Adherence to Religion as a Solution for Fear of Death

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Author Note

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Abstract

This paper examines the connection between one’s fear of death and one’s adherence and devotion to religion. The question being asked and analyzed in this paper is what role religion plays once mortality salience (MS) is experienced. The work of Ernest Becker (1973) and researchers Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (1986) regarding the Terror Management Theory (TMT) are combined to establish the impact death has on individuals and its potential to motivate human behavior and choices. Additionally, five religions are reviewed in order to gain an understanding of the tenets and beliefs being taught about death. This paper further examines the possibility that religions may be providing a sense of hope or false hope to adherents rather than factual solutions for the fear and anxiety associated with death. Finally, the articles and books studied and reviewed for this paper seem to indicate a direct relationship between one’s participation in a religion and one’s level of fear associated with death.

Keywords: Terror Management Theory, Mortality Salience
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Mortality salience is experienced by everyone – at different times, in various settings, and with an array of emotions. As with all fear, the immediate desire is to quench the emotion and the sudden onslaught of fear-generated thoughts and the images that accompany them. The initial and perhaps the fastest method we implement to eliminate this fear is a brief mental survey of one’s current situation and circumstances to conclude there is no evidence for a present threat of fatality. But that is a momentary resolve to a persistent and ever-present reality. On a grander and more permanent scale, one may pursue solutions that appear more appealing and capable of holding the numbing fear of death at bay until such time as the end is unavoidable. Quite often these solutions may be sought after and applied to one’s life unconsciously, having totally different conscious motives. After reviewing various religions and their beliefs regarding death, it seems religion is one such solution. It is possible that many who adhere to a religion were initially unconsciously motivated to do so in order to alleviate or lessen the sting associated with their fear of death.

According to the United Nations Population Division, the world population in 2010 was approximately 6,895,889,000 (United Nations Population Division, 2011). After omitting atheist and agnostics, The World Christian Database totals worldwide religious adherents at 6,082,292,960 (World Christian Database, n.d.). The significance of these figures is to demonstrate that of nearly seven billion individuals worldwide only about 12% have not adopted a particular religion. What these figures suggest is that a religion of some kind is accepted by
almost everyone on the planet. This is an incredible recognition considering devotion to and participation in a religion is a choice. What is so luring or attractive about religion that 88% of the world’s population embraces one? Initially, many might say it is the desire one has to get closer to God or a higher power. However, there are religions that do not promote a belief in a God being. Another idea may be the need for structure, morals, and behavioral boundaries that are established by many religions. However, such behavioral guidelines are often set forth in religions in order to satisfy the demands of something else within the religion. For example, Buddhism teaches that it is your actions in this life that will determine the karma one brings upon oneself in the rebirth of one’s next life. A third consideration for why individuals accept some form of religion might be fear. At first, it seems inconceivable to imagine one choosing a religion and adhering to its beliefs because of fear. After all, we observe many religious devotees performing their traditions and rituals such as praying, singing, making pilgrimages, gathering socially, reading sacred texts, and celebrating various holidays or holy days. On the surface, it is hard to imagine that any of these behaviors could be grounded or motivated by fear. But fear of what? Possibly a fear of God, perhaps a fear of Satan or hell, maybe a fear of ridicule from family or friends if one does not hold securely their same beliefs. But there is another fear, however, that would seem to coincide with the staggering number of religious adherents in correlation to the world population. This fear is the fear of one’s death. As Becker (1973) explains, “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else…” (p. XVII). Regardless of any other fears one might possess, every human, has some fear about death
and it is highly conceivable that this fear is motivating vast numbers of people to accept and follow a particular religion.

For the most part, we have all encountered death in some form or fashion. We have relatives, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and strangers who have died or who know someone else who has died. We are confronted with many deaths everyday simply by watching the evening news. We see a bug, fly, spider, or any other creature we considered a nuisance and immediately set out to kill it. A loud siren coming up behind us while we are driving, reminds us of death. Out of respect, we merge our automobiles over to the side of the road allowing a funeral to pass and continue heading toward one of thousands of cemeteries throughout the world. We are inundated with commercials and other advertisements telling us how we need to think about and maintain our health so as to prevent and ward off death. While “personality structure, socioeconomic class, and the situational context are among the types of variables that influence our interpretation of stimuli as being death-related,” (Kastenbaum & Aisenberg (Eds.), 1972, p. 44) every message or image still contributes to our fear of death.

Mortality salience, (MS) the awareness of our own death, is where the fear begins. This awareness is not a fleeting thought or cognitively identifying the fact that you are going to die. Mortality salience requires an all-encompassing mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual recognition of the very realness of one’s death.

Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) illustrate the typical response to mortality salience:

“I will die” thus implies self-awareness, logical thought operations, conceptions of probability, necessity and causation, of personal and physical time, of finality and
separation. It also seems to require the bridging of a tremendous gap: from what I have experienced of life to the formulation of a death concept. Death, however, essentially is a non-experience. I have not been dead (the state). I have not experienced death (the process of life coming to a final halt). The very mental operations I use in my efforts to fathom death falsify as they proceed. The mind’s own modus operandi equips it for interpreting life or life-like processes better than the alien void. Perhaps now and then I permit myself to believe that I have actually perceived or formed a concept of death. Closer to the truth, however, is the realization that I have simply observed my mind as it scurries about in the dark. (p. 9)

Awareness demands a response, even if that response has the appearance of no response. When we experience mortality salience our most obvious response happens. Sometimes instantaneously, without any conscious recognition, our emotions take over and in the blink of an eye, we become afraid.

Choron has broken down the fear of death into three different areas: fearing what comes after death, fearing the “event” of dying or “ceasing to be” (p. 73-83). Fearing what comes after death “seems to have psychological roots in an apparent difficulty in visualizing the cessation of being alive and in the consequent notion of “witnessing” one’s death and the decay and decomposition of one’s own body” (Choron, 1964, p. 73). Fearing the “event” of dying has a self-explanatory understanding in that it is the fear one has for the “process of dying” (Choron, 1964, p. 76) The final fear of “ceasing to be” is what Choron referred to as “extinction”
Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1971) also liken the “ceasing to be” to extinction and describe it this way:

It is difficult to feel, think, or speak of our potential nonexistence. How can we feel ourselves into a state of “nothingness?” How can we truly “see ourselves dead” when the implicit “we” hovers about as the depository of perception and experience? Death in the sense of not-being or being-not has a way of undercutting our mental and emotional processes. The other feelings are fears about death. Fear of death is a term that we will reserve for the prospect of extinction. (pp. 44-45)

It is this extinction, the ultimate annihilation of your being that sends the mind and emotions spiraling into an often unconscious, panic-driven frenzy to stop or postpone what tragically cannot be stopped. The cold reality is death cannot be stopped. Cultural Anthropologist Ernest Becker closely examined the fear of death and associated the word “terror” with this fear stating it conveyed “how all-consuming it is when we look it full in the face” (Becker, 1973). The death research conducted by Becker laid the foundation for a future theory proposed by Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (1986) and properly labeled Terror Management Theory or TMT. The Terror Management Theory presents a “mortality salience (MS) hypothesis, which proposes that if certain structures (e.g., worldviews) provide protection from the psychological consequences of death awareness, then heightening the awareness of death (i.e., mortality salience) will, in turn, increase investment in these structures” (Routledge et al., 2010, p. 898). This theory suggests that the terror one feels with MS creates a high level of anxiety that one needs to buffer. The buffering is done by maintaining one’s cultural worldview and/or high or
increased self-esteem (Greenberg, J., Psyzcynski, T., & Solomon, S., 1986). “Basically, “…in order to avoid feelings of terror, individuals must believe they are good (i.e., valuable); therefore, individuals need self-esteem to function with minimal anxiety” (Greenberg et al., 1986). These researchers, along with Godenberg, Kluck and Cornwell (2001) further explain the theory:

Terror management theory and research provides support for the proposition that humans employ a symbolic solution to cope with anxiety associated with the awareness of death. By clinging to sources of self-esteem or one’s cultural (political, social, or religious) worldview, human beings can begin to escape their existential burden. (p. 428)

Many fears that we experience in life do have solutions. A reckless driver swerves into our lane and we react quickly by maneuvering our vehicles out of the way; as if by instinct we avert an accident. Our bodies develop aches and pains causing us to become nervous and fearful about our health. But a timely visit to the doctor, combined with medicinal assistance, often settles or eliminates our thoughts and worry. We sit at home and without warning our electricity flashes off. Before we even determine the cause, we securely locate candles and flashlights to restore our visibility and remove the threat of the darkness. But when we reflect on the fact that we are a dying creature we are not able to conjure up a quick fix or instinctively begin self-protection. Rather, in the initial moment following mortality salience we find ourselves empty handed, mentally searching for what could possibly change this dreadful outcome of our life. Sadly, there is no solution one can implement that will change the event of death. “Just as one knows one’s name…one also knows that death is…inescapable even when one can assure oneself that one is not overly vulnerable…and that death is therefore a problem lying somewhere
in the distant future” (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon & Breus, 1994, p. 636). Clearly we can choose to do or refrain from certain actions that will delay death, but certainly nothing will stop death from swallowing up our short earthly existence.

Becker (1973) contends that due to the severity of the impact “terror” has on the emotions, we resort to the defense mechanism of repression (p. 15). We attempt to vanquish the fear by repressing it, but, as Becker (1973) points out, “its disappearance doesn’t mean that the fear was never there….repression is a real phenomenon” (p. 20). Although we have tucked away in the portals of our unconscious the awareness of our death and the petrifying fear that accompanies it, does not mean that we are void of the knowledge and will not unconsciously seek a way to feel better. For a high percentage of the population, the remedy for feeling better comes in the form of one’s beliefs about death. And for many, these beliefs are generated from and supported by one’s religion. Religion allows its followers the opportunity to wipe the sweat from their perspiring brow and breathe a sigh of relief. By submitting to various interpretations and understandings regarding the meaning of death, dying, and the afterlife, one’s heart and mind receive structure and thereby become lullabied by the possibility of purpose. “From the perspective of TMT, a structured understanding of the world and one’s life provides an important source of meaning that functions to assuage mortality concerns” (Vess, Landau, Routledge, & Arndt, 2009, p. 728). When religious individuals are taught that death can be a heroic act as in some fundamental extremism, or, perhaps, a passage into a perfect, heavenly existence or even a natural process with the potential for a rewarding world to come, then death has been embellished with structure and purpose. A study conducted by Feifel and Branscomb (1973)
concluded that when participants were asked to answer the question “Are you afraid of your own death?” followed by “Why?” 71% answered no reasoning that “it’s inevitable or “it’s God’s will and he’ll take care of me” (p. 282). The test “indicated that subjects reporting nonfear of death because “it’s God’s will” rated themselves as significantly more religious than those in the other no and yes categories” (Feifel & Branscomb, 1973, p. 282).

Additional research has also concluded that there is a relationship between religion and mortality salience. Jonas & Fischer (2006) conducted three studies validating their prediction “that intrinsic religiousness provides effective protection from mortality concerns and that the affirmation of intrinsic [as opposed to extrinsic] religious beliefs prevents worldview defense” (Jonas E. & Fischer, P., 2006, p. 556). Likewise, Ya-Hui Wen (2010) studied one hundred sixty-five church participants concluding that “a positive relationship exists between intrinsic religious motivation, frequency of attendance at religious services or meetings and strength of belief” (p. 36). An abundance of research has proven that religion does impact one’s fear of death and by reviewing the basic death beliefs of five different religions, we can begin to understand what devotees are being taught regarding death; we can begin to recognize how one’s fear of death is offset by one’s religious beliefs.

Christianity is considered the largest religion in the world. In 2010, Christianity constituted almost 33% of all religious adherents in the world (World Christian Database, n.d.). One of the most significant tenets proclaimed by Christianity is salvation. When a Christian dies a separation of the soul/spirit from the body is believed to take place. The body of one’s soul ceases and decays. In fact, the body is considered rather insignificant to Christian followers as it
is the part of man that houses his sinful nature. The important part of the human being is the soul. Upon death, Christians hold the belief that there are two possible destinations for the soul – heaven or hell. The determination for where the soul will go after death is actually something that can be known prior to dying. This can be done through the process referred to as salvation. Salvation occurs when an individual believes that Jesus Christ died on the cross to make an atonement for one’s sins, forgiveness is then sought for those sins, and Jesus is asked in prayer to come dwell in the heart of the individual. Salvation is considered the necessary requirement for entering heaven, God’s domain. If during one’s lifetime salvation was not chosen, that individual will unfortunately be bound for hell, the domain of Satan. Of all the principles and practices upheld in the Christian faith, the saving of one’s soul from going to hell after one dies, is the primary theme of this religious system. It is only after one has gone through the process of salvation that a relationship with God can begin and develop. Considering the order of events, it seems plausible that the desire of the initial motivation for one to become a Christian is first to implement a resolution for death, thereby alleviating or disguising one’s fear. The connection to or relationship with God appears to be more of a bonus than an initial motivator.

The second largest religion in the world is Islam (World Christian Database, n.d.). While the Islamic religion has different tenets than Christianity, there is much similarity as it relates to death. The Muslims also believe the soul will part from the body at death. The body will end in decay but the soul will maintain an eternal existence in one of two places – Paradise or Hell. What determines the soul’s final destination are the good works and obedience to Islamic beliefs one upheld in this life prior to dying. As Smith (1998) explains:
“Muslim children are taught from an early age that life on this earth has no purpose if it is not to prepare oneself specifically for life in the next and that to live ethically in recognition of God’s oneness is virtually to assure a felicitous hereafter in the gardens of paradise.” (p. 134)

It is clear that death is as integral a part of Islam as it is in Christianity. The motivating force in this life actually stems from a life yet to be lived. Both Christianity and Islam provide their believers with a solution for the fear surrounding death.

Hinduism finds its ranking at number three of the world’s largest religions (World Christian Database, n.d.). Again, we find a similarity between the aforementioned religions and Hinduism. Hindus equally believe that the body will die but the soul will continue after death. However, the Hindu takes a very different approach with respect to the soul. They believe the soul is reincarnated into another physical body and that this may happen more than once. “The seemingly endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, to which, in the Hindu view, we are all subject, is known as the wheel of samsara (“going-through”) – the wheel of rebirth” (Pearson, 1998, p. 114). One’s soul reincarnating is dictated by the “law of karma or the law of cause and effect…” (Pearson, 1998, p. 114). One’s actions in one’s life will determine the condition of the next. Death is merely a transitioning time when the soul moves from one physical body to another. Much like the Hindu, the Buddhist also believe in a cycle of rebirth after dying. Again in this process, the soul or qualities of the soul will reenter another physical body and the good or bad circumstances of the future life will be determined by the karma from the previous one.

These two belief systems have some variations, but ultimately, the goal of the Hindu is to be
released from the rebirth cycle and unite with Brahman. The Buddhist also has the ultimate goal of release from the reincarnation cycle arriving at “a state known as parinirvana…[where] he never again takes rebirth” (Klein, A., 1998, p. 48).

A final religion that should be mentioned is Judaism. This religious system is not one of the largest, but it is among the oldest religions still being practiced today. To the Jewish believer, death is a natural process of living. We live and we die. For the most part, specific beliefs concerning the afterlife of a Jew are still debated today. Some followers contend that there is a world to come where one will be rewarded for the good deeds and Godly actions one performed during their lifetime. But the primary focus of the Jewish believer is on *this* life rather than any other existence after this life. “The idea of subordinating life’s opportunities, responsibilities or challenges to some greater possibilities in the world to come is alien to Judaism. Judaism can thus be characterized as a religion of this world…” (Ponn, A., 1998, p. 145).

In addition to today’s organized religions, a look at the rituals of the primitive man reminds us that a way to ease the fear of death has always been in demand. As Becker (1975) explains, the primitive man believed one could “take the spirit-power that resided in the scalp of an enemy…[and] transfer that life from its former owner to the new one…. [In this way] death was considered the final promotion of the soul to a state of superhuman power and indefinite durability” (p. 7).

By observing unbiasedly the primary tenets of various religions we can clearly see the degree of emphasis that is placed on death. “Grappling with the meaning of death and reaching
some resolution is a central theme in practically all philosophic and religious systems” (Feifel & Branscomb, 1973, p. 287). Is it this focus on death that makes religions so attractive and desirable to individuals? Why is it difficult for humans to conclude that our fate is the same as all other living creatures that will eventually die? Aside from the relatively limited information we have learned about near-death experiences, it is still a fact that no one has died, spent a lengthy period of time in the afterlife and returned to give us details about an existence beyond the grave. Even with near-death experiences there is so much inconsistency between the reports and stories that concluding any particular religious belief as “the right one” is not possible. In the absence of afterlife facts, we seem left to our own devices, our own imagined or taught conclusions about what happens after death. If we do not have facts about the afterlife, then it seems logical to conclude that our beliefs about the afterlife are being created from the facts we do have, which are those we accumulate while living. These would be that death is the unstoppable, inevitable, and unpredictable end of a being’s life. Recognizing these facts creates the terror of death that in turn drives one to identify and cling to something that will soothe and stop the hurt and fear. Religion has been successful at placating this pain. Even if one particular religion or pieces of each religion hold some truth about death and the afterlife, they have remained unverifiable. Without verified facts, one must question what is religion actually providing its followers keeping them faithful and devoted. Perhaps what is being offered is hope, the hope that death is not final – that death is not one’s extinction. With this hope in place the roaring fear of death is silenced or has the appearance of such. Scioli, Ricci, Nyugen and Scioli (2011) elaborate on the prevalence and power of hope:
Hope has been hailed by thinkers of every age from Aristotle to Marcel. It has been endorsed by the spiritually minded as well as the most atheistic philosophers and scientist. Practitioners of every healing art have prescribed hope. For modern scholars...there is no greater virtue, no more powerful therapeutic tool, no better ally for the sick or dying. (p. 78)

By supplying the universe with the hope that extinction is not really extinction, rather the beginning of a different kind of continuation, humans basically feel better. The mental torture of the unknown, the emotional devastation of terror, and the psychological insanity of abandonment and annihilation stops or becomes so deeply repressed that one believes it has stopped.

But the question can be asked whether this hope is healthy or more akin to false hope. This idea is not hard to fathom when we consider the lack of evidence regarding the afterlife. If one’s religious beliefs turn out to be true when the individual dies, then clearly it will have been worth believing it as truth. If, on the other hand, something opposite or dissimilar takes place then we could say that individual lived a life clinging to false hope.

Schachter (2009) illustrates the detriment of maintaining false hope or unrealistic hope:

Maintaining or fostering a sense of false hope can lead individuals to persistent denial of reality, which often promotes poor judgment. ‘It causes (1) persistent goal oriented behavior toward an unobtainable goal; (2) distraction from necessary activities; and (3) a delay in resolving emotional issue’” (Bushholz, 1990 as cited in Schachter, p. 55).

These three consequences of false hope can be easily applied to a lifetime devoted to specific religious beliefs. For example, if a religious devotee upheld certain practices, traditions, and
beliefs in anticipation of arriving in heaven upon one’s death but that particular goal was not reached in the afterlife, it would seem those actions were in vain. Secondly, spending a lifetime focused on maintaining a sinless life and spiritual devotion only to find out that it did not provide the eternal bliss or heavenly rewards ascribed to it would demonstrate distraction from other necessary activities. And thirdly, if one’s afterlife beliefs do not prove to be true, then it is possible time was wasted holding on to false hope rather than resolving psychological or emotional issues created by various dysfunctions developed throughout one’s life.

If we consider for a moment that death is just that… death….The End, the grand finale, then simply identifying false hope is not enough. In order to remove the delusion created by false hope, it is necessary to determine how it was created. How does an individual move from “When I die, it will be the end of me,” to “I am going to die but I’m going to live again on earth, or a place called heaven/Paradise or hell?” Perhaps death gets disguised or embellished in order to appear differently or is hidden so as not to be visible at all. Staudt suggests that death can be covered up in several different ways. (Staudt, 2009) Three of these might have validity when applied to religions and should be given further examination. They are (1) giving form to death, (2) masking death with beauty and (3) deflecting the impact of death (Staudt, 2009, pp. 152-172).

The notion of giving form to death brings in the idea of representation. Straudt (2009) describes representation and how it works:

Arguably, representation is the means by which reality is created – given form.
Individuals tend to create or embrace definitions of reality that offer them means of control and venues for coping and interacting functionally with the world around them. Representations interpret and edit the world they depict or describe; they bring about order, inform, and give rise to emotions. They make it possible for society to grasp and communicate ideas, manage life, and promote beliefs and desires… (p. 154).

Every religion has a representation for death. For Muslims, Christians and some Jews, death is represented by the promise of a perfect destination upon one’s death if certain criteria are met prior to one leaving this world of evil. The Buddhist and Hindu are promised a release from a cyclical rebirth provided one’s karma was good enough in a previous life. A closer look at these actually reveals that several representations have to be in place singularly and then combined to create a full picture. In other words, there must be initial, independent representation for the perfect destination or world to come, the certain criteria that must be met prior to dying, karma, and the evil or undesirable aspects of this world. Once these parts have been created and promoted, they are then combined to describe the whole representation of death that gives it a particular form. Individuals must have a place worth longing, waiting, and aspiring for, a reason to want to go there and finally, a guaranteed arrival. Imagine for a moment, if a religion taught its followers that this world here on earth is a good place and in fact, the only place worth living. Then suppose, the religious leaders proposed that upon one’s death, one would journey to a horrible and frightening place in which the only way out of such a destiny is to commit suicide. A representation such as this may attract a few followers, but would be hard pressed to be accepted by the masses. The point being, that in order for a representation to work, as it relates
to death, the entire equation must add up to something acceptable and desirable. It is acceptability and desirability that appeals to and draws religious adherents - perhaps even more so than believability. Simply stated, if the representation sounds good and feels good, then the probability of success is much higher. Without representation, humans would be left to view death through what is factually and visibly available to observe…. a being once breathing and functioning and capable of existing as a living creature now a lifeless corpse, fully void of animation and all possibility of rejoining the living.

Masking death with beauty is often done irregardless of religion. Statements such as “It was her time to go,” “He led a good, long life,” “She is not hurting anymore,” or “He is in a better place,” are all stated to beautify the ugliness associated with death. In reality, we are completely clueless about the timing of death, as evidenced by our insistence of the unfairness when a child or young person dies without warning. Whether someone led a good life or bad life prior to dying is complete speculation on behalf of the one still living. Concluding that the deceased is not hurting anymore lacks facts regarding any afterlife and one being in a better place supposes that the afterlife does, in fact, offer a better place. In reality, we have simply aestheticized death as a way to ward off the pain incurred by our loss. Additionally, there are many other ways we masks death with beauty including our funeral and burial ceremonies. With the application of make-up and specific attire combined with lavish wooden caskets and a garden of floral arrangements we ensure death looks presentable and pleasing to the eyes. Everywhere we look, death receives the beautification we need in order to hide what is really there.
Finally, religions deflect the impact of death. One way this is done is by maintaining focus on an afterlife. For many religions, death is nothing more than a split second change. Those who are still living look upon a dying person and watch them slowly fade away to death. Unfortunately, at the exact moment the living person observes a dying person die, knowledge of what happens next remains a mystery. Is there more to the dying process than we can see with our physical eyes? How long does it last? What does it consist of? Do both the body and the soul go through a decay or deterioration process that takes a period of time? Or, have we observed all there is to see the moment the last breath is breathed and the last heart beat has thumped. In an effort to deflect the impact of death, religions have developed answers to these questions, most of which suggests that immediately following death one goes to another place or another body or both. Death has been minimized as simply a minute event that one merely has to go through prior to doing the next scheduled event on one’s timeline; like going through the process of cooking prior to eating a delicious meal. By deflecting the impact of death one basically skips over the actual event of death or turns away from it by emphasizing something else – a majestic existence amid streets of gold in peaceful harmony with God. Deflecting is a very popular technique when something negative cannot be avoided. We see this happen very often in commercials for prescription drugs. All of the dangerous side-affects are stated because they cannot be avoided. However, by the end of the commercial few viewers really remember what the side affects were. Viewers have been deflected away from the side-affects with happy faces of individuals free from their supposed health issue and now joyfully strolling down the beach in the arms of someone special. Deflecting helps ensure the fulfillment of an ulterior
motive. Prescription drug companies’ motives are to secure the business of the general public. Their motivator for deflection is money. The motivator or ulterior motive of religion for deflecting the impact of death may not be so easy to articulate. Perhaps it is to appeal to as many people as possible thereby securing more believers. Or maybe it is for a much more unconscious, yet therapeutic motive of providing a way for human beings to feel better about a situation they cannot alter or stop.

While a significant amount of research has determined that religiosity helps to lessen one’s fear and anxiety about death, other studies have concluded just the opposite. Power and Smith (2008) conducted a study of Canadian students and found there were certain variables that determined one’s fear. This study “revealed that the more religious participants had higher fear of the dead, fear of being destroyed, and fear of conscious death, whereas participants with lower religious conviction were more fearful of the unknown” (Power, T & Smith, S., 2008, p. 267). Admittedly, this study’s participants were primarily Christian, which may explain the findings, however, it seems plausible that a study of followers from other religions would conclude similar findings coinciding with that religion’s tenets on death.

Some would suggest that religion addresses the subject of death but only as one part of the whole belief system. Many religious followers are convinced that their decision to follow their religion of choice stems from a desire or need to be united or connected to a higher power, supernatural being, or specifically, God. However, it is quite possible that by providing acceptable, hopeful, and comforting perspectives on death, religion may be incorporated into an individual’s life as a psychological solution for the fear ignited by mortality salience.
Ultimately, religion may have little or nothing to do with uniting individuals to a higher power. The lines between self-preservation versus devotion to or worship of a higher power may become blurred. The fear of death is so prevalent and emotionally terrifying that it appears to be the motivator behind myriad of behaviors or choices, with religion being no exception. This is not to imply that individuals do not desire a bond with a higher power, but merely, that one’s gravitation toward religion is possibly motivated by one’s fear of dying rather than a longing for connection to God. As TMT suggests, self-esteem plays a significant role in combating death anxiety and fear. When one regards himself/herself as united and devoted to God, or the Creator of the Universe, a higher power, Allah, or Brahman, a sense of correctness and righteousness begins to emerge internally, where self-esteem develops. Additionally, as religious adherents become more devout and committed to following the principles, doctrines, and rituals required, that righteousness intensifies, thereby bolstering self-esteem to an even higher level. Studies conducted by Routledge et al., (2010) asserted “that existential threat in the form of death cognition influences psychological adjustment and that self-esteem plays a crucial moderating role” (Routledge et al., 2010, p. 898).

Human behavior is motivated. This idea has been researched and accepted by many. But, the question that has been tossed around from psychologist to anthropologist, to sociologist, and philosopher is what motivates behavior. Sigmund Freud theorized that we are motivated by pleasure. Gordon Allport, in his Trait theory, suggested our behavior can be viewed through the consistency of certain traits. Another psychologist, Abraham Maslow, contended we are motivated by a hierarchy of needs. In addition to motivation and trait theorists, there are
cognitive theorists who suggest our *thoughts* motivate and determine our behavior and choices. And Ernest Becker concluded that death is perhaps the ultimate human motivator. In the end, one thing is clear, behavior and choices are motivated and determined by some emotion, thought, trait, desire, or need. To be knowingly or unknowingly paralyzed by the fear of dying would necessitate a solution and one’s behavior, choices, and actions would surely become motivated. Seeking answers to death and the dreadful fear it creates has been a preoccupation of mankind for thousands of years, if not since the beginning of man’s existence. Trusting a particular idea or suggestion of what happens when and after one dies is logical in the sense that humans rarely find comfort in allowing the unknown to remain unknown. Whether those beliefs are packaged and labeled as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or Judaism is of little significance. Hundreds of religious and cultic beliefs held by adherents all over the world provide plausible and possible suggestions for dealing with death and dying. Perhaps each one of these religions is correct but not in the sense that the facts regarding death and the afterlife are correct. Possibly each religion is correct in that they each offer mankind peace and relief from the fear of his eventual, inevitable, and unstoppable demise.
References


