

Article

Attachment to God Across Religions: Fathers and Mothers Matter Differently in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism

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Abstract

This study examined how attachment to parents influences attachment to God across Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Grounded in attachment theory and extending prior work on parental correspondence, participants from the United States and India completed measures of attachment to mothers, fathers, and God. Consistent with the correspondence hypothesis, parental attachment patterns mirrored attachment to God. For Christian participants, both avoidance and anxiety toward fathers predicted attachment to God, reflecting Christianity's paternal conception of the divine. For Muslim participants, both avoidance and anxiety toward mothers predicted attachment to God, consistent with the maternal role in transmitting Islamic faith. Among Hindu participants, avoidance toward mothers predicted avoidance toward God, and anxiety toward both parents predicted anxiety toward God, reflecting the balance of masculine and feminine divine representations in Hinduism. These findings underscore cultural differences in spiritual attachment and highlight the importance of parental influences in understanding cross-religious variations in faith development.

Keywords: attachment theory; attachment to God; parental attachment; correspondence hypothesis; Christianity; Islam; Hinduism; cross-cultural; religious development; divine attachment

1. Introduction

Attachment theory (Ainsworth 1978; Bowlby 1969) revolutionized the understanding of human development by positing that the emotional bonds between infants and caregivers shape internal working models of self and others. These models guide relational expectations throughout the lifespan, influencing friendships, romantic relationships, and even religious beliefs. Scholars have increasingly turned to attachment theory to explain how individuals relate to God, conceptualizing God as a potential attachment figure who provides proximity, a safe haven, and a secure base (Granqvist et al. 2010; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990).

Central to this application are two explanatory models. The correspondence hypothesis proposes that attachment to God mirrors parental attachment: secure parental relationships foster secure divine relationships, while insecure attachments lead to insecure divine relationships. In contrast, the compensation hypothesis suggests that God serves as a substitute attachment figure for those with insecure or deficient parental attachments, offering a corrective emotional experience (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2004). Empirical support



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for both hypotheses exists, though recent large-scale evidence favors the correspondence hypothesis (Alford et al. 2026), but findings are often mixed, pointing to the complex interplay of relational, cultural, and theological factors in shaping attachment to God (Beck and McDonald 2004; Hall et al. 2009).

Early empirical studies on attachment to God primarily examined Christian samples, reflecting the Western context of attachment research. For example, attachment to fathers—but not mothers—predicted attachment to God among Christian college students, consistent with Christian theology’s emphasis on God as “Father” (Limke and Mayfield 2011). However, these findings may not generalize to other religions. Scholars have called for expanding research into non-Christian faiths (Granqvist et al. 2010), but empirical work remains limited.

The current study addresses this gap by examining parental predictors of attachment to God among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu participants in the United States and India. By differentiating the roles of mothers and fathers, this research provides cross-cultural insight into how theological traditions and parental roles jointly shape divine attachment.

2. Background

Attachment theory, pioneered by Bowlby (1969) and elaborated by Ainsworth (1978), explains how early caregiver–child interactions shape internal working models of self and others. Securely attached children perceive caregivers as available and reliable, whereas insecurely attached children develop anxious or avoidant patterns, viewing others as inconsistent, rejecting, or untrustworthy. These relational templates extend beyond infancy into adulthood, shaping peer relationships (Collins and Read 1990), romantic bonds (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Hazan and Shaver 1987), and increasingly, spiritual relationships (Granqvist et al. 2010; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990).

God, for many religious individuals, functions as an attachment figure. Believers seek proximity to God through prayer, perceive God as a safe haven in distress, and rely on God as a secure base for exploration and meaning-making (Beck 2006; Cicirelli 2004). Attachment to God has been linked to psychological well-being more strongly than conventional religiosity indicators such as church attendance or frequency of prayer (Bradshaw et al. 2010). Secure attachment to God predicts resilience (Nguyen et al. 2015), existential well-being (Cooper et al. 2009), and tolerance for religious diversity (Beck 2006). Conversely, insecure attachment to God predicts religious struggles, alienation, and spiritual distress.

Two competing hypotheses attempt to explain how these bonds form. The correspondence hypothesis suggests that attachment to God mirrors attachment to parents: secure parental attachments foster secure divine attachments, whereas insecure parental bonds predict insecure divine bonds (Granqvist and Hagekull 1999). The compensation hypothesis posits that individuals with insecure parental attachments may turn to God as a surrogate secure base, compensating for unmet relational needs (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2004; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990). Evidence exists for both: securely attached individuals tend to internalize their parents’ religious faith and experience God as loving (correspondence), whereas insecurely attached individuals are more likely to undergo sudden conversions or intensify religiosity as a coping response (compensation).

Despite substantial work, research has tended to overlook potential differences between mothers’ and fathers’ contributions to divine attachment, especially outside of Christian faith.

2.1. Christianity

2.1.1. Theological Context

Christianity is distinctive among the Abrahamic faiths for its strong paternal language and imagery. God is repeatedly described as Father in both the Old and New Testaments

(e.g., Matthew 6:9, “Our Father who art in heaven”; Isaiah 63:16, “You, Lord, are our Father”) and is central to Trinitarian doctrine, which names God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992). Biblical injunctions also emphasize paternal responsibility for spiritual formation: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, ESV). In Christian practice, clerical roles have historically been male-dominated, particularly in Catholic and Orthodox traditions in which priests, bishops, and the pope are exclusively male (Berman 2013; Johnson 1990). These theological and institutional features reinforce the paternal representation of the divine and suggest that human-father relationships may serve as especially salient templates for Christians’ attachment to God.

2.1.2. Empirical Studies

Empirical evidence supports this expectation. Paternal attachment—rather than maternal attachment—predicts Christians’ attachment to God (Limke and Mayfield 2011). Children’s perceptions of their fathers’ spirituality and relational style also exert more influence on their God concepts than maternal variables (McDonald et al. 2005). In broader Christian samples, secure parental attachments correspond to perceiving God as loving, whereas insecure bonds are linked to viewing God as distant, controlling, or punitive (Brokaw and Edwards 1994; Hall and Edwards 2002). Attachment to God has further been shown to predict low psychological distress among Presbyterians, independent of traditional religiosity (Bradshaw et al. 2010). Attachment to God often strengthens later in life, when other attachment figures such as spouses or parents are lost, reflecting God’s role as a compensatory figure (Cicirelli 2004). Family structure also shapes these dynamics: individuals from intact families tend to exhibit correspondence between paternal and divine attachment, whereas those from divorced families more frequently display compensatory attachment patterns (Murunga et al. 2017).

2.1.3. Images of God in Christianity

Christians’ images of God strongly affect psychological outcomes. Believing in a compassionate, engaged God predicts life purpose (Stroope et al. 2012), resilience (Nguyen et al. 2015), and trust in others (Mencken et al. 2009). In contrast, viewing God as punitive is linked to paranoia, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and social anxiety (Silton et al. 2013). Gendered images also matter: Christians who view God as masculine endorse traditional gender roles and resist same-sex marriage, whereas more relational and nurturing God images predict egalitarian attitudes (Whitehead 2012, 2014). Christians’ endorsement of feminine characteristics of God also predicts psychological well-being, especially among women (Pryse et al. 2013). Collectively, Christian theology and empirical findings converge: paternal attachment is central to Christian attachment to God, with theological emphasis on God as Father reinforcing paternal correspondence effects.

2.2. Islam

2.2.1. Theological Context

Islamic theology is rooted in *tawhīd*, the radical oneness and transcendence of Allah. God is believed to be incomparable and beyond human categories, including gender (Qur’an 42:11 (<https://quran.com/42/11>, accessed on 1 January 2025)). Although Arabic grammar uses masculine pronouns, Islamic teaching stresses that Allah is neither male nor female. Parental roles in Islamic families often reflect these theological emphases, with mothers bearing significant responsibility for religious education and the transmission of daily practices such as prayer and dietary observance (Altares 1996). Hadith tradition further elevates the religious significance of mothers, stating, “Paradise is at the feet of your mothers” (Sunan al-Nasa’i, Hadith 3104), reinforcing the maternal role in nurturing faith identity.

2.2.2. Empirical Studies

Psychological research within Muslim populations underscores the significance of parental bonds in shaping attachment to God. Secure parental attachments correspond to secure God attachments, whereas insecure childhood bonds predict anxiety and avoidance in divine relationships (Mansour et al. 2008; Shahidi et al. 2010). Generational research demonstrates that although second-generation Muslim immigrants in Europe often report weak ethnic and religious identity, they maintain strong affective connections to God (Maliepaard et al. 2010). Identity studies likewise show that high religiosity among Muslim immigrants corresponds with strong ties to origin identity and culture, whereas low religiosity aligns with integration into host societies (Saroglou and Mathijsen 2007).

2.2.3. Image of God in Islam

The Islamic image of God blends mercy and justice, expressed in the divine names al-Rahmān (the Most Merciful) and al-‘Adl (the Just). Believers often describe Allah as simultaneously compassionate and authoritative, which fosters an image of God as close yet commanding (El Azayem and Hedayat-Diba 1994). Unlike Christianity, in which God is typically anthropomorphized as a Father, Islamic conceptions remain abstract, with Allah envisioned as transcendent and formless. Developmental studies show that children initially use anthropomorphic language when describing Allah but gradually adopt more abstract, transcendent conceptions as their religious understanding matures (Zuberi 1988). Theological and empirical evidence suggest that maternal roles are particularly influential in Islamic faith development.

2.3. Hinduism

2.3.1. Theological Context

Hinduism presents a pluralistic and polytheistic framework in which the divine is encountered through multiple deities embodying diverse attributes. Central figures such as Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver), and Shiva (destroyer) coexist with powerful goddesses like Durga, Parvati, and Lakshmi, who represent protection, fertility, and prosperity (Bose 2015). This gender inclusivity contrasts sharply with the paternal dominance of Christian theology. Parents in Hindu families are considered the child’s first religious teachers, guiding them through samskaras (rites of passage) such as Vidyarambha (initiation into study) and Upanayana (initiation into sacred learning), which instill both spiritual and moral values (Radhakrishnan 1953; Bühler 1886).

2.3.2. Empirical Studies

Psychological research, although limited, reflects these theological dynamics. Personality studies reveal that Hindu individuals tend to emphasize autonomy and achievement compared to Muslims, who score higher on deference and affiliation, suggesting differing orientations toward religious authority and individuality (Ojha and Jha 1991; Kumar 2015). Devotional practices such as pooja and bhakti have been shown to promote psychological resilience and well-being, functioning as attachment-like mechanisms that foster security and stability (Kumar et al. 2025). These findings suggest that Hindu approaches to relationships with gods are both individualistic and relational, with both maternal and paternal parental attachments likely serving as templates for divine bonds.

2.3.3. Image of God in Hinduism

The Hindu image of God is relational, diverse, and deeply personal. Through bhakti (devotion), believers cultivate intimate emotional bonds with their chosen deities, often conceptualized as parental, friendly, or even romantic figures depending on tradition (Ku-

mar et al. 2025). Because both male and female deities are prominent, Hindu individuals can experience God as simultaneously fatherly and motherly, disciplinary and nurturing. Hindu representations of deities are prototypically structured, just like natural categories, and although followers have diverse representations, love and truth are the most defining features across the religion (Fincham et al. 2019). The presence of both male and female deities in Hinduism suggests that both paternal and maternal attachments may serve as templates for divine attachment.

2.4. The Current Study

The body of research on attachment to God demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of existing scholarship. Studies consistently show that secure parental attachments foster perceptions of God as loving and available, whereas insecure parental attachments often translate into anxiety or avoidance in divine relationships (Beck and McDonald 2004; Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2004; Hall and Edwards 2002). However, this evidence base has been disproportionately developed in Christian contexts. Indeed, until very recently, attachment-to-God research had been conducted almost exclusively among Christians (Granqvist et al. 2010; Limke and Mayfield 2011), with little to no systematic exploration in other world religions.

The present study addresses this gap by examining attachment to God in three major world religions—Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—while differentiating the contributions of both mothers and fathers. These three traditions were selected not solely for their global size but because together they offer maximal theological contrast in how the divine is gendered and in which parent is culturally positioned as the primary religious socializer: a paternal conception of God in Christianity, a formally nongendered conception of God in Islam paired with a cultural emphasis on maternal religious transmission, and a pluralistic Hindu tradition that includes prominent male and female deities. Other major traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Judaism) were not included in the present design; extending this comparative framework to those traditions is an important direction for future research. By analyzing participants from both the United States and India, this research expands the empirical base beyond Western Christianity and directly tests whether parental influences on divine attachment align with theological emphases and cultural practices across traditions.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

A total of 472 individuals participated in the study. Recruitment occurred in both the United States and India through classroom announcements, email and social media invitations, and face-to-face solicitation in community settings (e.g., outside local mosques, churches, and temples). Religious affiliation was self-reported. Among the participants, 193 (40.9%) identified as Christian, 52 (11.0%) identified as Muslim, 165 (35.0%) identified as Hindu, and 62 (13.1%) reported no religious affiliation. Individuals with no religious affiliation were retained in the dataset for descriptive purposes but were excluded from analyses concerning attachment to God. Table 1 provides a sample composition by religious affiliation, gender, and country of recruitment.

Gender distribution was slightly weighted toward females. Across the total sample, approximately 56% identified as female, 43% as male, and fewer than 1% reported a gender outside the male/female binary. Age ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 21.8$; $SD = 3.9$). Most participants were undergraduate students, though the Indian subsample included a mix of community members and graduate students as well. Among U.S. participants, 63.6% identified as White/European American, 12.7% as Black/African American, 7.5% as Native American/Alaska Native, 5.8% as Hispanic/Latino, 5.2% as Asian/Asian American, 0.6% as

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 4.6% as “Other.” Participants recruited in India were overwhelmingly South Asian (97.6%). Participation was voluntary. In the United States, undergraduate students received research participation credit in psychology courses. In India, participants did not receive course credit.

Table 1. Sample Composition by Religious Affiliation, Gender, and Country of Recruitment.

Religious Affiliation	Female	Male	Other/Neither	Total	U.S.	India
Christianity	123	70	0	193	190	3
Islam	34	18	0	52	37	15
Hinduism	92	74	0	166	7	159
None	27	34	1	62	62	0
Total	276	196	1	473	296	177

Note. $n = 473$ (the 62 participants reporting no religious affiliation are included here for descriptive completeness but excluded from the regression analyses in Section 4). One participant identifying outside the male/female binary is included in the None row total.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Attachment to Parents

Attachment to parents was assessed using the Experiences in Parental Relationships Scale (Limke and Mayfield 2011). This measure was adapted from the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan et al. 1998) to assess retrospective accounts of parental attachment separately for mothers and fathers. Each version of the scale contained 22 items, with 11 items assessing attachment-related anxiety (e.g., “I worried about being abandoned by my father/mother”) and 11 items assessing attachment-related avoidance (e.g., “I found it difficult to allow myself to depend on my father/mother”). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly), with higher scores indicating greater anxiety or avoidance. Internal consistency for all four subscales was high, with Cronbach’s alphas exceeding .84 in the present sample.

3.2.2. Attachment to God

Attachment to God was measured using the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI; Beck and McDonald 2004). The AGI consists of 28 items that assess two dimensions of divine attachment: anxiety about abandonment by God (e.g., “I worry a lot about damaging my relationship with God”; “I fear God does not accept me when I do wrong”) and avoidance of intimacy with God (e.g., “I prefer not to depend too much on God”; “I am uncomfortable allowing God to control every aspect of my life”). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Internal consistency for both subscales was strong in this sample ($\alpha s > .80$), consistent with previous research (Beck and McDonald 2004; Limke and Mayfield 2011).

3.3. Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study on “attitudes and relationships.” Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to beginning the survey. In the United States, most participants were undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at a public university who completed the measures online through a secure survey platform and received course credit toward their research participation requirement. In India, participants were recruited both from university settings and surrounding communities; they generally completed the paper-and-pencil version of the survey and were thanked for their time and contribution. To minimize potential order effects, measures were presented in counterbalanced order across participants. Both the

U.S. and Indian research teams followed identical administration protocols. Prior to administration in India, measures were reviewed by bilingual collaborators to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness of wording as translated.

4. Results

Prior to conducting the primary analyses, data were screened for missing values and outliers. Of the 472 individuals who participated, 62 reported no religious affiliation and were therefore excluded from analyses involving attachment to God; no additional participants were excluded for incomplete responses. The final analytic sample consisted of 193 Christian individuals, 52 Muslim individuals, and 165 Hindu individuals. Cronbach's alphas across the parental and divine attachment subscales ranged from .82 to .91, indicating good to excellent internal consistency. Descriptive statistics and reliability estimates are presented in Table 2. For each religious subsample, stepwise multiple linear regression (criteria for entry, $p < .05$; for removal, $p > .10$) was used, with father-avoidance and mother-avoidance as candidate predictors of God-avoidance, and father-anxiety and mother-anxiety as candidate predictors of God-anxiety, so that only predictors contributing unique significant variance were retained in each final model. Table 3 provides subscale means for each religious affiliation.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Estimates for Attachment Measures ($n = 472$).

Measure	M	SD	α
Attachment to Fathers			
Father-Anxiety	2.98	1.01	.86
Father-Avoidance	3.12	0.94	.84
Attachment to Mothers			
Mother-Anxiety	2.91	0.97	.88
Mother-Avoidance	2.87	0.89	.85
Attachment to God			
God-Anxiety	3.24	1.02	.90
God-Avoidance	2.85	0.88	.91

Note. Higher scores indicate greater attachment-related anxiety or avoidance. Cronbach's α coefficients reflect internal consistency for each subscale across the total sample.

Table 3. Subscale Means (Item-Level) by Religious Affiliation, with One-Way ANOVA Comparisons.

Measure	Christianity M (SD)	Islam M (SD)	Hinduism M (SD)	F(2, df)	p
Father-Anxiety	3.32 (1.35)	3.38 (1.29)	3.79 (1.04)	7.04	<.001
Father-Avoidance	3.73 (1.26)	3.50 (1.02)	3.35 (0.90)	5.33	.005
Mother-Anxiety	3.03 (1.23)	3.34 (1.16)	3.96 (1.04)	29.73	<.001
Mother-Avoidance	3.18 (1.13)	3.08 (1.12)	3.08 (0.86)	0.48	.618
God-Anxiety	3.27 (1.20)	3.20 (1.00)	3.55 (1.10)	3.48	.032
God-Avoidance	3.13 (1.11)	2.89 (1.04)	3.75 (0.90)	22.54	<.001

Note. Values are item-mean scores (1–7 scale); higher scores indicate greater anxiety or avoidance. ANOVA compares Christian ($n = 193$), Muslim ($n = 52$), and Hindu ($n = 165$ – 166) subsamples. Subscale-level reliability (Cronbach's α) by group, computed on the subset of cases with item-level responses available (Christianity $n = 70$; Islam $n = 51$; Hinduism $n = 163$ – 164), ranged from .69 to .93 for Christianity, .78 to .89 for Islam, and .66 to .82 for Hinduism; the lower reliability for some Hindu subscales (as low as .66–.69) is a limitation noted in Section 6.

4.1. Christianity

Regression analyses for the Christian subsample used stepwise entry, with father and mother attachment dimensions as candidate predictors. Paternal attachment variables emerged as the only significant predictors of attachment to God; maternal attachment variables did not meet the criterion for entry into either model. Specifically, attachment avoid-

ance toward fathers significantly predicted avoidance of God ($\beta = .17, t = 2.34, p = .02$), such that higher avoidance of intimacy with fathers was associated with greater avoidance of intimacy with God. Similarly, attachment anxiety toward fathers significantly predicted anxiety toward God ($\beta = .17, t = 2.33, p = .02$). The regression models accounted for $R^2 = .03$ of the variance in avoidance of God and $R^2 = .03$ of the variance in anxiety toward God.

4.2. Islam

For the Muslim subsample, maternal attachment emerged as the only significant predictor of attachment to God, with paternal attachment variables not meeting the criterion for entry in either model. Attachment avoidance toward mothers significantly predicted avoidance of God ($\beta = .33, t = 2.48, p = .02$). Likewise, attachment anxiety toward mothers significantly predicted anxiety toward God ($\beta = .43, t = 3.34, p = .002$). The models explained $R^2 = .11$ of the variance in divine avoidance and $R^2 = .18$ of the variance in divine anxiety.

4.3. Hinduism

Analyses for the Hindu subsample revealed a more balanced pattern of parental influence, though the two parents played different roles for avoidance versus anxiety. For avoidance of God, mother-avoidance was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .17, t = 2.26, p = .02$); father-avoidance did not meet the criterion for entry. In contrast, for anxiety toward God, both father-anxiety ($\beta = .53, t = 7.08, p < .001$) and mother-anxiety ($\beta = .19, t = 2.55, p = .01$) contributed significant unique variance, with father-anxiety the substantially stronger of the two predictors. The regression model explained $R^2 = .03$ of the variance in avoidance of God and $R^2 = .45$ of the variance in anxiety toward God.

Considered as semi-partial correlations, the pattern in Table 4 clarifies how much unique explanatory weight each parent carries once the other is accounted for. In Christianity and Islam, where each outcome retained only a single predictor, the semi-partial r is numerically identical to β ($sr = .17$ for both Christian father effects; $sr = .33$ and $.43$ for the Muslim mother effects), so the standardized effect already reflects each predictor's unique contribution. Hinduism is the informative exception: although father-anxiety ($\beta = .53$) and mother-anxiety ($\beta = .19$) both remained significant predictors of God-anxiety, their semi-partial correlations ($sr = .41$ and $sr = .15$, respectively) show that father-anxiety uniquely accounts for roughly seven times as much variance in God-anxiety as mother-anxiety does ($sr^2 = .17$ vs. $.02$) once the other parent is held constant. This confirms that the two parents are not equally weighted contributors to Hindu God-anxiety despite both reaching significance, and it is consistent with the substantially larger β for father-anxiety reported above.

Table 4. Stepwise Regression Results Predicting Attachment to God from Parental Attachment, by Religious Tradition.

Religion	Outcome	Predictor	B	β	sr (Partial r)	t	p	R ²
Christianity	God-Avoidance	Father-Avoidance	0.19	.17	.17	2.34	.02	.03
Christianity	God-Anxiety	Father-Anxiety	0.19	.17	.17	2.33	.02	.03
Islam	God-Avoidance	Mother-Avoidance	0.39	.33	.33	2.48	.02	.11
Islam	God-Anxiety	Mother-Anxiety	0.47	.43	.43	3.34	.002	.18
Hinduism	God-Avoidance	Mother-Avoidance	0.23	.17	.17	2.26	.02	.03
Hinduism	God-Anxiety	Father-Anxiety	0.72	.53	.41	7.08	<.001	.45
Hinduism	God-Anxiety	Mother-Anxiety	0.26	.19	.15	2.55	.01	(above)

Note. Only predictors retained by the stepwise procedure (entry $p < .05$, removal $p > .10$) are shown; the omitted parent's attachment dimension did not meet the entry criterion in that model. sr = semi-partial (part) correlation, indicating the unique variance each predictor contributes to R^2 net of the other predictor(s) in its model. For the Hindu God-Anxiety model, $R^2 = .45$ reflects both predictors together (Father-Anxiety entered first, $R^2 = .42$; Mother-Anxiety added second).

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether attachment to parents predicts attachment to God in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. The regression results reported above show that this relationship held, but that the specific parent involved differed by tradition; the interpretation below is anchored in that pattern of results, with prior theory and research discussed only insofar as it helps explain what the present data show. Guided by attachment theory (Ainsworth 1978; Bowlby 1969) and prior research emphasizing the correspondence and compensation hypotheses (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2004; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990), this study sought to clarify whether maternal and paternal attachment differentially predict attachment to God across three theologically contrasting world religions. The findings demonstrate that parental influences on divine attachment vary systematically across traditions, reflecting the theological emphases and cultural practices unique to each faith.

5.1. Christianity: Fathers as Templates for Divine Attachment

Among Christian participants, paternal—but not maternal—attachments predicted attachment to God. Avoidance toward fathers predicted avoidance toward God, and anxiety toward fathers predicted anxiety toward God. These findings replicate and extend earlier work demonstrating that paternal attachment is central to divine attachment among Christians (Limke and Mayfield 2011; McDonald et al. 2005). Christian theology consistently portrays God as a paternal figure, with scripture, liturgy, and clerical roles reinforcing the paternal metaphor (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992). The results therefore support the correspondence hypothesis by showing that Christians' experiences with their fathers are reflected directly in their relational experiences with God.

5.2. Islam: Mothers as Primary Religious Socializers

Among Muslim participants, maternal—but not paternal—attachments predicted attachment to God. Avoidance toward mothers predicted avoidance toward God, and anxiety toward mothers predicted anxiety toward God. These results align with Islamic teachings that elevate the maternal role in shaping children's religious identity and practice (Altares 1996; Sunan al-Nasa'i, Hadith 3104). Although Islamic theology stresses that Allah transcends gender, cultural practices emphasize the mother's responsibility in transmitting faith during early development. The findings support the correspondence hypothesis.

5.3. Hinduism: Both Parents Shape Divine Attachment

Among Hindu participants, maternal avoidance predicted avoidance toward God, whereas both paternal and maternal anxiety predicted anxiety toward God, with paternal anxiety emerging as the substantially stronger of the two. These findings are consistent with Hindu theology, which embraces both male and female divine figures, and devotional traditions such as bhakti that encourage believers to form intimate, relational bonds with chosen deities (Bose 2015; Kumar et al. 2025). Hindu parental roles, reinforced through samskaras and household worship, emphasize the contributions of both mothers and fathers to children's religious development (Radhakrishnan 1953; Bühler 1886). The results therefore support the correspondence hypothesis while illustrating that Hindu attachment to God reflects the relational inclusivity and plurality of its theology.

5.4. Theoretical Implications

Recent family-level research supports and extends these findings. Using the Social Relations Model, Cooper et al. (2019) examined Christian and Hindu families to disentangle whether views of God(s) reflect actor effects, partner effects, or unique relationship

effects. Their results showed that mothers and children demonstrated stronger reciprocity and alignment in their perceptions of deity representations than did fathers. These results converge with our findings by highlighting the salience of mothers in religious socialization, particularly in Islam, where maternal attachment uniquely predicted attachment to God. At the same time, the Social Relations Model study demonstrates that father–child relationships generate distinct relational variance, consistent with our finding that paternal attachment predicts divine attachment in Christianity and contributes alongside maternal attachment in Hinduism.

The present findings also converge with and extend a recent large-scale study by Alford et al. (2026), who employed latent profile analysis across two samples of U.S. emerging adults (Study 1 $n = 824$; Study 2 $n = 875$). Consistent with the present results, Alford et al. found no evidence for a compensation profile; instead, three correspondence-based profiles emerged: Complete Secure Correspondence (secure across all figures), Complete Insecure Correspondence (insecure across all figures), and Insecure Father Correspondence (insecure for father and God but not mother). The Insecure Father Correspondence profile replicates and extends our finding that paternal attachment is distinctively linked to attachment to God in predominantly Christian U.S. samples. Alford et al. further demonstrated that the Complete Secure Correspondence profile predicted the lowest symptoms of anxiety, depression, and loneliness over time, underscoring the mental health importance of attachment security across both human and divine figures.

As a whole, the findings support the correspondence hypothesis across religious groups but reveal that the identity of the relevant correspondence partner is not fixed—it shifts with the theological and cultural role each tradition assigns to mothers and fathers. This underscores the importance of cultural and theological context in attachment-to-God research and challenges assumptions of universality in prior Christian-centric research.

The compensation hypothesis did not receive strong support in the present study, as parental attachment dimensions consistently predicted corresponding dimensions of attachment to God in ways that reflected cultural and theological expectations. Nonetheless, it remains possible that compensatory processes occur under certain conditions or for particular subgroups. For example, individuals from non-intact families may be more likely to compensate for insecure parental bonds by turning to God as a surrogate attachment figure (Murunga et al. 2017), and religious conversions may similarly reflect compensatory dynamics when prior attachments have been disrupted (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2004).

5.5. Practical Implications

These findings carry significant implications for counseling, pastoral care, and interfaith dialogue. For Christian clients, exploring paternal relationships may clarify struggles with perceiving God as loving or trustworthy. For Muslim clients, maternal bonds may be more relevant to understanding spiritual insecurity or alienation from God. For Hindu clients, both parents may serve as important entry points into discussions about the divine. In clinical practice, interventions that address parental relational histories may facilitate spiritual healing and resilience, as secure attachment to God has been linked to more adaptive coping and lower distress (Beck and McDonald 2004; Cooper et al. 2009).

Beyond counseling, the findings have implications for interfaith dialogue and multicultural competence. Awareness that different traditions emphasize paternal, maternal, or dual parental influences in religious development may reduce stereotyping and foster mutual respect across religious groups (Saroglou and Mathijssen 2007; Maliepaard et al. 2010). Finally, attachment to God has been shown to function as a resource for resilience and coping, particularly in times of stress and loss (Nguyen et al. 2015; Bradshaw et al. 2010).

6. Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present study provides important cross-cultural insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the Muslim subsample ($n = 52$) was relatively small compared to the Christian and Hindu groups. This partly reflects the demographic composition of the recruitment sites in the United States and India, where Muslim residents made up a smaller share of the surrounding community than Christian or Hindu residents; nevertheless, the resulting imbalance limits statistical power for the Muslim subsample and generalizability of the findings, and larger and more diverse Muslim samples are needed to confirm their robustness. Because data collection for this project concluded some time ago, it is not feasible for the present research team to reopen recruitment at this time; we note this so that future researchers are aware of the need for a larger, purpose-built Muslim sample rather than treating the present estimates as final. Second, the study relied on self-report and retrospective measures of parental attachment, which may be influenced by memory biases or current relational experiences. Third, although data were collected in both the United States and India, analyses did not disaggregate within-faith cultural differences—for example, the proportion of Muslim participants recruited in the United States versus India, caste membership among Indian participants, or socioeconomic status, all of which may shape both parental relationships and religious experience and could not be examined with the present sample size. Country of recruitment and religious affiliation were also substantially confounded in this sample: Christian participants were drawn overwhelmingly from the United States (190 of 193), Hindu participants overwhelmingly from India (159 of 166), and Muslim participants from both countries but more heavily from the United States (37 of 52). Because of this confound, the present design cannot fully separate theologically driven effects from country-level cultural effects, and this should be kept in mind when interpreting the cross-religious comparisons; future work should aim for a more balanced cross-national sampling design within each faith tradition. Fourth, the sample's age range (18–45 years) was broad, and developmental differences in both parental and divine attachment across this range were not modeled; restricting or stratifying by age band in future work would help clarify whether the present findings are stable across adulthood. Fifth, most participants were undergraduate students, so the findings may not generalize to community members with different levels of educational attainment; comparing university-recruited and community-recruited subsamples directly is a useful next step. Finally, within Christianity specifically, the study did not distinguish among denominational traditions (e.g., Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant), which may differ in the degree to which they emphasize a paternal image of God; examining denominational variation is an important direction for future research.

Future directions offer exciting possibilities for theoretical expansion. The Alford et al. (2026) study, while providing valuable longitudinal evidence for correspondence and the importance of father attachment in U.S. emerging adults, was conducted exclusively within the United States and did not distinguish among religious traditions—limitations the present study directly addresses. Future work might replicate the latent profile approach of Alford et al. within multi-religious and cross-national samples to examine whether the Insecure Father Correspondence profile replicates across traditions or is specific to Christian-majority contexts. Longitudinal studies examining how parental and divine attachments evolve across the lifespan and research expanding into Buddhism, Judaism, and indigenous spiritualities would further clarify the universality versus cultural specificity of parental influences on divine attachment.

7. Conclusions

The present study demonstrates that attachment to God is shaped differently across Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Fathers predict divine attachment among Christians, mothers among Muslims, and both parents among Hindus. These results affirm the correspondence hypothesis while underscoring the cultural and theological specificity of parental influences. The principal contribution of this study is empirical rather than purely theoretical: whereas prior correspondence research had assumed a single, largely paternal template drawn from Christian samples, the present cross-religious design shows that the specific parent who serves as the template for divine attachment is itself shaped by theology and culture, a pattern that could not have been observed within a single-faith sample. By extending attachment-to-God research beyond Christianity, this study highlights the necessity of cross-cultural approaches for understanding the complex interplay between family relationships, theology, and spiritual development. Practically, the findings suggest that efforts to strengthen children's sense of security with God—whether in religious education, family ministry, or parenting programs—may be most effective when they target the parent–child relationship that a given tradition treats as spiritually central (fathers in Christian contexts, mothers in Muslim contexts, and both parents in Hindu contexts), rather than applying a single, one-size-fits-all model of family-based faith formation.

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