A Discussion of Object-Relations Theory and its Relation to Christian Faith

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Abstract

Object relations theory is one way of understanding the infant’s process of attaching to significant others. It also has been used to explain how people frame their view of self and their relationship to transcendent objects. Because Christian faith teaches a personal, knowable God, it is of special interest how Object relations theory explains this relational process. This literature review discusses faith objects, how the faith object – God – is viewed, how a person may construct their understanding of a relationship with God, and finally, how counselors may use this understanding in their clinical work. Also included is a summary of Fowler’s Stages of Faith (2004).
Literature Review: A Discussion of Object-relations Theory and its Relation to Christian Faith

Object-relations theory is grounded in the first two years of childhood and is one means of explaining how a child attaches to significant others, and how the view of self, other, and transcendence is shaped. From Object-relations theory flows the theory of attachment, wherein “we internalize our primary caregivers and use these relationships to form object representations, or views of others and ourselves” (Gurney & Rogers, 2007, p. 961). This construct is both useful and instructive in considering interventions to address developmental bonding deficits within the therapeutic relationship. From the primary bond or emotional attachment to a known object, a child may learn how to yearn for the transcendent object which is not known, thus entering into a lifelong spiritual journey. Attachment is developmentally crucial; successful attachment is both generalizable and enduring, setting the stage for relational intimacy in the years to come (Fowler 2004; Gurney & Rogers).

Reiland sees truth in Freud’s construct of a “primal father,” that specific “relationship which precedes all human relationships” (2004, p.78), and identifies this object as the Judeo-Christian God, a real Being that draws us to relationship. Further, he sees our spiritual development as a longing of understanding, knowing, and finding a true relationship with God. Thus, what is identified by Freud as the primary object (mother and mother’s breast), Reiland labels the first transitional object which serves as a mediator between the child and God, that is, the sacred, “the object beyond objects” (p. 80).

Christian therapists may find it difficult to accept the fruit of psychoanalytic theory while rejecting the ground from which it sprung. Freud, the father of psychoanalytic theory, identified himself as a “godless Jew” and saw the use of the object as solely developmentally rooted, one whose function disappears through normal maturation, and if it does not disappear, creates
psychologically fertile ground for neurosis (Reiland, 2004). This is in direct conflict with Christian faith, which encourages a spiritual journey into the mystery of God in Christ, who is both knowable and unknowable and in whom the visible and invisible world touch (cf. Col.1:15-23, New International Version).

While the relationship between Object-relations theory and its impact on Christian faith development far exceeds the scope of this literature review, it is possible to explore how Object-relations theory makes a significant contribution to the development of a substantive Christian faith (Fowler, 2004; Gurney & Rogers, 2007; Hall, 2007; and Reiland, 2004)). In Gurney and Rogers’ excellent summary of Object-relations theory, spirituality is “defined broadly as having a transcendent relationship with a higher power or divine being” (2007, p. 964) and it is distinct from Christian faith. They wrote further that,

At the center of both spirituality and object-relations theory we find the language of relationships, a language that is often apprehensible yet not comprehensible; it is mysterious, supernatural, and dynamic. There is a relational need beyond us; it is a need that cannot be met from within. This I/Thou experience grounds both spirituality and object-relations theory. (p. 965)

Fowler, who conceptualized stages of faith development (See Appendix), explained this process: “As [a] child matures physically and emotionally, faith accommodates the development of an expanding range of object relations, and when exposed to religious symbols and practices, the child may nurture a sense of relatedness to the transcendent” (2004, p. 17). Thus, Object-relations theory is grounded in early childhood experiences of bonding, or attachment, and can be a primary segue to religious knowledge and experience. Primal faith, which is Fowler’s first stage, and which usually occurs between birth and age two, is the developmental stage in which
objects of attachment are defined as being separate and permanent (p. 18). Disruptions of this Eriksonian process hurt the child’s development of basic trust, often encountered in therapy later as the inability to form intimate bonds in significant relationships, and the difficulty in feeling connected to God and others (p. 19).

Bonding with others is then viewed as a primary success of early childhood trust development, and that ability is able to be generalized to significant relationships across the lifespan and facilitates the possibility of a transcendent bond as well. Object-relations theory, though grounded in psychoanalytic theory, is not hostile to the process of spiritual development; rather, it provides one explanation of why some are able to feel the loving presence of God in their lives while others feel a pronounced internal emptiness. Access to one’s spirituality can lead the seeker to the One who can fill the void (Mat. 6:25-34). Gurney & Rogers (2007) continued,

Spirituality and object-relations are both creative processes, trying to make something larger than the sum of the parts, but object-relations, may have a harder time at this because there is no room for the immaterial…Object relations asks how our relational history forces us to behave in a predetermined way, but spirituality asks what our relationship with the universe or transcendent other can become. (p. 969)

In their attempts to draw a contrast between the individuation process of object relations and the joining process of spiritual searching, and ultimate joining with the transcendent, Gurney and Rogers (2007) observed that in Object-relations one is moving from enmeshment toward healthy separateness, and in spirituality, one moves from separateness toward healthy union. Christian faith would agree man’s fallen state is that which has created the divide, and redemption is the means of joining.
Hall (2007) has written a thorough review of the literature, firmly planting Object-relations theory within psychoanalysis and defining attachment theory without, while simultaneously embracing that both “have had significant implications for our sensibilities in understanding and working with our clients’ spiritual stories” (p. 14).

There is much to be explored in the area of integrating Object-relations and attachment theory into the counseling process. Christian counseling provides a unique opportunity to both provide palliative relief for individuals who feel emptiness because of bonding problems and a path for counselees who want to address theory based faith development issues as part of their emotional healing. Emotional closeness, emptiness, and individuation from and bonding with others are primary reasons counseling is sought by religious and non-religious individuals. Hall succinctly affirmed, “Our client’s experiences of God are but one entry point into a complex, interconnected relational matrix that can bring about change throughout the entire matrix” (2007, p. 17). Hall clearly identified the role of bonded therapist as healer: “from an attachment perspective, the process of becoming attached to our clients, and they to us, becomes a central relational prerequisite for incarnating God’s love to our clients by providing direct care, and by taking on and detoxifying their suffering” (p. 25). Understanding the process of attachment within the context of Object-relations theory can help counselors identify underlying mechanisms that may obstruct or facilitate counselees seeking a warm, affective bonding to others and to God.

Chris,

I think that you offer a clear and concise review of the literature and you write very well. Your integration of the issues of spirituality in the subject matter of Object-relations and vice versa is very clear and well articulated. Thank you.

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Appendix

Stages of faith

The Stages of Faith Development was conceptualized by Fowler (2004) as an hierarchical, seven stage process that does not exclusively concern Christian faith. Eriksonian developmental tasks and Piaget processing and thinking patterns lay the groundwork for the growth of an increasingly complex, abstract and self-sacrificing faith. Fowler believed that most individuals do not develop faith beyond the early stages and that only a very few individuals such as Mother Theresa or Gandhi were able to achieve the final stage.

The early stages of faith

Primal faith (infancy to 2 years), centers around primal bonding. Intuitive-projective faith (toddlerhood and early childhood) presents the opportunity to link intense imagery and emotion to transcendent objects. Mythic-literal faith (middle childhood and beyond) gives rise to a more logical thought process and subsumes the prior intuitive stage. Synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence and beyond) is the stage where the faith object is personalized and a synthesis process with the adolescent’s world view and view of self is begun.

The later stages of faith

Achieving and progressing through the later stages of faith (Individuative-reflective faith and Conjunctive faith) requires critical thinking skills and the power for deep personal reflection. The final stage, Universalizing faith, is seen in the lives of only a few. These individuals are believed to be so aligned with the goodness of God and so devoted to the non-violent opposition of evil that their lives are spent selflessly in the service of others. They serve without judgment or
prejudice regarding others’ religious beliefs but see all individuals as children of God, and
deserving of the love and support required to right societal injustice.

Okay, good, not too many changes needed. I imagine that you will continue with this theory all
the way through your PhD program.
References


