Resonance, Attunement and Attachment: Contributions to an Understanding of Human-Divine Relationships by Developmental Psychology and Trinitarian Theology

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Abstract

This paper draws from an analysis by Fraser Watts of divine activity with respect to people, and further explores the metaphors of ‘resonance’ and ‘attunement’ through Trinitarian theology and developmental psychology. It is argued that the concept of attachment to God, as an analogy with, foundation for, and extension of human relationships, can point to fruitful ways of increasing our understanding of human-divine relationships. Psychological research into the development of one’s sense of attachment to God is warranted, based on methods of studying the development of human attachment relationships.

An important issue for those studying the human person as a spiritual being is this: How can one coordinate theological, biological and psychological accounts to give a provisional, yet coherent, explanation of human-divine relationships? This is a particular form of the problem of God’s action in the world. In the case of the natural sciences at issue is the action of God upon or within particles, atoms, objects etc. In the case of the psychological sciences at issue is the interaction of God with people. Fraser Watts holds that talk about divine action in the world does not adequately suggest the interactive nature of God’s involvement with people. To talk of divine action conjures up the notion of God acting unilaterally and independently. In contrast, Christian theology has always seen God’s influence on people as being interactive – as being dependent on God’s initiative, but also on people’s response.¹

Hence, Watts suggests use of the term “resonance”, in terms of “people being attuned to God, rather as a receiver can be attuned to a transmitter” with God “allowing them the freedom either to respond, or to go their own way”.² Yet resonance is a passive term,

² Watts, Science and Theology, 108.
suggesting matter with the property of vibrating at certain frequencies. A better term for persons in interaction is attunement because of its conceptual density in psychology. It allows for individuality: both the independence and unknowability of each in interaction. Fraser Watts draws from neurobiology, cognitive & social psychology in his writings, exploring personhood in terms of neurological and cognitive processes, experiences and observable behaviour. However a consideration of developmental and clinical psychology suggests one can explore more deeply the unfolding of attunement between people - a type of close, personal interaction that can also occur between humans and the divine.

This paper begins with some comments concerning a theological basis for asserting that attunement is an appropriate metaphor for divine-human interaction.

Attunement of God towards humans: a theological perspective

Attunement of the divine towards people within Christianity is asserted in the Trinitarian nature of God who is relational. Many recent theologians emphasise the relationality of God. Basic to a trinitarian model of God is the concept of God as distinct but inter-relating persons. However, attributing personhood to God could be seen as projective. La Cugna recognizes this critique from thinkers such as Freud and Fuerbach, and states that such criticism arises from a doctrine of God constructed from philosophy, not the self-revelation of God in Christ. Hence she (and many contemporary theologians following the work of Karl Rahner) argues that a core premise for theology is that God’s nature is revealed through salvation history. Colin Gunton further argues that subjective, personal knowledge of God in the world, transforming relationships, gives rise to objective knowledge of God. Attunement of God towards persons is predicated on a core attribute of God as love. In particular, attunement is evidenced by the incarnation and crucifixion. The crucifixion is a central example of perichoresis (mutual indwelling), and of Father, Son and Spirit involved in suffering. To quote Gunton the Father “must be seen both to command and to suffer his Son’s total identification with man under judgment”; the Son “actively allowed himself to be passively subject to the

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6 McGrath, Christian Theology: An Introduction.
7 LaCugna, God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life.
principalities and powers”,¹² the Spirit as the means of the Son’s identifying with the lost human condition “enables Jesus’ suffering to be redemptive, to make it of eschatological significance”.¹³ Through suffering the Trinitarian God demonstrates attunement that goes beyond empathic love to full identification at the point of humanity’s deepest need.

Attunement of humans towards God: a theological perspective

Trinitarian theology also holds that people share with God qualities of relationality through the imago Dei. La Cugna states that “Persons are essentially interpersonal, intersubjective. The doctrine of the Trinity is the sine qua non for preserving the essentially relational character of God, the relational nature of human existence, and the interdependent quality of the entire universe.”¹⁴ Trinitarian theology posits the inherent relationality of humans as a means for people to be attuned to God through the actions of the Spirit of God. It is the third Person of the Trinity who seeks and maintains relationality with humans, uniting all with the ties of love.

Attunement of humans towards God: neuro- psychological perspectives

From a psychological stance, the ground for asserting the attunement of people to God is more problematic. At issue is not manifest spirituality in some people (as evidenced by brain activity, states of consciousness, spiritual practices and the like) but rather the question of how people come to ‘know’ the work of Spirit in their lives and how such processes relate to empirical psychology. In his brief discussion of resonance and attunement as metaphors for divine action with respect to humans, Fraser Watts does little more than suggest that people act towards God as a receiver is tuned to a transmitter.¹⁵ However, to move forward with this metaphor we need to examine human responsiveness to relationships, and not just rational responses to revelation. Advances in neurobiology and developmental psychology over the last three decades demonstrate that humans are oriented towards relationality from birth, but the capacity for healthy relationships grows through interactions with an attuned other in an attachment relationship. The empirical study of attachment relationships between infants and caregivers, and adult romantic partners, in particular, provides strong support for the mental health advantages of secure attachment.¹⁶

Many of the interactions between infants and caregivers have powerful biological underpinnings.¹⁷ For the neonate, mutual gaze is the primary means of attunement with the caregiver. The frequency and intensity of mutual gaze regulates the infant’s pleasure in the interaction, and distress at its cessation. Pleasure reinforces the interaction and positive relational bonds, the beginnings of secure attachment, are developed. The memories of the

¹² Gunton, Act and Being, 128.
¹³ Gunton, Act and Being, 130.
¹⁴ LaCugna, God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life, 288.
interaction are laid down as emotionally laden inner models of the experiences. Heightened pleasure is associated with increased levels of endorphins, brain chemicals that contribute to infant brain development. At the end of the first year of life there is a critical period for the maturation of the orbitofrontal cortex. Since the orbitofrontal cortex processes information from the external world (particularly visual information such as faces) and from internal bodily states, it can generate non-verbal internal working models that can be accessed in the absence of the mother. These internal models can enhance positive, and reduce negative, emotion. This is the beginning of the self regulation of affect. If the parent is responsive to the child’s distress, then the child can internalize the experience of ‘interactive repair’ (where distress can be contained and replaced by positive emotion) as symbolic representations, or working models. Such interactions in turn promote maturation of orbitofrontal regions, especially neural circuits that brake arousal and promote an inhibitory state. The securely attached child thus encodes a working model of a ‘regulated self in interaction with an attuning other’. Attachment, in short, is defined as the dyadic regulation of emotion, or as a mind-body interaction with the goal of emotional regulation.

Since secure attachment depends on neurological development of the brain in the context of emotional regulation by the caregiver during infancy and early childhood, internal representations of attachment are based on procedural memory (rather than verbal memory) and are largely unconscious, automatized, and preverbal. These representations subsequently guide the child’s regulation of affect as experiences (and hence representations) become more complex, and promote healthy psychological development. On the other hand, difficulties of attachment result from misattunement and can lead to psychopathology.

There are important implications for understanding human-divine relationships from these biological and developmental insights. That the human capacity for relationality is a product of both neurological development and attachment to a caregiver attests to the significance of relationships in human functioning and is consistent with the claim that humans are ontologically relational. If God is seen as Creator, then the biological processes can be seen as the God-given foundations for relationship with other people and also with God. Within the psychology of religion relationship with God has previously been considered as a projection of parental representations (as in Freudian theory or as a generalisation from earlier attachment experiences). However, if attachment to God is considered by analogy with the

18 Schore, Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self, 121.
19 Schore, Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self.
perspective of intersubjectivity\textsuperscript{22} then there is the possibility for real attunement and a real relationship with God who is considered as a fully subjective, intentional agent.

Insights from developmental psychology allow us to consider the mechanism of attunement from the earliest attachment relationships through the full human lifespan. Infant attachment bonds, laid down in pre-verbal memory structures, shape subsequent relating,\textsuperscript{23} even relating without the immediate physical presence of the other. The earliest attachment models allow for knowledge of an absent ‘other’ to be associated with cognitive-affective schema, and for a valid relationship to be present (e.g., the grandparent living overseas and never seen by the child or adolescent, but interacting through gifts, letters and phone conversations).

Previous psychological accounts of divine-human interactions largely limit the action of God to a representation of human relationships. However, pursuing the mechanism of attunement allows for hypothesizing that God is fully autonomous and interactive in human affairs. If God interacts with people at all stages of development it may be that early affective experiences of attachment with God may be present in a form that is unarticulated because it has not been validated and brought into consciousness through experiences with others.\textsuperscript{24} Later religious experiences and socialization in the context of secure human attachment relationships may then allow these to become integrated and able to be symbolized, and later brought into conscious awareness. Hence, both God’s relational action in the world via the attuning presence of God’s Spirit and relatively secure attachments with others would be necessary for close, attuned, realized human-divine relationships.

Research into the development of a person’s sense of attachment relationship to God is warranted, based on hypotheses derived from research into the development of other human attachment relationships. Such research would include inquiry into children’s earliest concepts of God, prior to religious socialisation; research into the different styles of attachment to God and their relationship with human attachment styles; and psychological consequences of human and human-divine attachment relationships. In short, I have argued that the metaphor of resonance, together with the mechanism of attunement, can be developed into a coherent theory of attachment to God and hence, act as a promising vehicle for understanding more of God’s interaction with the world of human beings.


\textsuperscript{24} Atwood and Stolorow, Faces in a Cloud: Intersubjectivity in Personality Theory.