

Research Paper

## The Relationship Between Attachment to God and Psychological and Spiritual Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Shame and Guilt Among Indian Catholic Adults

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the mediating roles of shame and guilt in the relationship between attachment to God and psychological and spiritual well-being among 435 Indian Catholic adults aged 18 to 59. Mediation analyses revealed that shame and guilt partially mediated the effects of anxious and avoidant attachment dimensions on well-being. Anxious attachment was associated with increased shame and guilt, with shame negatively impacting wellbeing and guilt contributing positively. Avoidant attachment predicted higher shame and lower guilt, both of which influenced well-being in opposing ways. The findings highlight the negative impact of attachment insecurity to God on wellbeing, primarily through shame, while guilt supports psychological and spiritual growth. These insights have important implications for culturally sensitive counseling, pastoral care, vocational discernment, and seminary formation, emphasizing the need for fostering secure attachment to God and healthy emotional regulation.

**Keywords:** Attachment to God, shame and guilt, wellbeing, Indian Catholic adults

This study examines the relationship between attachment to God and psychological and spiritual wellbeing among Indian Catholic adults, with a specific focus on the mediating roles of shame and guilt. Drawing on Kirkpatrick and Shaver's (1992) application of Bowlby's attachment theory, we posit that God can function as a significant attachment figure, influencing an individual's emotional security, coping mechanisms, and overall wellbeing. Wellbeing is understood as a multidimensional construct, incorporating psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions, with spirituality increasingly recognized as a critical aspect of human flourishing (Ellison, 1983).

The study focuses on Indian Catholic adults, a population that has received limited attention in existing research on religious attachment and wellbeing. Most studies on attachment to God have been conducted in Western Christian contexts (Gannoway, 1996; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992; Ripley et al., 2001), and their findings may not fully capture how cultural and religious contexts shape attachment processes. India's religious diversity and the minority status of Catholics introduce unique dynamics that influence attachment to God. As Indian

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## **The Relationship Between Attachment to God and Psychological and Spiritual Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Shame and Guilt Among Indian Catholic Adults**

Catholics navigate cultural sensitivity while adhering to Eurocentric Catholic traditions, they often experience internal conflicts and external pressures (Sen, 2023). Additionally, increasing religious intolerance and attacks on Christian institutions in India create an environment of sociopolitical stress, making it essential to explore how attachment to God influences psychological and spiritual resilience in this community. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the interplay between culture, spirituality, and wellbeing in the Indian Catholic context.

### **God as an attachment figure**

The concept of God as an attachment figure suggests that individuals perceive and relate to God as a source of security, comfort, and love. Attachment to God refers to the extent to which individuals seek closeness to God, experience distress when feeling separated from Him, and view God as a secure base (Kirkpatrick, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). Research suggests that a strong attachment to God is linked to greater happiness, life satisfaction, and overall wellbeing (Knabb et al., 2023; Nezlek, 2022).

A secure attachment to God fosters confidence and resilience, as individuals perceive God as a warm, responsive, and protective figure. This bond, reinforced through prayer, religious rituals, and daily spiritual practices, provides solace during adversity and enhances emotional wellbeing (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Cassibba et al., 2008; Kirkpatrick, 1998). Securely attached believers feel worthy of God's care and maintain a hopeful outlook, even in difficult circumstances (Proctor et al., 2009).

However, insecure attachment patterns can create spiritual distress. Anxiously attached individuals struggle with fear of abandonment, seeking constant reassurance and worrying about divine rejection or punishment (Graham et al., 2009; Njus & Okerstrom, 2016). Avoidantly attached individuals, by contrast, maintain emotional distance, engage less in religious practices, and often perceive God as punitive or uninvolved (Ellison et al., 2012; Jordan et al., 2021). These insecure attachment styles have significant implications for psychological and spiritual wellbeing, affecting mental health, relational security, and religious engagement.

### **Attachment to God and wellbeing**

Attachment to God serves as an important relational framework that influences psychological and spiritual wellbeing, with early attachment experiences playing a crucial role in shaping this bond. Psychological wellbeing includes positive emotions, effective daily functioning, autonomy, meaningful relationships and meaning in life (Huppert, 2009). It is closely related to self-actualization (Ryff, 1989, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2008), personal achievement (Elosúa, 2015), and engagement in meaningful activities (Marrero-Quevedo et al., 2019).

Ryff (1989, 2014) proposed six dimensions of psychological wellbeing: purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships and self-acceptance. Various studies have examined factors that influence wellbeing, including ageing, generativity and ego integrity (Cheng, 2009), as well as family experiences and adult roles (Brim et al., 2005). Research has also highlighted the link between psychological wellbeing and spirituality (Bradshaw et al., 2022), particularly secure attachment to God, which is associated with lower depression and greater life satisfaction (Bradshaw & Kent, 2018; Leman et al., 2018).

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Spiritual wellbeing is a positive state that reflects healthy relationships with self, others, the transcendent and nature, and promotes joy, contentment, inner peace, meaning, identity and harmony in life (Gomez & Fisher, 2003; Hateley, 1985; Morris, 1996). The common understanding of spiritual wellbeing is that they are linked through a holistic understanding of the overall health and fulfilment of the individual. Therefore, we can derive a broader sense of spiritual wellbeing that includes religious, sociological, psychological and environmental factors. Specifically, spiritual well-being consists of the satisfaction or fulfilment that individuals derive from the quality of their relationship with God, satisfaction from religious practices, understanding of life experiences, beliefs about the future, and overall quality of life (Tudder et al., 2017). We therefore examine how attachment to God is associated with spiritual well-being among Indian Catholic adults.

### **Shame and guilt in the relationship between attachment to God and wellbeing**

Shame and guilt are two self-conscious emotions that play a significant role in moral and religious development. While some scholars treat shame and guilt interchangeably, others emphasize their distinct psychological effects. Because it is crucial to find a way to distinguish healthy self-conscious emotions from unhealthy ones, we adopt an approach that distinguishes shame from guilt.

Shame is a global negative evaluation of the self, often leading to self-condemnation, avoidance, and distress (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Fischer, 1995). It is a highly aversive emotional state, associated with powerlessness, inferiority, and fear of exposure (Lewis, 2008). Persistent shame can contribute to depression, social withdrawal, and spiritual alienation (Blum, 2008). In contrast, guilt is a negative evaluation of one's behavior, leading to remorse, accountability, and the desire for reparative action (Arnold, 1960b; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt is often considered a constructive moral emotion, as it encourages ethical behavior and personal growth (Baumeister et al., 1994; Gilbert & Andrews, 1998). While shame is linked to lower psychological wellbeing, guilt, when appropriately regulated, is associated with higher wellbeing (Orth et al., 2010).

The relationship between attachment to God and self-conscious emotions is particularly relevant in religious contexts. Anxiously attached individuals may experience heightened shame, interpreting personal failures as evidence of divine rejection (Varghese, 2015). Avoidantly attached individuals, on the other hand, tend to minimize guilt, as they may suppress moral emotions to maintain emotional distance (Akbağ & İMamoğlu, 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Given that Indian Catholicism emphasizes moral responsibility and personal accountability, these emotions may mediate the relationship between attachment to God and overall wellbeing.

### ***Purpose of the study***

This study aims to:

1. Examine the characteristics of attachment to God, shame, guilt, and wellbeing among Indian Catholic adults in relation to gender, age, and vocational status (seminarians, priests, women religious, and laity).
2. Analyze the direct relationship between attachment to God and psychological/spiritual wellbeing.
3. Investigate the mediating roles of shame and guilt in the relationship between attachment to God and wellbeing, clarifying their distinct effects on psychological and spiritual flourishing.

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By addressing these objectives, this study contributes to a culturally and religiously nuanced understanding of attachment to God, while offering insights for counseling, pastoral care, and religious formation programs tailored to Indian Catholic adults.

### METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study included 435 Indian Catholic adults between the ages of 18 and 59. The mean age was 31.59 years ( $SD = 10.70$ ), with 238 males (mean age = 30.22,  $SD = 9.46$ ) and 197 females (mean age = 33.24,  $SD = 11.87$ ). The sample represented diverse vocational backgrounds, including laypersons, seminarians, religious sisters, and clergy members.

Measures used in the study included the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI), the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWB), the Spiritual Wellbeing Scale (SWB), and the Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3). The AGI, developed by Beck and McDonald (2004), assesses anxiety and avoidance in one's attachment to God. It consists of 28 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger attachment anxiety or avoidance. The internal consistency for AGI was  $\alpha = .86$  for anxiety and  $\alpha = .79$  for avoidance in this study.

The Psychological Wellbeing Scale, originally designed by Ryff (1989), was used in its 42-item version. It assesses six dimensions of wellbeing: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The internal consistency for the overall PWB scale in this study was  $\alpha = .88$ .

The Spiritual Wellbeing Scale (SWB) was developed by Paolutzian and Ellison (1982) and consists of 20 items assessing religious and existential wellbeing. Responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater wellbeing. The internal consistency for the total SWB scale in this study was  $\alpha = .89$ , with subscale reliabilities of  $\alpha = .85$  for religious wellbeing and  $\alpha = .83$  for existential wellbeing.

The TOSCA-3 (Short Version), developed by Tangney et al. (2000), was used to measure shame and guilt. This scale consists of 16 scenarios depicting everyday situations, followed by response options rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The short version excludes pride-related subscales and five positive scenarios to enhance reliability. The internal consistency in this study was  $\alpha = .79$  for shame and  $\alpha = .76$  for guilt.

The study confirmed good internal consistency of all measures, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .70 to .89. The data demonstrated symmetrical distributions with acceptable skewness and kurtosis values. The values for asymmetry and kurtosis between -2 and +2 are considered acceptable in order to prove normal univariate distribution (George & Mallery, 2010).

This study utilized a cross-sectional correlation design and employed parallel multiple mediator models to examine the relationship between attachment to God (AG), psychological wellbeing (PWB), and spiritual wellbeing (SWB), with shame and guilt as mediators. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 25, and Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) was employed to perform the mediation path analysis.

## RESULTS

### Gender differences in attachment to God, shame, guilt, PWB, and SWB

An independent-samples *t*-test revealed significant gender differences in the avoidance dimension of attachment to God. Males ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) scored higher than females ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t(433) = 8.84$ ,  $p < .05$ , Cohen's  $d = .852$ . However, no gender difference was found in the anxious dimension of attachment to God. Significant gender differences were also observed in PWB and SWB. Males had lower PWB scores ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ) compared to females ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ),  $t(433) = -2.44$ ,  $p < .05$ , Cohen's  $d = .234$ . Similarly, males showed lower SWB ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) than females ( $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ),  $t(433) = -3.93$ ,  $p < .05$ , Cohen's  $d = .380$ . However, no significant gender differences were found in shame ( $t(433) = -.228$ ,  $p = .820$ , Cohen's  $d = .021$ ) or guilt ( $t(433) = -1.789$ ,  $p = .074$ , Cohen's  $d = .172$ ).

### Age differences in attachment to God, shame, guilt, PWB, and SWB

Participants were divided into four age groups: 18~28, 29~39, 40~49, and 50~59. A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences among age groups in several variables. Anxious attachment to God varied significantly by age,  $F(3,431) = 11.49$ ,  $p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .07$ . The youngest age group (18-28 years,  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) exhibited significantly higher anxiety in their attachment to God compared to the older groups (29-39 years:  $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ; 40-49 years:  $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ; 50-59 years:  $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .92$ ).

Shame also showed significant differences across age groups,  $F(3,431) = 6.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .04$ . The youngest group (18-28 years,  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .73$ ) reported higher shame compared to the oldest group (50-59 years,  $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = .72$ ). PWB significantly varied by age,  $F(3,431) = 21.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .12$ . The youngest group (18-28 years,  $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = .56$ ) had the lowest PWB compared to all older age groups (29-39 years:  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = .53$ ; 40-49 years:  $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = .53$ ; 50-59 years:  $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = .52$ ). SWB was also significantly different among age groups,  $F(3,431) = 19.31$ ,  $p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .12$ . The youngest group (18-28 years,  $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) had significantly lower SWB compared to the older groups (29-39 years:  $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = .68$ ; 40-49 years:  $M = 5.18$ ,  $SD = .66$ ; 50-59 years:  $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = .64$ ). No significant differences among age groups were found in the avoidant attachment to God ( $F(3,431) = 2.682$ ,  $p = .086$ ,  $\eta^2 = .018$ ) or guilt ( $F(3,431) = 1.39$ ,  $p = .247$ ).

### Variations between vocational states in attachment, shame, guilt, PWB, and SWB

The study categorized participants into six vocational states: lay males, lay females, male religious in formation, female religious in formation, male religious/priests, and female religious with perpetual vows. A one-way ANOVA indicated that the level of anxious attachment to God significantly differed among vocational states,  $F(5,429) = 4.143$ ,  $p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .046$ . Post-hoc analysis revealed that males in formation for priesthood and religious life ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) exhibited significantly higher levels of anxiety in their relationship with God compared to priests ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) and lay males ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). The level of avoidant attachment to God also differed significantly,  $F(5,429) = 17.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .168$ . Lay males ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), male religious in formation ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), and priests ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) exhibited higher levels of avoidance compared to both female religious in formation and perpetually professed female religious.

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Shame varied significantly among vocational states,  $F(5,429) = 5.605, p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .061$ . According to post-hoc test results, lay females showed higher levels of shame ( $M = 2.88, SD = 0.76$ ) compared to perpetually professed religious sisters ( $M = 2.34, SD = 0.80$ ), female religious in formation ( $M = 2.38, SD = 0.75$ ), and priests ( $M = 2.49, SD = 0.63$ ). Guilt also differed significantly,  $F(5,429) = 5.421, p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .059$ . Lay females demonstrated higher levels of guilt ( $M = 4.24, SD = 0.50$ ) compared to female religious in formation ( $M = 3.74, SD = 0.71$ ) and male religious in formation ( $M = 3.93, SD = 0.57$ ).

Differences in psychological well-being (PWB) were also significant,  $F(5,429) = 6.458, p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .070$ . Post-hoc analysis showed that perpetually professed sisters ( $M = 4.49, SD = 0.49$ ) and priests ( $M = 4.41, SD = 0.52$ ) exhibited higher levels of psychological wellbeing compared to lay males ( $M = 4.12, SD = 0.72$ ) and male religious in formation ( $M = 4.05, SD = 0.49$ ). Spiritual well-being (SWB) also showed significant differences,  $F(5,429) = 11.398, p < .001$ , with an effect size of  $\eta^2 = .117$ . According to post-hoc analysis, perpetually professed female religious demonstrated significantly higher levels of spiritual wellbeing ( $M = 5.31, SD = 0.52$ ) compared to male religious in formation ( $M = 4.62, SD = 0.71$ ), lay females ( $M = 4.83, SD = 0.80$ ), and lay males ( $M = 4.53, SD = 0.91$ ). Additionally, female religious in formation ( $M = 5.11, SD = 0.58$ ) and priests ( $M = 5.09, SD = 0.68$ ) exhibited higher levels of spiritual wellbeing compared to male religious in formation ( $M = 4.62, SD = 0.71$ ) and lay males ( $M = 4.53, SD = 0.91$ ).

### Mediation of shame and guilt between the anxiety and avoidant dimensions of attachment and PWB

The anxiety dimension of attachment to God (AGI ANX) significantly predicted shame ( $F(1, 433) = 129.69, p < .001, R^2 = .2305$ ), explaining 23.05% of variance in shame. It also significantly predicted guilt ( $F(1, 433) = 9.42, p = .002, R^2 = .0213$ ), accounting for 2.13% of variance in guilt. Together, AGI ANX, shame, and guilt explained 42.43% of variance in PWB ( $F(3, 433) = 105.89, p < .001, R^2 = .4243$ ). Mediation analysis confirmed that shame negatively impacted PWB ( $b = -.3335, SE = .0335, p < .001$ ), while guilt had a positive effect on PWB ( $b = .3438, SE = .0366, p < .001$ ). The direct effect of AGI ANX on PWB remained significant ( $b = -.1595, SE = .0211, p < .001$ ), indicating partial mediation by shame and guilt.

The total effect ( $c$  path) indicated that AGI ANX negatively influenced PWB ( $\beta = -0.2362, p < .001$ ). When shame and guilt were included as mediators, the direct effect ( $c'$  path) was reduced but remained significant ( $\beta = -0.1595, p < .001$ ), indicating partial mediation.

Mediation analysis revealed a significant positive effect of AGI ANX on shame ( $b = .3089, SE = .0271, p < .001$ ), and shame negatively affected PWB ( $b = -.3335, SE = .0335, p < .001$ ). The significant indirect effect ( $-.1030, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.1349, -.0754]$ ) confirms that heightened attachment anxiety lowers PWB through increased shame.

For guilt, AGI ANX had a significant positive association ( $b = .0763, SE = .0249, p = .002$ ), and guilt positively predicted PWB ( $b = .3438, SE = .0366, p < .001$ ). The significant indirect effect ( $.0262, 95\% \text{ CI } [.0094, .0443]$ ) suggests that guilt partially mediates the relationship between AGI ANX and PWB (the results are summarized in Tables 1 and 2).

The avoidant dimension of attachment to God (AGI AVD) significantly predicted shame ( $F(1, 433) = 15.649, p < .001, R^2 = .0350$ ) and weakly predicted guilt ( $F(1, 433) = 5.958, p =$

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.015,  $R^2 = .0136$ ). Together, AGI AVD, shame, and guilt explained 37.35% of the variance in PWB ( $F(3, 433) = 85.637, p < .001, R^2 = .3735$ ).

Shame was positively associated with AGI AVD ( $b = .1525, SE = .0385, p < .001$ ) and negatively influenced PWB ( $b = -.4207, SE = .0318, p < .001$ ). The indirect effect ( $-.0642, 95\% CI [-.0971, -.0334]$ ) indicates that avoidance-based attachment increases shame, which in turn reduces PWB. In contrast, guilt was negatively associated with AGI AVD ( $b = -.0772, SE = .0316, p = .015$ ), suggesting that higher avoidance predicts lower guilt. However, guilt positively predicted PWB ( $b = .3081, SE = .0387, p < .001$ ). The indirect effect ( $-.0238, 95\% CI [-.0456, -.0044]$ ) suggests that lower guilt in avoidantly attached individuals contributes to reduced PWB (Tables 3 and 4 show the regression coefficients for mediation and indirect effect of attachment avoidance on PWB, respectively).

**Table 1: Regression coefficients for mediation of attachment anxiety and PWB**

Path	Predictor	Outcome	Coeff.	SE	p
a1	AGI ANX	Shame	.3089	.0271	< .001
a2	AGI ANX	Guilt	.0763	.0249	.002
b1	Shame	PWB	-.3335	.0335	< .001
b2	Guilt	PWB	.3438	.0366	< .001
c'	AGI ANX	PWB	-.1595	.0211	< .001

**Table 2: Indirect effects of attachment anxiety on PWB**

Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI (LL, UL)	Mediation Type
ANX → Shame → PWB	-.1030	(-.1349, -.0754)	Partial
ANX → Guilt → PWB	.0262	(.0094, .0443)	Partial

**Table 3: Regression coefficients for mediation of attachment avoidance and PWB**

Path	Predictor	Outcome	Coeff.	SE	p
a1	AGI AVD	Shame	.1525	.0385	< .001
a2	AGI AVD	Guilt	-.0772	.0316	.015
b1	Shame	PWB	-.4207	.0318	< .001
b2	Guilt	PWB	.3081	.0387	< .001
c'	AGI AVD	PWB	-.1060	.0253	< .001

**Table 4: Indirect effects of attachment avoidance on PWB**

Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI (LL, UL)	Mediation Type
AVD → Shame → PWB	-.0642	(-.0971, -.0334)	Partial
AVD → Guilt → PWB	-.0238	(-.0456, -.0044)	Partial

These findings indicate that both attachment anxiety and avoidance negatively impact PWB. Shame serves as a key mediator, amplifying the negative effect of insecure attachment, while guilt appears to play a protective role in maintaining wellbeing.

**Mediation of shame and guilt between the anxiety and avoidant dimensions of attachment and SWB**

Attachment anxiety to God significantly predicted shame,  $F(1, 433) = 129.69, p < .001, R^2 = .2305$ , and guilt,  $F(1, 433) = 9.42, p = .002, R^2 = .0213$ . Together with shame and guilt,

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it explained 31.59% of SWB variance,  $F(3, 433) = 66.34, p < .001, R^2 = .3159$ . Mediation analysis showed attachment anxiety increased shame ( $b = .3089, SE = .0271, p < .001$ ), which in turn reducing SWB ( $b = -.4177, SE = .0475, p < .001$ ), resulting in a significant negative indirect effect ( $-.1290, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.1695, -.0935]$ ). Conversely, guilt was positively associated with SWB ( $b = .3952, SE = .0518, p < .001$ ), yielding a positive indirect effect ( $.0301, 95\% \text{ CI } [.0115, .0498]$ ).

Attachment avoidance to God significantly predicted shame,  $F(1, 433) = 15.65, p < .001, R^2 = .0350$ , and guilt,  $F(1, 433) = 5.96, p = .015, R^2 = .0136$ . Collectively, attachment avoidance, shame, and guilt explained 43.39% of SWB variance,  $F(3, 433) = 110.11, p < .001, R^2 = .4339$ .

Mediation analysis showed that attachment anxiety (ANX) partially influenced SWB through shame and guilt. The indirect effect via shame was negative ( $b = -0.1290, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.1695, -0.0935]$ ), while the effect via guilt was positive ( $b = 0.0301, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.0115, 0.0498]$ ). This suggests that shame mediates the negative impact of ANX on SWB, whereas guilt slightly offsets it. Both mediation effects were partial (a summary of the results can be found in Tables 5 and 6).

The avoidant dimension of attachment to God significantly predicted both shame ( $F(1, 433) = 15.649, p < .001, R^2 = .0350$ ) and guilt ( $F(1, 433) = 5.958, p = .015, R^2 = .0136$ ), with a small effect size for guilt. The combined effect of attachment avoidance, shame, and guilt explained 43.39% of the variance in SWB ( $F(3, 433) = 110.11, p < .001, R^2 = .4339$ ).

Mediating analysis revealed that shame was positively associated with attachment avoidance ( $b = .1525, SE = .0385, p < .001$ ) and negatively related to SWB ( $b = -.4281, SE = .0393, p < .001$ ), resulting in a significant negative indirect effect ( $-.0653, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.1018, -.0329]$ ). This suggests that higher avoidance leads to greater shame, which in turn may contribute to reduced SWB.

Guilt, however, showed a different pattern. It was negatively associated with attachment avoidance ( $b = -.0772, SE = .0316, p = .015$ ) but positively related to SWB ( $b = .3982, SE = .0478, p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of attachment avoidance on SWB through guilt was significant ( $-.0230, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.0469, -.0044]$ ), indicating that higher avoidance predicts lower guilt, which subsequently reduces SWB (Tables 7 and 8 summarize the regression coefficients for mediation and indirect effects of attachment avoidance on SWB, respectively).

**Table 5: Regression coefficients for mediation of attachment anxiety and SWB**

Path	Predictor	Outcome	Coeff.	SE	p
a1	AGI ANX	Shame	.3089	.0271	< .001
a2	AGI ANX	Guilt	.0763	.0249	.002
b1	Shame	SWB	-.4177	.0475	< .001
b2	Guilt	SWB	.3952	.0518	< .001
c'	AGI ANX	SWB	-.1452	.0299	< .001

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**Table 6: Indirect effects of attachment anxiety on SWB**

Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI (LL, UL)	Mediation Type
ANX → Shame → SWB	-.1290	(-.1695, -.0935)	Partial
ANX → Guilt → SWB	.0301	(.0115, .0498)	Partial

**Table 7: Regression coefficients for mediation of attachment avoidance and SWB**

Path	Predictor	Outcome	Coeff.	SE	p
a1	AGI AVD	Shame	.1525	.0385	< .001
a2	AGI AVD	Guilt	-.0772	.0316	.015
b1	Shame	SWB	-.4281	.0393	< .001
b2	Guilt	SWB	.3982	.0478	< .001
c'	AGI AVD	SWB	-.3395	.0312	< .001

**Table 8: Indirect effects of attachment avoidance on SWB**

Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI (LL, UL)	Mediation Type
AVD → Shame → SWB	-.0653	(-.1018, -.0329)	Partial
AVD → Guilt → SWB	-.0230	(-.0469, -.0044)	Partial

These results indicate that both attachment anxiety and avoidance negatively impact SWB. Shame plays a key mediating role, amplifying the negative effects of insecure attachment on spiritual wellbeing. Guilt, however, exhibits a more complex role. Guilt partially mediated the effects of attachment anxiety and avoidance on SWB, acting as a positive mediator for anxiety and a negative mediator for avoidance.

## DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this research was to examine how two dimensions of attachment to God—*anxious* and *avoidant* attachment—affect psychological and spiritual wellbeing, particularly through the mediating roles of shame and guilt. The findings indicate that these relationships are influenced by gender, age, and vocational states, reflecting the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and psychological factors unique to the Indian Catholic context. This section presents the findings of the three primary objectives, integrating them with relevant theoretical frameworks and prior research to deepen the understanding of religious attachment processes within this cultural and religious context.

**Gender Differences.** The findings showed no significant gender difference in attachment anxiety to God among Indian Catholic adults, contrasting with Western research that found higher anxiety among women (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Noller, 1996; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994) and with South Korean findings showing higher anxiety among female Catholics (Hwang, 2022). This absence of gender difference may stem from Indian Catholics' shared religious experiences, such as family prayers and community worship, which foster a common sense of relational security with God across genders (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Chelladurai et al., 2018).

However, Indian Catholic men showed significantly higher avoidant attachment to God than women, aligning with Hwang's (2022) study in South Korea. This reflects the influence of masculine social roles, which emphasize emotional restraint and self-reliance (Plant et al., 2000), discouraging emotional openness even in spiritual life. Further, the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church may reinforce a distant, authoritarian image of God for

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men, while women, socialized to value emotional closeness, may develop a more nurturing relationship with God (Pargament, 2001). In summary, gender differences among Indian Catholics appear more pronounced in attachment avoidance than in attachment anxiety, shaped by cultural norms, religious practices, and gender role expectations.

Contrary to Western findings (Lewis, 1971, 1978; Lutwak et al., 2001; Tangney et al., 1996), no significant gender differences in shame or guilt were found among Indian Catholic adults. In the Indian context, where religious and moral education are equally emphasized for both genders from a young age, this equal exposure may contribute to similar shame and guilt proneness (Khambaty & Parikh, 2017). Moreover, Indian cultural expectations around preserving family honor apply to both men and women, further reducing gender-based emotional differences (Bajaj & Kaur, 2018).

Indian Catholic women demonstrated higher psychological and spiritual wellbeing than men. This is consistent with global studies (Božek et al., 2020; Matud et al., 2022) showing women's higher religiosity and stronger interpersonal bonds contribute to enhanced wellbeing. Indian Catholic women's central role in religious transmission within families—leading family prayer and encouraging religious participation—may foster stronger spiritual identity, positively impacting wellbeing (Jensen, 2019).

In contrast, Indian Catholic men's lower wellbeing can be linked to work-related stress, social expectations to be family providers, and lower religious participation (Gopalkrishnan, 2018). Traditional male roles discourage emotional expression and help-seeking behavior, contributing to poorer mental health outcomes (Mitra, 2020).

**Age Differences.** Young Indian Catholics (aged 18-28) exhibited higher attachment anxiety compared to older age groups. This is consistent with developmental patterns identified in both Western and Asian contexts, where younger adults report greater spiritual uncertainty (Hwang, 2022; Rigon, 2022). In the Indian context, young adults' religious identity is often shaped by parental expectations and social pressure, rather than internal conviction (Sahgal et al., 2021). This externally motivated religiosity may foster greater anxiety, as these individuals struggle to establish a personally meaningful relationship with God.

Among religious young adults, particularly seminarians and religious in formation, discernment stress contributes to attachment anxiety (McCormack, 2020). These individuals are not only navigating vocational uncertainty but are also subject to external evaluations by religious superiors, heightening performance-based anxiety (Oakley, 2017).

Younger participants also reported higher levels of shame, while no significant age differences were found for guilt. This reflects developmental trends identified by Orth et al. (2010), who found that shame declines with age, while guilt remains more stable. Younger adults' greater sensitivity to peer evaluation and greater concern about societal judgment contribute to heightened shame (Stuewig et al., 2015). In contrast, mature adults are better equipped with adaptive coping strategies and a stable religious identity, protecting them from excessive shame (Compas et al., 2014).

Psychological and spiritual wellbeing were lowest among younger adults and highest among middle-aged and older adults. This aligns with Ryff (1995) finding that wellbeing increases with age, as older adults tend to resolve identity conflicts and achieve greater existential

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clarity. Younger Indian Catholics' spiritual struggles, combined with identity uncertainty and external religious pressure, contribute to their lower wellbeing (Jafari et al., 2010; Leung & Pong, 2021).

**Vocational States.** Significant differences in attachment dimensions were found across vocational states. Religious men in formation (seminarians) showed higher attachment anxiety compared to priests and lay males, likely due to vocational discernment stress (De Gregorio et al., 2022). Lay males showed higher attachment avoidance compared to the religious and priests, reflecting lower religious commitment and a tendency to distance themselves emotionally from God (Cassibba et al., 2008).

Religious individuals—especially women with perpetual profession—reported higher psychological and spiritual wellbeing than lay participants. This is consistent with findings from the Philippines (del Castillo et al., 2020), The supportive communal life of religious sisters and priests, combined with structured spiritual guidance, fosters greater resilience and wellbeing in comparison to laypersons, who often lack such resources (Rajagopalreddy & Varghese, 2020). In contrast, seminarians reported lower wellbeing, which tend to be associated with heightened vocational anxiety, fear of failure, and uncertainty about future religious commitment (Mannath, 2009).

Overall, the results underscore that Indian Catholics' attachment to God, self-conscious emotions, and wellbeing are strongly shaped by gender, age, and vocational states—but these effects cannot be fully understood without considering the unique cultural and religious context of Indian Catholicism. Indian Catholics' collectivistic orientation, strong family-centered religious transmission, and religious minority status foster a unique interplay between attachment, shame, guilt, and wellbeing (Chelladurai et al., 2018). This study highlights the importance of cultural context in shaping religious attachment and emotional experiences, while offering important insights for both clinical practice and pastoral care tailored to Indian Catholics.

### **Relationship Between Attachment to God and Wellbeing.**

This study found that higher levels of anxious and avoidant attachment to God were associated with lower psychological and spiritual wellbeing among Indian Catholic adults. This pattern aligns with prior research demonstrating that insecure attachment to God is linked to diminished psychological health and spiritual flourishing hypothesis (Hall et al., 2009; Sandage et al., 2015). For example, Hall et al. (2009) found that Christian undergraduate students with anxious and avoidant attachment to God reported lower PWB, while Sandage et al. (2015) observed that graduate students in helping professions with insecure attachment to God experienced lower wellbeing. Beyond psychological outcomes, insecure attachment to God has also been associated with distress, neuroticism, interpersonal difficulties, and lower self-control (Bradshaw et al., 2010, 2022; Jordan et al., 2021), as well as loneliness and depression (Kirkpatrick et al., 1999).

The present findings align with attachment theory as applied to religious contexts (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). Individuals with anxious attachment to God tend to perceive God as inconsistent and unreliable, resulting in chronic worry and difficulty trusting God's responsiveness (Proctor et al., 2009; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002). This persistent relational insecurity contributes to lower wellbeing by fostering emotional dysregulation, heightened stress, and negative self-evaluations (Byrd & Boe, 2001). Avoidantly attached individuals,

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by contrast, tend to perceive God as distant and uninvolved, which may foster alienation, loneliness, and spiritual emptiness (Ellison et al., 2012; Jordan et al., 2021). Both dimensions of insecure attachment ultimately weaken PWB and SWB by disrupting a stable and supportive relationship with the divine.

### **Mediation of shame between attachment to God and wellbeing**

This study found that shame mediates the relationship between attachment to God and PWB and SWB, with both anxious and avoidant attachment positively linked to shame, which in turn diminished well-being. This finding echoes earlier work by Gross and Hansen (2000), who found that insecure attachment styles (preoccupied and fearful) were associated with greater proneness to shame among college students. Previous research has also found that religious individuals with insecure attachment to God tend to perceive God as punitive, harsh, and inconsistent (Proctor et al., 2009; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002), contributing to heightened shame when they perceive themselves as falling short of religious or moral expectations. In religious contexts, individuals with anxious attachment to God may interpret personal failures as evidence of their fundamental unworthiness in God's eyes, thereby exacerbating feelings of shame (Varghese, 2015). This dynamic is particularly relevant to Indian Catholic adults, whose religious worldview often emphasizes moral evaluation and divine judgment.

The connection between shame and divine attachment may stem from parental attachment. Reinert (2005) found that avoidant attachment to parents—especially mothers—strongly predicted both internalized shame and insecure attachment to God among Catholic seminarians. This highlights the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns and their emotional impact. In line with Lewis's (1971) theory of self-conscious emotions, insecure attachment fosters persistent fears of rejection, inadequacy, and moral failure, leading to pervasive shame (Muris & Meesters, 2014). Overall, the current study supports the interpretation that shame serves as a psychological bridge between attachment insecurity and reduced wellbeing. For Indian Catholic adults, shame appears to be amplified by religious interpretations that frame personal failings as evidence of moral or spiritual deficiency (see Jensen, 2019, Sen, 2023). This heightened shame, in turn, undermines both psychological and spiritual wellbeing.

### **Mediation of guilt between attachment to God and wellbeing**

This study found that guilt mediates the relationship between attachment to God and psychological and spiritual well-being, but the pattern varies by attachment dimension. Anxious attachment to God was positively linked to guilt, which in turn enhanced well-being. In contrast, avoidant attachment to God was negatively associated with guilt, yet guilt still positively predicted well-being. This distinction between shame and guilt is crucial. While shame reflects a global sense of being fundamentally defective, guilt reflects awareness of having violated specific standards or values (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Healthy guilt can promote psychological and spiritual growth by motivating reparative action, fostering empathy, and encouraging prosocial behavior (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney et al., 1992). Among Indian Catholic adults, guilt appears to function as a moral compass, stimulating introspection, accountability, and spiritual development (Schalkwijk et al., 2016), aligning with prior research showing that guilt can foster constructive moral action and relational repair (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014).

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In the anxious dimension of attachment to God, guilt may reflect heightened moral sensitivity and a desire to reestablish relational closeness with God. In this context, guilt can be interpreted as a call to spiritual growth, leading to greater engagement in religious practices, moral reflection, and acts of compassion (Davis, 2020). This interpretation is consistent with the Catholic emphasis on confession, penance, and reconciliation, where guilt serves as a catalyst for personal transformation and restored communion with God (Lacey & Pickard, 2015).

In contrast, greater avoidance in attachment to God is associated with lower levels of guilt, likely due to a tendency to suppress attachment-related distress and minimize emotional dependence on God (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This defensive distancing inhibits the moral introspection and relational repair processes typically facilitated by guilt (Akbağ & İmamoğlu, 2010; Consedine & Magai, 2003). Avoidantly attached individuals' reduced capacity for guilt may contribute to impaired spiritual and psychological adjustment by limiting opportunities for growth, reconciliation, and compassionate engagement with others (Varghese, 2015).

Ultimately, these patterns suggest that while guilt can serve a constructive role in spiritual and moral development, its diminished presence in avoidantly attached individuals may hinder both personal flourishing and religious growth.

### ***Implications of the study***

The study emphasizes the importance of distinguishing shame from guilt in clinical and pastoral practice. Healthy guilt, framed within divine mercy and reconciliation, can foster personal growth and spiritual deepening, while shame, particularly when rooted in insecure attachment to God, leads to self-condemnation, spiritual alienation, and reduced wellbeing (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Baumeister et al., 1994; Lewis, 1971; Proctor et al., 2009). This finding challenges the stereotype of Catholic guilt as inherently harmful and highlights the need for theological reflection and psychoeducation to help believers differentiate constructive guilt from toxic shame (Lacey & Pickard, 2015).

For seminarians and religious in formation, the findings underscore the importance of addressing attachment dynamics within formation programs. Elevated attachment anxiety among these groups reflects the vulnerabilities of early stages of vocational discernment, where moral expectations and evaluative scrutiny heighten insecurity (De Gregorio et al., 2022; Mendonca et al., 2007). Formation should focus not only on religious knowledge and conduct, but also on fostering secure attachment to God by encouraging emotional honesty in prayer, reshaping punitive God images, and nurturing peer attachment support within the formation community (Cassibba et al., 2008; Hwang, 2022; Rajagopalreddy & Varghese, 2020).

Gendered spiritual experiences call for more tailored pastoral approaches. Indian Catholic men, shaped by traditional masculine norms that value rationality and emotional restraint, are more prone to avoidant attachment to God, whereas women, often faith transmitters within families, experience greater relational closeness with God and higher wellbeing (Plant et al., 2000; Pargament, 2001; Chelladurai et al., 2018; Matud et al., 2022; Božek et al., 2020). These gender differences, along with higher anxiety and shame among younger adults, suggest the need for age-appropriate and gender-sensitive spiritual guidance that

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fosters secure and personally meaningful attachment to God (Orth et al., 2010; Stuewig et al., 2015; Vermeer, 2014).

Finally, this study underscores the need for culturally sensitive counseling and pastoral care for Indian Catholic adults, whose religious identity integrates faith, family, and community within a collectivistic framework (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Chelladurai et al., 2018). Counselors and religious leaders should recognize that attachment to God is not just personal, but also socially and culturally constructed, shaped by family expectations, communal rituals, and social judgment (Bajaj & Kaur, 2018). Effective pastoral care should reframe God attachment from a performance-based relationship to one grounded in secure attachment, divine mercy, and relational safety (Pargament, 2001; Proctor et al., 2009).

### ***Limitations of the study***

Despite the valuable insights this study offers, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited to Indian Catholic adults from specific cultural and religious contexts, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. India's vast cultural and linguistic diversity, even within the Catholic population, means that attachment to God, experiences of shame and guilt, and their effects on wellbeing may differ across regions and subgroups (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Furthermore, these findings cannot be extended to individuals from other religious traditions, whose beliefs about God and religious practices may shape attachment and self-conscious emotions in fundamentally different ways (Granqvist et al., 2007; Koenig et al., 2012). The sample size also poses a limitation, particularly due to the lower number of lay participants compared to priests, seminarians, and religious women. This imbalance may have influenced the gender and vocational analyses, limiting the ability to draw firm conclusions about lay Catholics' experiences.

In addition, the exclusive reliance on quantitative methods—while useful for identifying statistical relationships—limits the depth of understanding that qualitative methods could have provided. In-depth interviews, for example, might have captured the personal, relational, and culturally nuanced aspects of attachment to God and religious shame and guilt, especially in a collectivistic culture where religious identity is closely tied to family and community (Rahman, 2016). Another methodological limitation relates to the use of standardized measures developed largely in Western contexts. Although these tools have strong psychometric properties, some items—especially those assessing shame and guilt—may not fully reflect how these emotions are experienced or expressed within Indian cultural and religious frameworks (Bagozzi et al., 2003; Mesquita & Frijda, 1992; Wong & Tsai, 2007). Developing culturally sensitive measures tailored to the Indian Catholic context would enhance future research. Taken together, these limitations point to the need for future studies with broader, more diverse samples, mixed-method designs, and culturally adapted instruments to deepen understanding of how attachment to God, self-conscious emotions, and wellbeing interact in religiously and culturally diverse populations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how anxious and avoidant attachment to God influence psychological and spiritual wellbeing among Indian Catholic adults, with particular focus on the mediating roles of shame and guilt. The results demonstrated that attachment insecurity to God—whether through anxiety or avoidance—was linked to lower wellbeing, with shame amplifying this negative effect. Guilt, however, when experienced in a constructive, relational context, was associated with personal growth and spiritual deepening.

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The findings also revealed that gender, age, and vocational states significantly shape these dynamics. Indian Catholic men showed higher attachment avoidance, likely influenced by traditional masculine norms and authoritarian religious images, while women experienced greater relational closeness to God and higher wellbeing. Younger adults, especially seminarians and those in formation, exhibited higher attachment anxiety and shame, underscoring the vulnerabilities linked to vocational discernment and externally driven religiosity.

Overall, this study highlights how attachment to God is culturally embedded, shaped by family-centered religious practices, gender roles, and vocational identity within Indian Catholicism. By integrating cultural, religious, and psychological dimensions, the findings offer valuable insights for counseling, pastoral care, and formation programs, emphasizing the need for culturally attuned, emotionally supportive approaches to nurturing secure attachment to God and healthy self-conscious emotions.

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