate. It is possible that different insecure attachment styles could operate in either compensation or correlation depending on the religious status of the subject.
For instance, one confused section of the data is the avoidant category. Supposing that a correct four style model is being used, it may be found that attachment acts as a correlation in both the pre-conversion and post-conversion state, but that it acts as compensation at conversion. This would make sense of the data.

Kirkpatrick finds that avoidantly attached adults appear to contradict the idea that internal working models will correlate with attachment to God. He entertains the possibility that relationships with God do not have the same dynamics as relationships with people, where the ‘other’ in the relationship has their own agenda and exerts influence on how the relationship functions (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990). However this reveals an incomplete understanding of how relationships with God are at least perceived by people and in fact may function in reality. His use of Kaufman’s mediated concept of God seems to be in view here where God is an idea or metaphor, and as such have no agenda or relational influence in a relationship. We shall explore below the tenuous nature of this claim. God may very much be involved, having an agenda and acting to see this agenda fulfilled. The Christian story can easily be understood through this very dynamic. As we shall see below, Social Trinitarian theology tells us that God is active in history; some would say that all of history is moving toward and end point – the rule of God. It may be that researchers are closed to such interpretations of the data due to a mediated concept of God.

2.19 Stability in attachment to God: Is this as good as it gets?
In examining the stability of attachment to God, Kirkpatrick demonstrated that people insecurely attached as adults, were far more likely to have undergone a significant change in their relationship with God. The anxious and avoidant types had “found a new relationship with God” at twice the rate of the secure subjects. In addition, the anxious types described much higher level of religious experience or conversion than avoidant and secure types (Kirkpatrick 1997, 213). However the sample showed that adult and religious attachment style was stable. The changes in religious status can be explained as changes in how those in the sample experienced their attachment, not as changes in attachment per se.

Despite the theological and methodological questions raised in this project, some general points can be made. Those with the least satisfying personal relationships, those insecurely attached, showed greatest religious change. So negative models of self are more likely to lead to Christian conversion than the secure type. In addition, this study indicates that while
those holding an insecure model of self, Bartholomew’s *preoccupied* and *fearful* categories, are most motivated to turn to God, it is those with positive models of self, Bartholomew’s *secure* and *avoidant* types, that are most easily able to substitute God as an attachment figure (Kirkpatrick 1998, 969). Finally, Kirkpatrick’s study shows that stability of attachment, to a great extent, is as Bowlby predicted it would be. People maintain fairly consistent attachment patterns that reflect their primary infant attachment. They do exhibit fairly divergent patterns of change in their religious status that is predictable along attachment lines, but this new status does not bring new attachment styles quickly, if at all.

### 2.20 The territory so far: insight offered and problems uncovered

Attachment Theory is a verifiable explanation of how early childhood experiences affect the whole spectrum of human relationships. While offering very interesting insights into adult attachment to God, methodological and theological weaknesses leave researchers with an incomplete picture. While this study cannot offer solutions to the methodological issues, it will now explore Social Trinitarian themes as one way of addressing the problems highlighted above.
Chapter Three

Selected Themes from Modern Social Trinitarian Theology

3.1 Why the Trinity?

Moltmann provocatively states that most Western Christians are monotheists whether they are Catholic or Protestant (Moltmann 1981, 1). We will start by giving reasons for undertaking an evaluation of Attachment Theory from a Trinitarian stance.

The Trinity is the distinctive doctrine of God that separates Christianity from all other Theistic religions. Because talk about attachment to God in a pluralistic society could easily become blurred in its clarity about which God we are talking, it is hoped that by choosing the Trinity, we will provide a limited way of evaluating Attachment Theory that is distinctively Christian. The claim that the Christian God is the same in attachment terms as Jewish, Islamic or even Hindu conceptions of God is debateable, as no studies have yet been done to seriously look at attachment to God in other religions. Finally, Miner has demonstrated that theological development in attachment to God research has been almost totally absent, and that which has been done has been shown to be flawed (Miner, 2007). If we are to explore attachment to God, it is well to start with one of the agreed foundational
theological frameworks for talking about God – the Trinity.

3.1.1 The primacy of the doctrine of the Trinity

The early churches developed the doctrine of the Trinity so that they could make meaning of the New Testament testimony about Jesus Christ the Son of God. Often this was in response to attempts to emphasise either the humanity or the divinity of Jesus at the expense of the other. Through vigorous defence of the Christian tradition and proclamation that the early church had received through the scriptures, early Christians formulated an understanding that “Jesus the Son cannot be grasped except as part of the history of the Father, the Son and the Spirit (Moltmann 1981, 16)”.

Gunton says that this triune nature calls us to respond to God in ways that are consistent with this rich unique character (Gunton 1991, 4). This gives us new understandings of the Creator and the creation. “In turn that [response to the triune nature of God] means that everything looks – and, indeed, is – different in the light of the Trinity (Gunton 1991, 4)”.

A recurring theme in some theologians work is that the main benefit of Trinitarian theology is the development of an ontology of God that attributes personhood to the creator and redeemer of the world. We shall see below that this attribution of personhood becomes a significant source for understanding the human personhood (Gunton 1991, 164). If we are to embark upon an evaluation of a psychological theory that is at its very heart an explanation of human relationships, it will be helpful if we can use a theological framework that makes a serious contribution to understanding what makes us human – that answers theologically the question, what makes a person?

This study will not attempt to exhaustively explore the doctrine of the Trinity. Issues such as the definitions of early theological terms, conditions and controversies that gave rise to the doctrine, disputes between the Eastern and Western churches about the Spirit or many other worthy subjects have been covered elsewhere in much greater detail and skill than can hope to be achieved in this work. Rather, I have chosen certain themes from Social Trinitarian theology for evaluating Attachment Theory. The selection of these themes is not meant to be exhaustive, but it is hoped that they are significantly central and sufficient for an initial attempt at the task\(^8\).

\(^8\) I owe the choice of many of the themes in this section to Miner’s article (2007).
3.2 Which Trinitarian approach?

Moltmann summarises the differing approaches to the Trinity through various movements of thought. Characterising these as either thinking of God as supreme substance or absolute subject he outlines a number of significant problems with each of these approaches. For more detail see Moltmann (1981, 10-18). As a counter to these problems, he proposes to start with the history of Jesus the Son and develop from there a doctrine of the Trinity. Remembering that he said that much of Christian theology was monotheistic, he says past attempts have begun with the unity of God and then moved towards the Trinity. He is reversing the classical order – beginning with the Trinity of the Persons and developing a unity from that as a starting point (Moltmann 1981, 19).

This approach is distinctive in that it is based upon the fundamental self-relatedness of God, as a theological starting point from which all other theology is worked out. This form of Trinitarian thinking is known as Social Trinitarianism. The scriptures function to bear testimony to the fundamental relationship that is at the heart of God, and how out of this characteristic flows all of God’s actions (Moltmann 1981, 19).

While some of the themes below are found in other Trinitarian approaches, not all are, and all can be said to be characteristic of a Social approach. It is hoped that by choosing this Social Trinitarian position, we might contribute to Attachment Theory, being as it is, a unifying theory of interpersonal relatedness. The themes of connection and relationship within each of these theoretical approaches will hopefully be able to enter into a meaningful dialogue.

3.3 God as distinct but interrelating persons

Moltmann notes several problems in the Nicene and Athanasian Creed regarding their formulations of the Trinity. As we have said, these problems arise because the early Fathers began with the unity of God – God is one – and then tried to fit the biblical record of the Trinity into that. Moltmann proposes instead to start with the biblical record “to make the unity of the three Persons the problem . . . The unity of the Father, the Son and the Spirit is then the eschatological question about the consummation of the Trinitarian history of God (Moltmann 1981, 149)”. This unity has been described by saying God is distinct but interrelating persons.

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9 In fact he cheekily, but seriously points out that the unity of God is stressed so much as a starting point, that for much theology one can be a Christian without ever thinking about the Trinity.
3.3.1 Substance and Persons
The substance of God is that which the Trinity has in common as the basis of their unity while still expressing an outward diversity (McGrath 2007, 250). The persons of the Trinity are the unique way that the substance of God is made known to us (LaCugna 1991, 54).

3.3.2 The Language of ‘Person’
The use of the descriptor ‘person’ or ‘personal’ has a long history in Christian faith and theology. McGrath notes that this use comes with problems but these can be overcome. It may be that ‘person’ was used to understand that God, while one substance, was playing as it were, “three distinct yet related roles in the great drama of human redemption”. In addition, if substance is the unifying concept in the Godhead, person is what ‘distinguishes’ them (McGrath 2007, 250)”. A Trinitarian approach to God considers that in speaking of God as a person we open the possibility of personal relationship with God. This is a reflection of human relationships and the language is used as an analogy for relationship with God (McGrath 2007, 207). I will talk below of the limits of language used to talk about God.

3.3.3 Who is the Father?
The Father of the New Testament is not the Almighty Father or super ego in heaven that European Atheism protested against. Instead Moltmann makes a good case for the Father being solely defined by his relationship with Jesus the Son. The patriarchal images behind some of the old ideas must be forgotten. The term Father is a theological one, not a political or cosmological one. It points to the divine relationship of love between the Son and the Father – so it is a Trinitarian term only. Jesus was free to call him ‘Abba’, which signifies a freedom from the “universal patriarch of father religion (Moltmann 1981, 163)”. In essence, the Father is the ungenerated one (LaCugna 1991, 66).

3.3.4 Who is the Son?
In Trinitarian theology, the Son is the only Son of the Father. Not created, but one substance or essence with the Father, having everything in common with him but his Fatherliness. The Father communicates everything (with the exception of his fatherhood) to the eternal Son. “The [S]on therefore receives in eternity divinity and his being as Person from the Father (Moltmann 1981-167)”. This is an eternal birth that issues forth from the Father’s being. It
can be said to happen as a necessity\textsuperscript{10}. This means that the Son and the Father are unchangeably part of the triune God (Moltmann 1981, 167).

In addition,

they do not stand in an equal reciprocal relationship to one another. The Father loves the Son with . . . fatherly love. The Son loves the Father with responsive, self-giving love. The love of the Father, which begets . . . the Son is therefore open for further response through creation, which correspond to the Son, which enter into harmony with his responsive love and thereby fulfil the joy of the Father (Moltmann 1981, 168).

3.3.5 Who is the Holy Spirit?

John’s gospel tells us that God is Spirit (4:24). Therefore, Spirit is a valid description of God, just as ‘God is love’. The Spirit also proceeds from the Father, but not in the same way as the Son otherwise there would be a second Son. Nor does the Spirit proceed from the Son alone or there would be a second Father. Instead the Father breathes out the Spirit (Moltmann 1981, 169).

The danger is if we see the Spirit as the relational dynamic between the Father and Son. This would be an error – acting only to bring a duality into unity. Instead, the Father speaks his Word (the eternal Son) when he breathes out his Spirit. “There is in God no Word without the Spirit, and no Spirit without the word. In this respect the uttering of the Word and the issuing of the Spirit belong indissolubly together (Moltmann 1981, 170)”. We will speak more of the Spirit below.

3.3.6 Perichoresis

The way the three in one relate has been termed Perichoresis, a Greek term translated into English sometimes as mutual interpenetration. This concept “allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two (McGrath 2007, 251)”. The Father, Son and Spirit all equally share in one another’s life. The total mutuality of their love is such that they eternally co-exist as one. “Precisely through the personal characteristics that distinguish them from one another, the Father, the Son and the Spirit dwell in one another and communicate eternal life to one another. In the perichoresis, the very thing that divides them becomes that which binds them together (Moltmann 1981, 175)”. This concept enables us to hold both the one and the many together.

\textsuperscript{10} Many theologians will have a problem with ascribing necessity to God. However, it is a necessity in that it is a necessary outworking of the total mutuality within the Trinity. No other outcome can be conceived.
creatively. It illuminates the mutual interrelatedness of the Trinity. “God is not God apart from the way in which the Father, Son and Spirit in eternity give to and receive from each other what they essentially are (Gunton 1993, 164)”.

3.3.7 Our language is limited
Theological language is a human construction undertaken in the light of revelation and inspiration, a process of thinking theologically under the impact of creation, the fall and redemption. “That it is a human construct is quite clear: the going in and about is a way of speaking of the being of God by means of an analogy of movement in space and time (Gunton 1993, 164)”. We will see that Trinitarian theology accepts this limitation because in Christ, God has come near to us and transcended our limitations. One of the errors of discussion about Trinitarian theology is to hold that the doctrine of the Trinity is fully developed and fixed in time and therefore redundant because of ancient language used (Gunton 1991, 163). Trinitarian doctrine, is not set, but rather represents a history of developing thought (Gunton 1991, 164).

3.4 Epistemology – why does it matter?
Trinitarian theology has much to say about how we know. Gunton and others, show that Western philosophy has predominantly been influenced by Platonic dualism resulting in the exaltation of human rational and logic processes and the rise of relationally disconnected empiricism and the autonomous knower11.

This marked a change in our epistemology. We moved from being knowers in relationship to the Creator who had first made himself known to us, to individuals for whom everything was considered sceptical except that which we thought. Human knowledge became alienated from the Creator and creation and became a law unto itself.

This legacy within modernity leads to all sorts of alienation. The list of twentieth century evils that can be placed at the feet of the modern worldview is distressingly long. Atheistic political structures such as Nazism and those of other totalitarian states, destructive spiritualities such as Jonestown, the reduction of business practice to the highest gain for the shareholder with little regard for the vulnerable, environmental degradation for gain, the

11 For more insight into this effect, see just about everything that Gunton has written, a good example would be ‘Enlightenment and Alienation’ and ‘The One, the Three and the Many’, its intellectual descendent. Also Mark Strom’s ‘Reframing Paul’, Moltmann’s ‘Trinity and the Kingdom of God’ and ‘The Crucified God’.
threat of abortion to the unborn and pragmatic scientific approaches to human life, are just a few prominent examples.

In all of the above a thread can be traced of the primacy of the individual: their rights, power or lack of outside accountability to a larger truth because of the underlying worldview.

Starting with a critique of traditional Christian theology during the Enlightenment, the West has sought to displace God with the concept of the objective universal truth. Denying our own fallibility, we have succeeded in displacing God, but have failed to install a sustainable alternative (Gunton 1993, 131-133). The deeply ironic result has been that having rejected a personal objective truth in the revelation of God through Christ, we have become suspicious of all truth claims and have therefore limited truth only to that which can be apprehended through reason and logic – empiricism.

Trinitarian theology is a powerful critique of this zeitgeist. Gunton diagnoses this illness in Western society as “the disappearance of the other” (Gunton 1993, 43). For example, in general, science has difficulty with the particular – the other. It seeks an idealised or universal reality as already noted above (Gunton 1993, 42). This ideal is an unreachable objective, a situation which postmodernism has recognised and in turn rejected the possibility of any universal truth – itself a deeply universal position, which shows how intellectually flawed the whole approach is.

Getting back to the idealised search for truth, we note that this is an attempt to place us in the position of God and to have exhaustive knowledge. This attempt has led to more and more intellectual fragmentation and alienation from our fellow humans and creation, not unity. Not so much exhaustive knowledge, as exhaustion from knowledge fragmentation.

If then, a modern epistemology leads to alienation, then what is the solution? Gunton proposes that this process has closed the West to the possibility “that there may be a truth that is in its own way universal and objective, while acknowledged to be the work of fallible human minds (1993, 131)”. In this we might be able to claim to know truly, but not exhaustively. We will have sufficient knowledge but not the impossible burden of having to have all knowledge.
This knowledge would be able to operate within the limits of language that we talked about above. It would acknowledge its own limits and also the limits of that which it seeks and be able to arrive at universals that reflected those limits – because those universals would be experienced though our finitude (Gunton 1993, 132). Even this finitude would not only be the universal finitude of humanity, but also the particular experiences of place, culture and time that individuals find themselves. So it would act to break down alienation and re-establish our connection to creation and each other in the most important place – that particular geography of where we find ourselves each breathing moment.

Some of this epistemological position is represented by what follows.

3.5 **Is God knowable?**
Currently, there exists in Western society and in a significant number of Christian theologians, a deep scepticism regarding the knowability of God. Cartesian and Kantian thinking has opened the way for much philosophical radical scepticism. Theology itself has in many quarters failed to question or to mount a robust defence to the prevailing culture and many theologians have adopted a position that God is totally unknowable.

It is important to note that while the unknowability of God from a human stand point is important to theology, to then move from that to say that God can in no way make himself known is to make it impossible for humanity to be in relationship with God (Gunton 1991, 31).

The root of this is the neo–platonic suspicion of the material that Augustine carried through his theology. Kant had a similar difficulty with the material world, and modern theology has inherited this from their estate (Gunton 1991, 34). This difficulty with the material impinges on Christology in that it becomes harder to hold a strong incarnational theology when (a) God cannot make himself known, and (b) if he did, it would not be in the material world\(^2\).

Trinitarian theology is a good counter to these problems. The interrelation within the Godhead is a workable understanding that counters the difficulties arising from radical scepticism. That God is knowable is at the very heart of Trinitarian theology . . . “it is the

\(^2\) See Gunton 1991, 31-55 for a thorough evaluation of Augustine’s legacy and also all of Gunton, 1985 for a detailed and deeply insightful critique of the damaging affect of the Enlightenment and its prevailing philosophical themes upon Christian Theology and Western Culture.
function of the Spirit to realise through the Son the knowledge of the Father (Gunton 1985, 54)."

Gunton has deep insights into the significance and weaknesses of thinking about the unknowability of God, which are worth quoting at length:

The positive function of the doctrine of the unknowability of God is to preserve the freedom and, so to speak, personal privacy of God’s being. To be personal is to exist in relation, indeed, but also to be defined by one’s otherness to all other beings. There are therefore strict limits to what we may claim to know of any other person, let alone of God. Yet it must be borne in mind that corresponding to . . . thinking that we know too much, there is [the] arrogance, of claiming that we know too little to be able to speak at all. There lies the weakness of so much modern theology, in reducing the knowledge of God to a speaking about ourselves or our supposed experience rather from the God made known in Christ. It is important to stress here that we know other human persons in their otherness – indeed, that it is there that we most truly know them, as in large measure unknown. So it is with the knowledge of God, whose unknowability is therefore to be understood relationally – in terms of the relation with us into which he has freely entered in Christ and the Spirit – and not absolutely (Gunton 1991, 162-163).

Gunton is right to call this arrogance because it assumes that human experience is normative and that the revelation of God in Christ as it is recorded in Scripture is less important, for whatever reason, than it. Much modern theology has extolled the human experience as one of the main ‘texts’ or sources for theological reflection, but Trinitarian theology reduces the importance of human experience by accepting this partial knowability of God through Christ, rather than accepting the modern mantra that we cannot know anything with any certainty.

This partial knowability of God that Trinitarian theology proposes is a potent remedy to the rejection of the material world – a Cartesian and Kantian foundation – that underlies much modern theological enterprise. It allows a true knowing of God in Christ, but not an absolute knowledge that would elevate us in status to equal with God, thereby maintaining the created-Creator relationship.

3.6 Does God feel anything?
One of the main problems with reformed, classic theism is its indebtedness to the enlightenment divide between that which is material and ideal or neo-platonic dualism, where only ideas are seen as reliable and the world of emotion and material existence is seen
as inferior. This artificial separation into that which is supposedly objective or ‘reliable’ and that which is ‘subjective’ and unreliable has had terrible consequences for our conception of God.

Accepting this divide, the reformers, and almost all those who followed, forced themselves to choose between seeing God as objective and reliable or subjective and unreliable. Understandably, they chose objectivity as the organising concept for God and therefore this allowed the arena of emotion to be detached from God, as God became Plato’s unmoved mover, or pure mind. The Greeks saw emotion as belonging to the material world and classic theism bought into this system by accepting the divide between objective and subjective.

Consequently, the emotional facet of life has largely been relegated in this embrace of Enlightenment hyper–Rationalism. This is vividly illustrated in the evangelistic pamphlet ‘Two ways to live.’ In the back there is an explanation of the conversion process, which is illustrated by a little picture of a steam train. It is a train with two carriages attached behind. The train is labelled ‘facts’ the second carriage ‘faith’ and the last carriage ‘feeling’, illustrating that information in the form of ‘objective’ facts leads to faith in God and the feeling will come along afterwards.

![Diagram of a steam train with carriages labeled Fact, Faith, Feeling](image)

(Global Media Outreach 2006)

**FIGURE 5:** Example of neo–platonic dualism’s diminishment of the emotions in theology

The underlying message is that God does not feel. Feelings are inferior, unreliable and a poor part of relationship with God.
McGrath points out the Greek roots of this thinking in the notion that God is perfect mind and that perfection cannot change other than for the worse if it gets sullied by emotion and the material, and traces its path through early theology, arriving fully fledged at Aquinas (McGrath 2007, 211).

This is both a denial of the biblical witness of Christ’s suffering on the cross and increasingly a source of much strong protest among philosophically active Christian thinkers. At least a thesis topic in itself, we have already noted Gunton and Strom’s acerbic critique of the enlightenment effect on theology. We will continue to cover their main points in support of the notion that God does indeed feel and that it is theologically defensible to attribute to God relational emotions in the rest of this chapter. The interrelatedness of God’s being and attributes means that in this part of the research we must refer again to areas we have already covered and also to areas that we have yet to cover. Issues of God’s attributes are yet to be covered. God has no trouble being all these things at once, but it is humanly impossible to write anything other than a sequence of ideas. This is another reminder of our finitude and the sufficiency of our limited knowledge.

As we have seen, God is not pure mind, which is a distortion. God is person and that personhood is the basis for reality. We shall see below that God’s attributes and being enable God to come near to us and even to experience what it means to be fully human. This must include the ability to feel and be moved by human feelings. In fact Trinitarian theology locates the origins of our feelings in the being of God.

3.7 If so, how does God respond? The cross

The cross is the high point of the Trinity’s action of love in creation. It embodies the character and very being of the inner life of the Trinity. In this way it is the centre of Christian theology. In the cross we see nothing short of the Trinity in action. The Father permits the Son to sacrifice himself by the Spirit (Moltmann 1974, 241).

Again, Moltmann is particularly insightful in this key passage:

It [the cross] is not the only theme of theology, but it is in effect the entry to its problems and answers on earth. All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ. All Christian statements about history, about the church, about faith and sanctification, about the future and about hope stem from the crucified Christ.
The multiplicity of the New Testament comes together in the event of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and flows out again from it . . . The addition of ‘cross and resurrection’ represents only the inevitable temporality which is a part of language; it is not a sequence of facts on the same level; the first expression denotes a historical happening to Jesus, the second an eschatological event. Thus the centre is occupied not by the ‘cross and resurrection’, but by the resurrection of the crucified Christ, which qualifies his death as something that has happened for us, and the cross of the risen Christ, which reveals and makes accessible to those who are dying, his resurrection from the dead (Moltmann 1974, 204).

If this is not so, if the cross is a metaphor or in some way there is not complete unity at the heart of this action, then we cannot be sure that God really suffered for us fully. We cannot really be sure that the perfect community undertook this action fully freely, and fully experienced what it means to be human. Therefore, we are left alone in our sin. The Trinitarian action of suffering on the cross means that there is a concrete reality in which to base our salvation, because through it Jesus was able, by the Spirit to fully enter into “the spirit of life, love and election to salvation (Moltmann 1974, 246)”. That which is fully his can now be fully ours.

Moltmann challenges the traditional theistic approach, particularly that which is Neoplatonic at root and epitomises God as the unmoved mover – Plato’s divine mind (Moltmann 1974, 250). If God is like this there is no God on the cross. God cannot be moved by humanity’s plight. Moltmann quotes Whitehead saying: this “So-called Christianity has preserved the princely idea of God and blotted out the idea of the lamb, his merit and his death (Moltmann 1974, 251)”.

So the cross becomes the focal point not just for the saving action of God, but also for the deep revelation of the very heart of the nature – the being of the Trinity and hence the way to gain an understanding of the ultimate reality of the universe. God does indeed feel and this pulse is at once human and at the same time the heart beat of the universe’s existence.

3.8 **Ontological shifting: God crosses boundaries**

But how can this happen? Through what agency can God come near to us? That God is Spirit means more than that God is non-material. God spans both spirit and matter. As we see in the incarnation, Jesus is fully human, therefore esteeming the material world contrary to much western intellectual endeavour as already pointed out. The implication is that God
freely crosses ontological boundaries (Miner 2007, 118).

This is of supreme importance, because in this act of ontological movement, God enables his unknowability to become known. This dynamic makes possible the revelation of the character of the Trinity on the cross. While choosing to limit himself, God makes himself truly known to the creation and opens up the possibility of relationship – through coming close to us as we are, persons known by others, but in a new way – that of perfection with its attendant promise of hope. This was a new philosophical concept in the West: that there can be a sharing of being (Gunton 1991, 8).

Finally, we can say that, because of this, what we see in the revealed actions and life of Jesus is in a limited, but true way a reflection of the actual inner life of the Trinity. The life and ministry of Christ is not a metaphor or a symbol, but as we will say below the Trinity is the basis for all reality. The revealed Jesus is a revelation of God. This stands against mediated concepts of God that insist that we can know nothing about God’s inner life such as Kaufman, who says “To the internal structure of this innermost essence we have no access in history or revelation; and anything said about it is pure speculation” quoted in LaCugna (1991, 226).

3.9 Attributes count: God’s subjectivity and objectivity are the basis of relationality
The loving action of the cross is entirely consistent with the mutuality within the Trinity. God’s actions and being are linked in an entirely consistent way.

3.9.1 Ontological otherness of the Trinity is the basis of reality
What is the basis of reality? This is a mighty question that philosophy continues to try to answer. Trinitarian theology seeks to provide an alternative answer to the prevailing view in western culture – that of a mechanistic world. Gunton explores the early work of Coleridge as an answer to the mechanistic view. “Who are we – the many; and who – or what – is the one to whom we owe our being? (Gunton 1991, 98)”. God, who we call one, is more than an impersonal, mechanical, mere nature. God is a “unity of free hypostases taking their being and particularity from each other (Gunton 1991, 99)”. Therefore, accepting that this Trinity made the world, we can understand why it is suitable for humanity to live and have the possibility of relationship with God in it (Gunton 1991, 99). “The world and all in it takes its

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13 There are other views, such as the Pantheistic monism of some Eastern cultures that is gaining a place in the West, but as a generality, the prevailing view since the enlightenment has been a mechanistic one.
creation and recreation from the Trinitarian relatedness of Father, Son and Spirit (Gunton 1991, 100)”.

The otherness of God in Trinitarian thinking is central to reality. Monism impinges upon the otherness of God to the creation. Its merging of the creation and the created, robs humanity and creation of its freedom. When a god is ontologically merged with the world, creation looses its identity and uniqueness and becomes a function of god’s being. “In a Trinitarian understanding, because God has otherness – personal freedom and ‘space’ – within the dynamics of his being, he is able to grant to the world space to be itself (Gunton 1991, 171)”.

3.9.2 Perichoresis as reality as well
It is possible to say that, in addition to the otherness of God, perichoresis is also the basis of reality. If perichoresis is transcendental, can we understand reality to have a perichoretic dynamic – is it relational on all levels (Gunton 1993, 165)? This dynamic is already implied by the ontological boundary crossing that we have discussed. Gunton suggests that this concept, of the perichoresis of reality, will provide a framework to best understand reality (Gunton 1993, 166).

In proposing this idea, we can overcome the fragmenting effect of the enlightenment drive to find a unifying rational objective unity behind the universe. “It is not . . . something which holds things together, but someone: the one through whom, in the unity of the Father and the Spirit, all things have their being (Gunton 1993, 179)”.

3.9.3 God is love
Central to Trinitarian thinking is the appellation – ‘God is love’. God’s actions in creation are based in the ontological reality of his love. This is the thesis of the whole of Gunton’s book Act and Being, a recent and significant contribution to Trinitarian theology. In it he proposes that all divine action “begins with the Father, takes shape through the Son and reaches its completion in the Spirit (Gunton 2002, 113)”.

Gunton bases his thinking in the exegesis of 1 John 4. As the biblical author is exploring the love of the Christian community he links the knowledge of God and love for neighbour. These in turn are linked to knowledge of who God actually is. “Whoever does not love does
not know God, because God is love (v.8)”. God’s being as love is the basis for his loving action and any true loving action in humanity. This love that God is, had to be revealed to the world in order to be known – in movement outside of itself into relationship with the creation – by another (Gunton 2002, 116).

Gunton goes on to show from 1 John 4:9,13,14 that God showed his love to the world through sending his Son and that the Spirit confirms this action and our belonging to God (Gunton 2002, 116-117).

v. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world.

v. 13 We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

v. 14 The Father has sent his Son to be the saviour of the world.

This sending of the Son is the ultimate expression of God’s love for creation and illustrates what kind of God we are dealing with. Gunton says that this sending demonstrates God’s holiness because it shows that God’s being and action are consistent in regard to the creation. God is love and God’s actions are epitomised in the sacrificial sending of the Son, which is consistent with his loving being. This is how we can say that God is holy – the being and the actions of God are one and the same – they have integrity. We shall see below that the Spirit plays an integral role in this action as well.

Moltmann also starts with 1 John 4 for his theology of God’s love. In doing so he makes a number of statements to open up what this love is like. Love is the communication of that good that presupposes the capacity for self-differentiation. In doing so, God opens himself to the other through the desire to see life extended in a way that does not involve the reduction or compromise of God. This is because God loves from the centre of his being – it is a true expression of God’s self, not driven by outward influences. Further, as we have seen above, God crosses ontological boundaries. He discloses his inner being through the decision to open himself in love to another (Moltmann 1981, 57-58). Finally, “God is love”, means that there is humiliation and suffering within God. The opening of God’s self to the other inevitably means that God will self limit in order to make himself known to creation. The brokenness in creation will result in a rejection of God and ultimately the death and
humiliation of Jesus for the sake of the creation (Moltmann 1981, 59).

3.10 The critical role of the Spirit

Trinitarian theology pays attention to the role of the Holy Spirit. In relation to the church Christ indwells the church in order to bring the church into the Father’s presence. This must be all understood as an action of the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who continually empowers the church to worship by bringing it into the life that God offers through the Son (Gunton 1991, 5). This action of the Holy Spirit is known as communion. It is a prefiguring of the relationship that is to come in the final Kingdom. As we will see next, this future reality can only be experienced by humanity and realised now by the action of the Spirit. “The Spirit’s action is perfecting, eschatological action, realizing by anticipation . . . right relation between God and the creature and within the created existence which is promised for the world to come (Gunton 2002, 141)”.

As we have seen above, God is holy through the consistency between his being and action, particularly as it is seen in the sending of the Son in sacrificial love. The Spirit has a central role to play in this act. The Spirit makes humanity holy. It does this through the risen and glorified Christ, leading the fallen person into the Father’s presence. The Spirit makes holy, what was once unfit to relate to God. The Spirit’s eschatological work is to perfect humanity (Gunton 2002, 118).

3.11 Trinitarian anthropology

One of the important threads in Trinitarian thinking is its contribution to a Christian anthropology. Writers like Gunton have clearly demonstrated the devastating effect on the Western tradition of the dominance of Descartes’ autonomous knower14. As we have seen above, Trinitarian thinkers have proposed the plurality of the Trinity as the basis of reality.

Having done so, and with a view of humanity as the high point of creation, they are able to say that to be human is to be known by another human. Just as in the Godhead there is a fully open knowing between the members, and no room for full autonomy, to be human is to know ourselves because another knows us. Further, and highly significant to our study, it is essential that there be more than just two involved in this plurality. As Gunton says:

14 For a detailed explanation and critique of the effect of the enlightenment on Western culture in relation to its understanding of the person and the multifaceted results of this position, see all of Gunton, 1985 and pages 86-103 of Gunton, 1991.
the love of two for each other is inadequate, likely on its own simply to be swallowed up in itself, . . . [i]f it is to truly be love, the two will seek a third in order to be able to share their love (Gunton 1985, 92).

And again, Gunton quoting Richard of St Victor, “Shared love is properly said to exist when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community (Richard-of-St-Victor 1959, book 3, xix)”.

This anthropology is centred on the concept of being made in the image of God. To be made in the image of God is to have a special quality and reality to our personhood. This quality is rooted in the relationship within the Trinity. Therefore it is in our interrelatedness to other people that our humanity is found (Gunton 1991, 116).

This relatedness has two dimensions.

First is the vertical dimension. We experience our personhood when we are in relationship with God. Because of sin, this happens through the Son and the Spirit as we have already seen. “The image of God is then that being human which takes shape by virtue of the creating and redeeming agency of the triune God (Gunton 1991, 116-117)”.

Second, the other dynamic is the human one. We are made to find our being with other persons and creation. We get in touch with our image of God when, out of our relationship to God, we “give to and receive from others in the human community. One way into the content of the image, its concrete realisation, is through the concept of love (Gunton 1991, 59)”.

Traditionally, theology and philosophy emphasised the non-bodily aspects in a dualistic way. Trinitarian theology instead emphasises all the interrelatedness of our existence. We can see from the above dynamic, that rather than our ontology being based in certain rational faculties, Trinitarians place it firmly in our personhood. We find our identity in our communities and our response to the creation (Gunton 1991, 119).

In contrast at the heart of Augustinian anthropologies (and also post enlightenment conceptions) is a tendency to use neo-platonic categories. People are like God in the area of their mind or soul. Our bodily existence cannot therefore be the place for the image of God
to be expressed and hence is not the location of our humanity. Consequently, Augustine (and anthropologies such as his) tends to over-emphasise the inner life of a human and look for the Trinity in the soul. The Trinity then ceases to have relevance outside of these arenas and hence is not important for issues of relations. As relationships are between persons and conducted in the concrete outer world, the Augustinian use of the Trinity becomes irrelevant to these. It is just another “theologically legitimated” iteration of privatised individualism (Gunton 1991, 49).

An important part of Trinitarian anthropology is that it is not dualistic in the way Western philosophy has become divided between the mind and body. While the New Testament can seem to portray a dualism, especially in Paul’s contrast between the Spirit and flesh, it is an eschatological difference, not a constitutional one. When Paul talks of flesh he means the old humanity, broken, fallen and out of relationship with God. The Spirit refers to the new humanity in Christ (Gunton 2002, 114).

Volf illuminates a different facet of Trinitarian anthropology. Asking the question what kind of centre the self should have, he unpacks Paul’s statement of the Christian life “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:19-20)”. For Paul the self is improperly centred and needs to be crucified. There are many ways to become wrongly centred but Paul says there is only one solution – becoming de–centred. This is the life that was once lived by flesh now lived by faith in the Son of God (Volf 1996, 71). Paul’s image is not an obliteration of the uniqueness of the individual, but a remaking of the old self from one motivated by self-love to one motivated and energised by the self–giving love of the Son, sent by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

3.12 Last things last: Eschatology
Trinitarian theology and anthropology also has an eschatological element to it. To say that person is an eschatological concept, is to say that “personhood is being realised, and whose final realisation will come only when God is all in all (Gunton 1991, 118)”.

As we have seen above, the Spirit enables the creation to anticipate its eschatological destiny – “liberated from its bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the
children of God (Romans 8:21)” – enabling a measure of perfection there, too (Gunton 2002, 142).

The human is not a static creature in creation. Because Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” that God is “through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven . . .” (Colossians 1:15, 20), a dynamic human condition is envisaged. The potential for reconciliation is based in the inner life of the Trinity. Jesus is the one through whom everything was created. He is also the avenue through which the image of God will be reborn in humanity. “The image, therefore, created through the Word and in the Spirit, has in like manner to be realised through them, between the resurrection of Jesus and his return in glory (Gunton 1991, 119).”

The coming of the Kingdom of God is at the heart of eschatology; the three persons of the Trinity bring three differing aspects of the Kingdom of God to mind. The “kingdom of the Father is determined by the creation of the world and its preservation through God’s patience. This constitutes the freedom of created things and preserves for them the necessary space in which to live (Moltmann 1981, 212-213)”.

The Son’s kingdom of the Son is bounded with the freeing of humanity from their slavery to themselves. Jesus suffering love liberates us from our alienation from each other, creation and God. Lastly, the kingdom of the Spirit is witnessed in the creative forces at work in the new creation.

Through these powers and energies people become God’s dwelling and his home. They participate in the new creation. This gives liberty its bearings and fills it with infinite hope. These three determinations of the history of God’s kingdom point towards the eschatological kingdom of glory in which people will finally, wholly and completely be gathered into the eternal life of the triune God (Moltmann 1981, 213).

The Trinity holds up to us the future hope of life in God as true human beings.
Chapter Four

Social Trinitarian Contributions to Problems Posed

4.1 Social Trinitarian concepts affirm and can deepen attachment to God

The lack of theological development in research on attachment to God has seriously undermined and limited the use of the research. Studies by TenElshof (2000), Granqvist (2002), Hagekull (1999), Sin and Loh (2003) all lack any theological framework or discussion, and explicitly or tacitly accept Kirkpatrick’s theological framework, thin as it is. That only leaves Kirkpatrick’s mediated concept of God derived from Kaufman. As we have seen this amounts to no more than a couple of sentences.

Social Trinitarian theology however, presents many helpful and robust concepts that can support the use and understanding of attachment to God.

First, is acceptance of the use of language as a concrete expression of historical events and the wider realities of the universe. This allows us to say with confidence that we can actually talk about God meaningfully. Modern and particularly post-modern thinking is sceptical or in outright denial that any objective meaning can be attributed to any statements using language. However as we have seen, Trinitarian theology convincingly argues that limited language is sufficient for knowing the truth. It accepts the limitations of the human
position, rather than taking a propositional position. This stance as we have seen both challenges the hyper–rational myth of pure objective knowledge and frees us up from a never–to–be–fulfilled quest for idealised truth – driven as it is by neo-platonic dualism.

Second, flowing from the thoughts on language Trinitarian theology affirms the possibility of knowing God. This basic question is presupposed in the research, which must make the research automatically irrelevant to those within its discipline who presuppose the opposite. Social Trinitarian concepts challenge the negative presupposition that God is not knowable.

It does this by proposing an epistemology that is personal and does not lead to people being alienated from creation. In doing this it allows the possibility of personal knowledge. Western thought became alienated from the Creator when it displaced God and put the human mind at the centre of thinking. Platonic suspicion of the material world leads to a very real difficulty in encountering the living God in this world. Social Trinitarian thought rejects this anti–materialism and affirms creation as good. As a result, knowledge is possible.

However, it is a limited knowledge because of our finiteness. In this, Trinitarianism releases us from the enlightenment need to have perfect knowledge, which has lead to the fragmentation of Western culture. Our sinfulness is taken into account and we are freed from the need to have exhaustive knowledge and become like God to know God.

The ontologically important transcendence and immanence of Trinitarian theology also supports the knowability of God. Having denied Platonism’s denigration of the material world, Trinitarianism allows for the possibility that God can enter into the material world. This is a strong counter to the mediated concepts of God, such as Schleiermacher’s, that today we find in liberalism. If God is mediated, there is no possibility of personal knowledge and therefore any attachment to God thinking must be avoided if they want to maintain a non-contradictory position.

With its inherent boundary crossing possibilities, Trinitarian ontology is a strong support to God coming near to us. Having established our limitations it demonstrates that God is able to self-limit without compromising his deity or the interrelatedness within the Trinity. The Spirit maintains the relational dynamic of the Trinity, before, during and after the
incarnation.

4.2 Trinitarian understandings locate our longing for God in God himself

As already stated, Bowlby’s thesis is that attachment is an evolutionary adaptation designed to maintain proximity to the primary caregiver. Bowlby never actually explains how this adaptation comes about – that is, how it is passed on from generation to generation like other genetic adaptations. Nor does he propose where the incipient attachment system would lie, waiting to be developed. For Bowlby, the main point is that the attachment system arises and finds its source in the infant.

However, Social Trinitarian understandings of attachment to God open a radical alternative to this: that of locating the origin of the attachment system in God’s person. It brings a theological critique to the naturalism of Bowlby’s attachment system. We have already noted the ontological transcendence and immanence of God. This ontological dynamic means that not only does God come near to us, but that he is the source of our identity. “Let us make people in our own image (Genesis 1:26)”’. We see here the inter-subjectivity of the Godhead right at the highpoint of creation – God talks with God’s self. The Trinity has at its core a deeply relational dynamic – a perfectly secure attachment if you like. Although having said this I do not want to limit the life of the Trinity to just a perfect attachment. It is much more.

This imago dei, being made in the image of God – places our attachment system, or rather the theological possibility of its origin, within the Godhead. Our potential to attach to another in a loving relationship is actually a part of the character of God. It is plausible to say that the whole concept of internal working models is found in God first. God has a reliable internal working model of self and others because God is perfect. In the conversation within the Godhead, heard in Gen 1:26, we note that before people were created this perfect attachment existed. Even if as Christians we fully accept the evolutionary hypothesis, theologially we can say that the prototype for secure attachment can be found in God, and that Genesis bears witness to the fact that attachment in people reflects the image of God and finds is roots in this secure divine attachment that we call the Trinity, however it was transferred to people.

This location of perfect attachment is further illustrated in a reverse way by the cry of
dereliction. If as we are told, Christ became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), then a new way of reflecting upon that may be through the understandings of Attachment Theory. The cry of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Mark 15:34)” can be interpreted as Christ fully becoming human. That is experiencing the agony of a total rupture in the attachment that he had with the Father. That God had abandoned him implies that before there had been a state of connection. This cry could easily be the cry of the insecurely attached child. The sense of abandonment, separation, anxiety and loss that Bowlby identified at the heart of insecure attachment can be seen in this central event of the Christian story. In the cross, God embodies the very deep alienation that exists between Creator and created by fully participating in it from the human perspective. Trinitarian theology is helpful here. Can God come near and inhabit our suffering? In fact he can and has victory over it through the resurrection.

Not that we want to reduce sin to the experience of an insecure attachment, but that the cry of dereliction points to the very heart of God’s character as that of one who is in perfect relationship within himself and the deep grief when that relationship is lost.

It is important to locate our longing for God in God’s self. Psychology has levelled the criticism at religion that it is merely a projection, and this on the surface could seem the case with attachment to God. Is our attachment a projection of our inner models of parents and self?

However, a fully grounded Trinitarian theology that locates its centre in the God revealed by the Spirit in the sent Son, Jesus, can strongly resist such a reductionist approach. The gospel in such a historically rooted theology is just too offensive and it is implausible that it could be arrived at and so universally accepted as a projection (Gunton 2003, 27). Paul said that the cross was foolishness to the Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23) and it still is today in the ancestors of the Greeks, the modern and post–modern Western mind.

4.3 Trinitarian understandings give an ontologically different origin to attachment
This is Trinitarian theology’s most radical challenge to the theory of attachment to God because it suggests that infant and romantic attachment are not the antecedents to relationship with God, but that the longing for attachment to God could actually be the antecedent for all our significant relationships.
4.3.1 Interdisciplinary tension

This highlights an interdisciplinary tension that occurs between theology and reductionist psychology. In the study of religion, psychology moves closer and closer to the issues of theology in its study of human experience. If theology is vigorous and rooted in the history of God’s interaction with people, eventually difficulties will arise between the two disciplines.

Psychology, if reductionist, will find that its human centered approach becomes less and less capable of asserting meaning and it will need to move more toward a proper scientific role of describing what it sees if it subordinates itself, allowing theology the task of making meaning. If it does not respond to theology and bring God into the centre, it will distance itself from theology and veer off on a tangent and avoid “the God question” altogether. We can hear something of this dynamic in Kirkpatrick’s plaintive cry that the psychology of religion has become marginalised and a bit of a backwater. As theology begins to interact with the psychology of religion, as it must, the interdisciplinary discussion will inevitably become more and more tense because of the fundamentally different worldview of both disciplines. One centred solely on human experience will come into increasing dissonance with the other with its epistemological position of theistic realism. This is not to say that theology is not rational or anti-science, or that all psychology excludes the possibility of a theistic center, but it is to return to our point that the relationality within the Trinity is the ultimate reality and all science must conform to this if it wants to maintain its claim to observing the truth.

4.4 Social Trinitarian thinking can overcome the curse of the Enlightenment

Gunton and others have convincingly argued for the damage and intellectual havoc that the enlightenment has ultimately wreaked upon Western thinking. With Moltmann, Barth and many other observers of similar thinking, he has shown how this damage has not escaped the church.

As we saw above, it is defensible to attribute feeling to God. This is a critical contribution that Social Trinitarian theology makes to the scientific understanding of attachment to God. As Miner (2007) points out, inter-subjectivity is vital to strengthening understandings of attachment to God. That is, that God seeks to relate to us and there is a dynamic movement
between the Creator and the created.

The attribution of emotion to God and its subsequent allowance of inter-subjectivity are both important. They help to make sense of the actual scientific data uncovered by Kirkpatrick and others. They found that people do not see God as a mediated object (as, for example, Kaufman says God is), but as a Creator who they can relate to more or less (depending on attachment style as we have already seen) and as one who will, in turn relate to them. They have an expectation of the availability of God as an attachment figure, not as a concept.

A further difficulty of the effect of the Enlightenment is the development of solely mediated understandings of God. With a mediated concept of God, we have noted that there is no relational possibility between God and the creation. These were prevalent during the twentieth century and of course still remain. Here God is portrayed as a symbol, metaphor or idea as in Kaufman’s case. The person of God becomes instead the abstract “ground of our being”. As Miner has already stated, mediated forms of God make understanding any relationship with God difficult. It is hard to have a relationship with a principle, or a metaphor. Mediated forms lack inter-subjectivity.

Supporters of mediated forms may argue that inter-subjectivity is unnecessary, but the problem with that is twofold. First, Social Trinitarian theology mounts a strong critique and argues convincingly for an unmediated God, while accounting for the limits that God puts upon himself through using language. Secondly, the data from attachment research disagrees with such a finding. People report being attached to God in ways that support Trinitarian thinking and not the abstract pathway that solely mediated forms of God take. That is they report being attached securely or otherwise to God as if he were personal or had personhood. Finally, solely mediated forms have been arrived at totally from the bottom up. Social Trinitarian theology reminds us of the brokenness of humanity and our inability to undertake such an enterprise with out it being inherently faulty. Whereas its argument that the partially mediated forms of God that Trinitarian theology proposes are metaphors that have been supplied by God is defensible.

One of the great tragedies of the Enlightenment has been the deep alienation between people and also between people and the rest of creation. While the scientific method has brought many great benefits, (who amongst us would romantically want to go back to sixteenth
century dental practices?) it has also brought many great evils. Industrial processes have driven incredible greed and damage to the environment as well as fed our fallen appetites for more and more things of lower quality to fill our empty lives. We have devised more efficient and powerful ways of killing each other in great and greater numbers. Mental illness is on the rise in the West and the ability of our industry to produce more food, more efficiently has lead to some starving and others becoming morbidly obese.

While individual human sinfulness can be blamed for all of these, the rise of the individual and the separation of ourselves from each other and even from ourselves can also be blamed. Social Trinitarians, particularly Gunton, have convincingly argued that the autonomous knower, if not the main driver behind these issues, has been at least the philosophical equivalent of a magnifying glass that has intensified the results.

This has been because of the separation between the mind and the body in Cartesian thought and because of the rejection of the material. This separation was accompanied by the elevation of the mind to sole authority and so humanity was then at the mercy of both our fallen nature and the need to rise from our position of limited knowing to being all knowing – like God. Not only did we become our own idols, but also our own sinfulness prevented us from acquiring the right knowledge that we sought. We became victims even more than ever of our own choices and took ourselves down a, now well-documented, philosophical road to despair.

If ever we needed to have the possibility of a secure attachment to God it is now. As a culture, we are about to become like the prodigal son. We have gone our own way and rejected the Father’s rule. We are dissolute, keeping philosophical pigs, even breeding new varieties, but we are starving while they grow fat. However, if we are to form a secure attachment to God, it will only blow away the stale air of our despair if it is grounded in a thoroughly personal, realist paradigm. One that is based upon the limited, but sufficient knowledge of an all-loving perfect community that creates the universe for relationship and continually reaches out to that universe in love and mercy and self giving: a community that for us finds its most potent and ultimate expression in the historical story of Jesus of Nazareth.
4.5 Secure development in attachment is implied in Trinitarian theology

4.5.1 Is salvation for now? Is there hope of healing?

A critical question that naturally arises in the examination of attachment is the possibility of change. The early experiences are said by Bowlby to be deeply ingrained into our make-up. But are these styles fatalistically fixed?

Social Trinitarian theology’s rejection of the dualistic tendencies in Christian Theology and elsewhere have great implications for living today. Creation is seen as essentially good, there is no second ideal Platonist creation. The world is seen as good, but fallen. This means that from the beginning of creation there was the possibility of secure attachment to God within the very fabric of the universe and our personhood. That secure attachment was not a Greek ideal in a higher plane, but a very real possibility in the created order.

The data for stability in attachment indicates that we maintain our attachment style over infancy and through childhood. The data concerning adult attachment whether to peers, romantic partners or to God indicates that while attachment styles can remain stable, for those with insecure attachment there is a possibility of a change in attachment style to a more secure pattern. This is particularly evident in the studies of romantic attachment. Long-term stable marriages tended to become more secure in their attachment style if one or more of the partners entered the marriage with an insecure pattern (Davis and Kirkpatrick, 1990). It seems that marriages can act as a place where people can rework their internal working models from insecure to secure.

Just as that infant attachment is confirmed by a feedback loop as diagrammed earlier, marriage may act in the same way. As we love and are loved in return, our internal model of ourself is reinforced as positive enabling us to more easily love the other person (itself a sign that our internal model of the other is becoming more positive). This may explain part of the early phases of romantic attachment ‘falling in love’. An interesting study would be the differences in styles of falling in love and their implications for long secure marriages. It may be that this ‘falling’ acts to kick-start a secure feedback loop in those who carry insecure internal working models. Through this they may experience themselves and other in a new way as being worthy of receiving and giving love.

Although it is easy to write this process in a few words, we should not be mistaken in
understanding the time period that this would occur over. The deeper and more insecure the attachment style, the longer and more difficult the process will be. This is reflected in the shorter durations that insecure marriages last for when compared to secure ones. Although the data shows that insecure marriages can be reworked into secure ones, for a significant number this does not happen.

So it may be with our attachment to God. The Christian life is portrayed as one of growth. Scripture uses many metaphors to support this portrayal: new birth (John 3:3), vines that are productively growing and being pruned (John 15:1-8) and people being built into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:22). These metaphors and others like them imply some kind of development.

Paul’s strong aim of the Christian life is to become more like Christ, which for him was a putting on of the new person. In talking of this process of becoming more like Christ, Paul says “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect” (Philippians 3:12). Here we see that the mature Paul recognises that the Christian life is a moving close and closer to Christlikeness through the Holy Spirit.

This is accomplished by relationship with Christ.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:14-17a).

We will look below at the themes of being in God’s family, but for the moment we note that here Paul has in view a relationship with Christ through the power of the Spirit.

Paul has an expectation of relationship with Christ that leads to increasing likeness to Christ – something that has been termed holiness. As we have already seen, for mediated concepts of God, this is not possible. It is not possible to have an idea dwell in your heart in the way that Paul implies, which is distinctly one of personhood. Ideas do not have personhood or relationality.

An increased Christlikeness means an increase in the ability to love – especially the one that indwells us: Christ. This implies an increase in secure attachment to God. However,
Trinitarian theology modifies the underlying attachment framework at this point. God does not increasingly love us as happens in infant and romantic attachment. As we grow in our holiness, we become more aware of the perfect love with which God has always been reaching out to us. This perfect love, as we have seen, is at the heart of God’s being and does not suffer the inconsistencies that human love does. Therefore, secure attachment to God can be equated with spiritual maturity, meaning that it accompanies spiritual maturity, or is one of the signs of spiritual maturity amongst others.

This ontological otherness of the Trinity has deep implications for finite relationships as well. We make a mistake if we do not heed the implications of otherness for our interpersonal relations. Two elements to briefly consider are first that this otherness, which we said is the basis for reality, highlights the unique distinctiveness of every person. Second, this distinctiveness is a counter to any tendency for merging into the other, within human relationships. “To relate rightly to other people is to intend them in their otherness and particularly, to allow them room to be themselves (Gunton 1991, 171-172)”.

Social Trinitarian concepts support the possibility of close relationship with God, even becoming God–like, without diminishing God’s being or elevating people too high or loosing our humanity. This dynamic is very useful for understanding what is actually being, or not being, measured in attachment to God research.

4.5.2 Implications for further research in attachment to God
This theme of the otherness of creation and the Creator is an important challenge for attachment research. It could be that the difficulties in the data on adult attachment to God arise because psychology is mistaken in applying one measure and classification when it researches a population. Social Trinitarian concepts allow for two ontologically distinctive groups of people in creation: those who are adopted as children by God and those not yet adopted.

Paul talks of these two categories frequently. Talking to the Ephesian church of this he says “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light (5:8)”. Elsewhere he says to them “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins . . . But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ (2:1,4-5)".
If, biblically speaking, there are two classes of people, then it is plausible that they will show differing attachment behaviours depending on which group they are in. However, the attachment to God research to this date, has assumed for research purposes one group of people. That is, for example, that in relation to God, there is one ‘preoccupied’ attachment style. Whereas Trinitarian conceptions of people would allow for two ‘preoccupied’ style, one converted and one not.

There is no room in this study to discuss the complexities of conversion. Research in this area would be sensitive, because it would be deciding at least for psychological research needs, who was considered Christian and who was not. This is another example of the interdisciplinary tension that arises in this work. The question of whether psychology would accept theology defining who was Christian and who was not and serving theology’s definitions would be interesting to test. It is not clear if psychology would settle for the role of only describing what theology was making meaning of.

4.5.3 Models of health

Finally, if we can expect growth in attachment to God, we should be cautious of correlating recent models of psychological health with secure attachment. Moltmann points out that the norm for ‘health’ today can change with culture and is shaped by society. The model of health can be as much a product of a modern consumerist society as pathology. While we would affirm that health is desirable and that God wants good things for us, we must acknowledge that sometimes this will not look very attractive to the society in which it arises. “Suffering in a superficial, activist, apathetic and therefore dehumanising society can be a sign of [real] spiritual health (Moltmann 1974, 315)” We need to be keen readers of God’s economy and our surrounding culture to discern the truth.

4.6 Trinitarian understandings imply gifting of people with the Spirit

The action of the Spirit is central to Trinitarian theology. One of the imperatives particularly of Gunton’s work is that if Christianity is to be revived from our Enlightenment damage, we need to rework our pneumatology and arrive at a more fully involved understanding of the life of the Spirit in the Trinity and creation.

This is especially important in the area of healing or living with insecure attachment or
forming a secure attachment to God from the position of having an insecure adult attachment. Trinitarian theology radically supports the idea that worship and service of God might increase the security of our attachment to God. In talking about how the Spirit brings about an anticipation of the eschatological promise of perfection, Gunton says “This is especially . . . the case when men and women are enabled to fulfil their calling as those who, created in the image of God, behave in truly Godlike fashion to the created world, enabling it to praise its maker as it was made to do (Gunton 2002, 142)”.

As we are connected to God through the action of the Spirit, we find a foreshadowing of our perfect otherness that we are promised in Scripture. Paul teaches that each believer is given gifts according to the will of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7-11), with which they are to build up the church in order that the church can glorify God (Ephesians 4:11-12). This building up is experienced by the others in the church whom we are in relationship with both as something they receive and also give. This mirrors the mutual indwelling of the Trinity. While in practice it is not always perfectly experienced as such, theologically it can be said to act to confirm the personhood and otherness of ourselves, and the others with whom we are in relationship with. Even more, because of the indwelling of the Spirit in all believers, we truly but not absolutely, experience the action of becoming what we were made to be – fully human persons in relation to God and the creation.

4.7 Eschatological hope: Living with insecure attachment
What are the implications for attachment to God from Trinitarian eschatology?

4.7.1 Assurance of a new ontological status – adoption and new being in Galatians and Ephesians
As stated above, relationship with God implies a new ontological status. An important descriptor of this is ‘adoption’. Again using Paul, we see that adoption has both a now and future dynamic to it. As well as the access to the Father’s love now, adoption into Christ has a promise that will be fulfilled in the future – that is that the Father will bring all things under the headship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10). In Galatians, Paul says, “Because you are sons and daughters [of God], God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son and daughter; and since you are a son and a daughter, God has made you also an heir (4:6-7)”. The identification as heir has the anticipation of a future inheritance at its core. For those living with insecure
attachment, even if change does not come or is painfully slow, there is always the promise of a future in which they will have the full rights of being an heir, which by implication includes secure attachment to God – perfect relationship unaffected by damaged internal working models.

4.7.2 The return of Christ

One important aspect of Trinitarian theology is that having made himself known to the world through the saving act of Jesus’ death and resurrection, God has delayed finally consummating his relationship with his people. There is an eschatological dimension to relationship with God. We can know God now, but we are promised that we will know him fully in the future, when Christ comes in glory. This is when we will fully enter into our inheritance.

Jesus is going to return, and then all our imperfection will pass away and we will become perfect. Heaven is pictured as a place of never–ending worship of God. Another way of expressing it is that heaven will be a state where both the immanence and the transcendence of God will be experienced by his creation at the same time without any limitations. While it will be much more than this, perhaps another way of putting it would be a place of perfect attachment to God.

Trinitarian eschatological hope is a significant contribution to living with an insecure attachment. Not only is it possible to move into a more secure attachment to God, but also, for those who struggle with insecure attachment, maybe through severe disturbances in infancy, abuse, neglect and manipulation, there is hope. There is no short–cut to healing deep psychological trauma. Attachment Theory has explained why these deep experiences are so shaping, and why they take so much work and time to change. For the most severely traumatised people, it seems that the events of early life will leave an indelible, but slowly fading mark on their lives. While a sober, realistic and compassionate understanding of themselves will help to lead authentic lives now, God holds out the hope that for them, a secure attachment and more awaits them after this life.

This truly can be seen as an expression of ‘grace’ – that key distinctive to Christian theology. Without doing anything, the insecure person, no matter how severely insecure, can rightly hope in a secure relationship with God, through the agency of the love of God.
Trinitarian theology fully brings the saving act of God to the fore by emphasising the humanity of Jesus. He is portrayed as one who has fully come near to us – that is, as a fully human person, and has taken on for us all our brokenness in order that we may experience reconciliation with God without the terrible cost that God demands. Trinitarian theology takes account of all these aspects – the demand for justice, even God’s wrath and allows for them to be integrated in a way that still offers the possibility of secure attachment to God.

4.7.3 Secure attachment to God within the church is an eschatological sign to the world

Finally, Trinitarian theology can challenge attachment to God research to move beyond the individual and into a more communal analysis. The church exists in a fallen world. The whole of creation is being reconciled to God in the cross. This act is the act of the one who created the world in the first place. At the heart of the Trinity is a free creative action, not hindered by pride, ambition or desire for personal elevation. Therefore, this creativity is said to be free. It is the action of the eschatological Spirit (Gunton 1991, 73).

The degree to which the church continues to take its bearings from the triune God is the degree to which it will demonstrate to the world what shape of a truly human society will look like (Gunton 1991, 173). In doing this, it will participate in the eschatological plan of God for the world. A measure of the development of attachment research will be when it moves into more communal analysis.
Chapter Five

The Contribution to the Theory and Practice Of Spiritual Direction

5.1 Attachment Theory’s veracity

5.1.1 In its own light

This research has examined Attachment Theory as it was first promulgated for infants, briefly looked at its insights into adult romantic attachment and examined the methods and theological underpinnings of attachment to God.

In short we have noted that it is a widely accepted and verified theory of how our primary relational bonds are influenced by the quality of our early childhood care and any traumatic incidents that might interrupt that care and our reactions to those things. We did note several significant methodological issues, but overall, the findings in relation to infant and adult romantic attachment are stable, verifiable and highly insightful. This is partially because of the corrective work of later researchers in response to the issues, noted in this research and by others previously.

In its examination of adult attachment to God the methodological concerns have been
repeated, but not satisfactorily addressed. Kirkpatrick has been the main researcher and all others have followed his initial assumptions regarding three attachment styles. This remains a major defect in the research. However, the research findings are not so defective as to be of no use. There is significant data on the three styles of attachment and these can be used in combination with inferences drawn in the light of Bartholomew’s fourth attachment style. However, having said that the data is of some use, little is known about the attachment to God style and religious behaviour of the fourth style, Bartholomew’s ‘fearful’ classification. While the behaviours of the other three are clear, it must always be remembered that amongst their data lie a small group who do not fit the general pattern. Until this is seriously addressed the veracity of the research as it relates to attachment to God is compromised.

As a spiritual director, I feel the need to exercise caution if dealing with a person who might reveal characteristics that indicate a fearful attachment style may be operating. Care will be needed to arrive at any conclusions while the data remains incomplete.

5.1.2 In the light of Social Trinitarian theology

Attachment to God research is both supported and seriously challenged by Social Trinitarian theology. Challenges will be dealt with below. Support comes in the affirmation that God is knowable (an issue that we will cover in more depth below) and that personal knowledge of God is possible, limited but sufficient. Attachment Theory can be said to be theologically plausible in the light of the interior relational perichoresis of the Trinity that Trinitarian thinking developed. Not only is it plausible, but also Trinitarian concepts point out that attachment to God is reflected in significant New Testament images and thinking. Issues of adoption, holiness, hope and public testimony to God’s love all reinforce Attachment Theory’s validity.

5.1.3 Implications of this veracity

Attachment Theory’s plausible scientific description that explains certain religious and non-religious behaviours is highly significant for the practice of spiritual direction. Our relatedness to God and our experience of that relatedness is the raw material of spiritual direction. The first implication is therefore that it will be beneficial to integrate the findings of Attachment Theory into our practice. In the light of Social Trinitarian theology, some of the wider implications of this veracity and our evaluation of Attachment Theory follow.
5.2 Trinitarian theology confirms spiritual direction’s contention that God is making himself known

We have seen that God is both transcendent and immanent in Trinitarian theology. Central is the contention that God continues to open himself to creation in vulnerability. This opening is rooted in God’s very being. Initially we see God saying “Let us make humanity in our own image (Genesis 1:26)”. In this action God opens himself to humanity, to open the possibility of relationship, as we have seen already. Further, God is vulnerable to death, in the crucifixion, vulnerable to rejection, and so on. This opening can be understood as the mission heart of God. God is always reaching out to his creation through the Spirit who is continually trying to convince us that God loves us and that Jesus is the way to this love.

Spiritual direction works from the same premise. God is reaching out to his creation and is lovingly calling people into relationship. This reaching out is based within the core being of God. Trinitarian concepts help to affirm that this reaching out is not futile. It is both rationally plausible and ontologically feasible for God to reach out, and, importantly that we may be able to have meaningful relationship with God as a result of this outreach.

Faith is not a projection of our internalised father images, but a response that is enabled by God in order to have relationship with God. The personal relatedness that is at the core of the Trinity makes it possible for us to have this relationship. Trinitarian theology then, confirms the practice of spiritual direction as dealing with a concrete reality that is grounded in God’s fundamental ontology. It is not a sentimental regression.

Spiritual direction has been described as the art of helping another to notice and articulate what God is doing in their life. Trinitarian theology supports the use of Attachment Theory in this enterprise, and confirms that this reflection upon our relationship with God is reasonable. It is in accord with the underlying rationality of the universe. It is also a theologically plausible activity, and is possible because God has come near.

5.3 Contribution of the study for the formation of spiritual directors

5.3.1 Use of Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory can be said to measure and describe the relationship between a directee and God in some of its dimensions. Giving, as it does, clear insight into the effect of early childhood experiences of parenting, it opens profound windows into the inner life of a
directee. As we have seen, there are strong links between our God attachment, and our infant attachment. With careful training, this will allow a director to see back into the early life of the child through the experiences and perceptions of God that might surface in the process of direction.

This is a powerful possibility, and further development of the implications for power and trust and the potential for spiritual and emotional abuse need to be carefully examined if these psychological insights make their entry into a director’s skill set.

A directee may not wish for their childhood to be known in this way. It is reasonable to expect that when one goes to a psychologist with adult issues that they might have insight into early childhood. However, an adult entering direction may not have the same expectation. Many people enter direction with no other motive than to deepen their relationship with God. They may not present problems they want solved. In fact they may have no recollection of the emotional events that have shaped their internal working models. Here the disclosure to the directee of these insights may be damaging both to them and the spiritual direction enterprise.

Serious questions need to be answered in a formation program about these insights and how they are to be integrated into practice. It must be remembered that behaviours as a result of attachment styles are statistically allocated. That means that not all who are anxious in their attachment to God will behave so. Not all who are secure will behave so. There is a dimensionality and intensity to each style. This means that those statistically on the boundaries of two styles exist in a grey area, and may be moving toward one style or another. For example, an anxious person may be only just so statistically in intensity and may be moving over time towards a secure style.

Theories such as these that are highly insightful run the risk of being seen as a magic bullet that solves all issues. In reality people are not as neat as statistics and many more influences shape them. Evaluating someone through a theoretical construct may open fresh new insights, but may also box them in – closing off possibilities that are just emerging in them.

In light of the above, the following suggestions are made:
• That formation programs undertake a process of evaluating Attachment Theory and assessing their ability to integrate it
• If it is decided to introduce training in Attachment Theory, that a search be done of spiritual direction programs to see if any others have attempted to use attachment research
• That if used, it be integrated into training into postgraduate training – that is offered after the main formation program is finished
• That the insights of Attachment Theory should only be used by experienced and sophisticated directors who have demonstrated an ability to use theory carefully
• It is suggested that issues of attachment be brought to supervision or a closed seminar to be examined by a suitably trained person for a period of time in order to examine its proper use
• In addition, until further research is carried out, it would be well to be versed in some of the methodological weaknesses of the current research in order to know where the theory can be pushed and where it is fragile.

I believe that Attachment Theory can be highly beneficial to the practice of spiritual direction. However, because of the detailed (but accessible) theoretical background and the many layered dynamics of infant – romantic – God attachment, sufficient time needs to be given to training in order for those being equipped to avoid arriving at a shallow reductionist understanding that could easily lead to damage.

Finally, it is suggested that if under the first point a formation program undertakes to introduce Attachment Theory training, that this be done in a limited way with a few highly skilful, trusted graduates of the program and that, post the training, rigorous evaluation of the impact on the practice of spiritual direction is undertaken for a period of a year or two in order to notice any negative impacts, before introducing such training more widely.

5.3.2 Social Trinitarian contributions to the formation of spiritual directors

One of the unexpected outcomes of this research have been the insights that Trinitarian theology has for the training of spiritual directors.

One of the significant issues is the weight that human experience is given as a source of authority. Moltmann has something to say in this area. There is a stream of modern theology
that places great weight upon personal experience as a source of our theology. Moltmann points out that this thought stream shows some reservation towards the doctrine of the Trinity. The inheritors of Schleiermacher’s theology place human experience and specifically the awareness of ourselves in relation to God as one of the primary theological sources. “God is indirectly experienced in the experience of the absolute dependency of our own existence (Moltmann 1981, 2)”. In this stream, statements about God are at the same time statements about personal existence.

As we have seen above, these mediated ways of experiencing God lack inter-subjectivity. How can we say anything about how God experiences us? Scripture is replete with God’s experiences of us. Are we to ignore these? If we do, God becomes an abstract “ground of our being” rather than the living God revealed in Scripture.

In my own practical spiritual direction training this similar stream of emphasis on human experience was dominant. It was noticeable that one of the underlying foundations for the practice of spiritual direction was the acceptance of whatever human experience was presented in a direction session. What mattered was transformation. Into what, was never defined, but the looked for aim was the “authentic self”. Again this was never clearly defined. Authentic by what measure was never outlined.

As a consequence some students were comfortable to accept as legitimate places of God’s acceptance and the experience of God’s love, behaviours in their directees that many Christians would consider not normative for Christian living. For example, some students in the formation group considered homosexuality acceptable, and this was not questioned or explored by the formation team. It seemed that this was considered a legitimate human experience and therefore material for spiritual direction.

Such a radical departure from the tradition of Christian teaching should be more rigorously examined. A great deal of intellectual weight has been brought to bear in the centring of human experience as a theological source. However, the *a priori* acceptance of human experience as a valid source over scripture for reflection on God seems not enough.

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15 For example, while I am not convinced of the legitimacy of Paul Tillich’s categories, his theological system must be acknowledged as one of the most intelligent, highly developed and integrated.
The practice of spiritual direction is taught as one of discernment, but when training such as mine does not examine, debate or contemplate the consequences of using human experience as a source then it leaves itself open to being vulnerable to whatever the social mood of the present culture is. Fifty years ago, it would have been unheard of to consider homosexuality as a normative experience for a Christian. It might sound over emotive, but having accepted human experience as highly as we have, will we be surprised if in another fifty years, people with a sexual orientation to young children are calling for legitimisation and being normalised as homosexuals have?

Trinitarian theology can help us here. It can legitimately guide us to a deep and reflective use of the Bible. It can re-orientate our thinking to not just our experience of God, but also the rich record of God’s history with humanity and God’s experiences with humanity (Moltmann 1981, 4). As Moltmann says, “It is not the experiences which are important, but the one who has been experienced in them (Moltmann 1974, 2)”. 

If spiritual direction is to avoid accommodating the latest move of culture, Trinitarian theology suggests that it bases its primary source for reflection in the history of God’s interaction with creation and God’s experience of creation. The Enlightenment distorted concepts of God, and with the rise of rationalism, theology developed in some quarters a concept of God that owes its conception more to Plato than to the triune holy community that the early church came to understand God as.

This Enlightenment concept of God elevated the mind and rejected the emotions and material experiences. The recent renewal of interest in spiritual direction can be seen as a reaction to this and recognises the need to pay attention to the experiences of people. However in doing this, spiritual direction needs to be cautious that they are not reacting to the elevation of the mind by elevating experience. This would still be a conformation to the surrounding culture that has displaced God and elevated the human, just in reverse. What is needed is a return to the God who is both personally involved in creation and other than it. Trinitarian conceptions challenge us to root our practice in the whole of God’s history of interaction with creation – in God’s experience of us as it is revealed in Jesus life amongst us.
5.4 What are we listening to — God or the directee’s attachment?

Let us turn our attention to the dynamics of spiritual direction and how adult attachment and attachment to God might inform us.

What will happen if two insecure attachments come together in the direction session? If a dismissing director and an anxious pilgrim are sitting in the room, the director may experience the pilgrim’s candid self-revelation as positive, when in truth it may to some degree represent a clear lack of self boundaries and an unhealthy need to disclose all to all that often accompanies an anxious style. Or alternatively, they may experience the pilgrim’s need to be totally close as suffocating and it may activate their dismissing system. This in turn will communicate itself to the anxious style as being unavailable.

On the other hand, if an anxious director is listening to a dismissing pilgrim, they may experience the pilgrim’s need for distance as resistance to them or God, which indeed it may be, but it may need to be seen as part of a larger pattern of avoidance, rather than a personal rejection, which the anxious director may be more vulnerable to concluding.

The following question arises: In the experience of resistance, are we as directors listening to the directee’s experience of God or is it a clash of attachment styles? The implications of this are important for supervision. If we have decided that teaching about attachment theory is not for a formation program, perhaps there is a need to equip supervisors with this knowledge. Without needing to teach directors, we might be able to supervise them in this area, bringing with it the benefits of the theoretical concepts without the dangers for abuse.

5.5 The possibilities of the director’s attachment

Having talked about some of the limits of the director’s attachment let us briefly note a few positive implications for applying Attachment Theory. Trinitarian theology, as we have seen, pays attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. Part of the foundation of spiritual direction is the understanding that the director listens to the Spirit in them and the directee. The director, thus enabled with the Spirit, even more importantly – indwelt with the Spirit, is able to embody the secure attachment in a way that foreshadows the perfect relationship promised through Christ’s incarnation. Not that the director mediates this in any way, but in the gracious holding and listening to the pilgrims spiritual story, which is done in dependence upon God, they act as a representation of God’s current grace to the directee.
This grace is a spiritual reality whether or not the director is present. However the director’s listening, which is an act of love, is not a metaphor for God’s love for the pilgrim. Trinitarian theology teaches us that to the degree that it is empowered by the Spirit it is an actual experience of God’s love here on earth.

5.6 Striking implications for pastoral ministry
Pastors could benefit greatly if they realised that at any one time, their congregations are made up of the spectrum of people that we have elaborated above. Whatever our tradition, whether liturgical, preaching based or otherwise, we can adapt our congregational practice in a reflective way to take into account in a serious and grounded way, the emotional frameworks that people bring to their relationship with God.

Pastoral leaders can also grasp the fact that they might be projecting their own attachment onto the congregation. It would help them to know that people will not just change overnight when they have spent years, even decades building up, living with and reinforcing their internal working models. However, preaching and spiritual formation that is sensitive to the particular attachment styles has been shown both theologically and scientifically to have the effect of moving a person’s attachment towards an increasingly secure style.

There are implications for denominational authorities as well. Careful reflection may lead them to conclude that certain types of attachment may be unsuitable for professional pastoral leadership. More research needs to be done here, but my own experience has shown that some of the more emotionally dysfunctional and ineffective pastoral leaders, on reflection, seemed to display insecure attachments that would be categorised as intense. That is, that not only were they insecurely attached, but that they were at the more intense end of the spectrum. This is particularly a risk with the dismissing type, because they can be highly functional (driven) in the ‘job’. The anxious type is also a risk because they can be seen to be highly relational and lack appropriate emotional boundaries and have a poor work ethic.

In this, we should not presume that God could not use the soil of our lives as ground for his ministry, but that ministers who operate in an unknowing way with insecure attachment styles might be risky appointments. Formation should consider whether these styles of attachment should be made aware of their emotional internal working models and taken through a process of examining and reflecting both psychologically and theologically upon
them. Only when they have shown understanding may they be suitable candidates for professional ministry. Some may never be suitable for sole pastor or senior leadership roles, but function very well in associate positions where a sensitive leader can help them in their ongoing growth towards secure attachment.

5.7 The imperative to Mission: God is reaching out — so must we

At the heart of Trinitarian concepts of God is the loving outreach of the Creator, in perfect community, to the creation to include it in the creative life of the Trinity. God is at heart a missional God. Before the fall of humanity the Trinity opened itself in vulnerability not only in the act of creation, but especially in the act of making humanity in God’s own image.

Trinitarian theology has shown us that the mutually loving relationship that is the very being of the Trinity is the source and foundation for this outreach. If, as we have suggested, the life of the Trinity is the basis for all reality and we are made in the image of the Trinity, now empowered by the Spirit, then this has implications for how we conduct our ministry of spiritual direction. Especially in focus in this section is the issue of outreach to creation.

An increasing possibility in our pluralistic society is that spiritual directors will find themselves directing people who do not in any way think of themselves as Christian, but who are genuinely seeking true spiritual communion with their creator. What is the role of the Christian spiritual director in a case such as this? Much of our training might incline us to just hold the story. Our past church experience may have (with good reason) caused us to shy away from overt evangelism. However Nouwen has some confronting things to say to us about this issue:

As a reaction to a very aggressive, manipulative and often degrading type of evangelisation, we sometimes have become hesitant to make our own religious convictions known, thereby losing our sense of witness. Although at times it seems better to deepen our own commitments than to evangelise others, it belongs to the core of Christian spirituality to reach out to the other with good news and to speak without embarrassment about what we ‘have heard and . . . seen with our own eyes . . . watched and touched with our hands’ (1 John 1:1) (Nouwen 1976, 92).

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16 This point comes from my level three essay submitted as part of my Graduate Diploma in Spiritual Direction.
This is a complex area and any director commencing such a relationship needs to have thought through the implications. They also need to have a good understanding of what the directee is actually looking for. However, an embarrassment about evangelism should not discourage us from giving a distinctively Christian explanation for spiritual movements within such a person’s life if such an explanation will make meaning of a person’s life.

To do so will not be an abuse of relationship, but an invitation into the loving community that has opened itself to us in grace and hope. If we do not embody this loving outreach to those around us then we have failed to be changed by the ultimate life changing relationship – one with God.
Chapter Six

Concluding comments

6.1 Remarks
This and other research has established the veracity of Attachment Theory for explaining some structures that govern human relationships. While it has also been shown to be highly insightful about adult attachment to God, problems with method and lack of theological development have been uncovered. Social Trinitarian themes have been useful in this task and provide challenging frameworks through which to resolve some of these problems. Research into attachment to God could prove highly beneficial to the practice of spiritual direction if this is done and certain cautions are heeded. Social Trinitarianism challenges spiritual direction to examine its use of the human experience of God as a theological source.

6.2 Journeying toward Hope: God is bigger than our listening and accepting loving and being loved
Concepts of movement, progress and journey are rich analogies for the Christian life. Many characters in Scripture journeyed as a result of the breaking into creation of God. Abraham journeyed on a promise, as did Moses and the people of God. Around the birth of Jesus – the
primary breaking into creation of God – peopled journeyed. The Magi, Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and down to Egypt, and finally Jesus travelled around Judea in three years of ministry that itself was an extended journey to the cross.

The promise of a future with God is the great hope that we have. This hope can be partially conceptualised as a perfect secure attachment to God. We shall perfectly experience truly knowing God and being truly known by God. Trinitarian theology reminds us as directors that until then we are limited. God is much bigger than our theology or psychological theories. Until the time that this hope is realised, Trinitarian theology accepts these limitations and shows us that God accepts them as well and works through them and despite them. In addition, Social Trinitarianism does not lay upon us the burden of having to have exhaustive knowledge that we have seen is an impossible ideal. Instead, it offers the assurance that limited personal knowledge is possible, plausible and most importantly sufficient for us to live in the love of the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For myself as a director, this research has reminded me of the central place of Scripture in my vocation. I have a sense that I am underdeveloped and have identified the need to deeply engage with the Trinity as a lived reality in my life and the lives of my directees through the Bible. Today, as I write the last words in this project, I have received in the mail a journal article that has already shown me possibilities for this development (Wrigley-Carr 2008, 329-346). Other directors before me have struggled with this and the ministry of von Hügel promises at least one way forward. As one project closes, another one begins.
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