

ERNEST BECKER'S PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION FORTY YEARS ON: A VIEW FROM SOCIAL COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

by Jonathan Jong

Abstract. This article distinguishes between three projects in Ernest Becker's (1924–1974) later work: his psychology of "religion," his psychology of religion, and his psychology of Religion (with a capital R). The first is an analysis of culture and civilization as immortality projects, means by which to deny death. The second, which overlaps with the first, is a characterization of religion-as-practiced (e.g., by adherents of the world religions) as a particularly effective immortality project vis-à-vis death anxiety. The third is less social scientific and more theological; Becker argues for a view of God that is in the tradition of Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich (and, arguably, Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas). Focusing on the second of these projects—as much has already been written on the first, and little can be said about the third—this article evaluates Becker's claims about religion-as-practiced in light of recent developments in social cognitive psychology.

Keywords: Ernest Becker; death; death anxiety; evolutionary psychology; psychology of religion; terror management theory

It is not easy to say exactly how *The Denial of Death* (1973) is about religion. Or rather, it is difficult to distinguish between Ernest Becker's analysis of religion *per se*—whatever that amounts to—and his analysis of cultural belief systems more generally, all of which are "religious" in some broader sense. Immediately then, before embarking on the project of this article—that of evaluating Becker's work in light of contemporary psychology of religion—we face the problem of definitions. This article therefore comes in two parts: first, a description of Becker's psychology of religion, such as it is, mainly as laid out in *The Denial of Death*, but also in *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1971) and *Escape from Evil* (1975), the latter published posthumously. Having identified the multiple ways in which Becker thought about the causes and consequences of religious belief

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and behavior, the rest of the article is dedicated to empirically evaluating these claims by reviewing the extant research on the relationship between death anxiety and religiosity.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Like most categories in the natural and social sciences—“gender,” “ethnicity,” “species,” and “disease,” just to cite a few examples—religion is a fuzzy concept. If the history of discourse on religion has taught us anything, it is the difficulty, if not impossibility and futility, of listing necessary and sufficient conditions for some enterprise to count as being religious. Religion is not a natural kind, but a disparate collection of sometimes co-occurring phenomena, including various kinds of supernatural beliefs, ritualistic behaviors, and social arrangements (Boyer and Bergstrom 2008; Whitehouse 2008). This view enables us to appreciate the diversity in explanatory theories of religion as being at least in part a consequence of different definitional starting points, different foci, or different explananda. In the last twenty years or so, cognitive anthropologists and social psychologists have focused on the belief in and devotion to supernatural agents as their primary object of enquiry (e.g., Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Whitehouse 2004; Tremlin 2006; Pyysiäinen 2009; Bering 2011), wherein agents are supernatural by virtue of their ability to “supersede . . . natural constraints,” to overcome “the intuitively expectable limitations of normal agents” (Whitehouse 2004, 10–11). Gods, angels, demons, souls, and spirits are thus all examples of supernatural agents, by virtue of their unusual properties and abilities, their being able to walk through walls or watch us unseen or create the entire cosmos *ex nihilo*. The central preoccupation of contemporary psychological research on religion, and in particular the nascent interdisciplinary cognitive science of religion, therefore revolves around the question—to paraphrase Justin Barrett’s (2004) titular phrase—why would anyone believe in gods?

ERNEST BECKER’S PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

It is not difficult to see what Becker would have to say about this. People believe in gods because they, we, fear death. We fear death, and we particularly fear death *sans* meaning, *sans* significance, and therefore we, perhaps unwittingly, create and co-opt means by which to deny our mortality and finitude. Religions—particularly those complete with systems of morality, venerable social structures, and most importantly, immortal gods who have the ability to grant their worshippers everlasting life—are potentially powerful solutions to the problem of death. Indeed, for Becker (1973, 202) secular, scientific, and particularly psychoanalytic ideologies are pale facsimiles of religion, which is itself “the most legitimate foolishness,” the most “life-enhancing illusion” that solves the problem of death by

providing freedom, dignity, and hope. “What,” he asks rhetorically, “greater security than to lean confidently on God, on the Fount of creation, the most terrifying power of all?” (Becker 1973, 202). God—or, at least, the “hidden and intangible” God of Kierkegaard and Tillich (and, indeed, though unacknowledged by Becker himself, Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas; cf. Burrell 1986; McCabe 2007)—guarantees freedom because “as an abstraction, [God] does not oppose the individual as others do, but instead provides the individual with all the powers necessary for independent self-justification” (Becker 1973, 202). God guarantees dignity because “we no longer have to please those around us, but the very source of creation”; our lives are now “measured by standards of the highest heroism, ideals truly fit to lead us on and beyond ourselves” (Becker 1973, 202). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, God gives us hope because belief in God is the belief in

the dimension of the unknown and unknowable . . . the possibility of a multidimensionality of spheres of existence, of heavens and possible embodiments that make a mockery of earthly logic . . . [that] relieves the absurdity of earthly life, all the impossible limitations and frustrations of living matter. (1973, 203–04)

This is all heady stuff, but as Becker admits, it is about religion “not as practiced but as an ideal” (1973, 204); he is eager to assert that this view—of religion as the best, if not the only solution to the terror of death—is no “apologia for traditional religion” (1973, 201).¹ But if so, then this is not a psychology of religion that is easily investigated empirically. Does religion provide freedom, dignity, and hope in the ways Becker suggests? How can one know, if no one actually participates in such an idealized religion, if no one believes in such an abstract God, save perhaps a handful of religious geniuses? Indeed, on this view, most religion as practiced—and, by extension, as studied by cognitive anthropologists and social psychologists—is, for the most part, also a pale facsimile of Becker’s Kierkegaardian-Tillichian faith, with the same pitfalls and limitations as other such idolatries.

This gap between an ideal religion and religion as believed and practiced poses a significant challenge to those of us who are interested in empirically evaluating Becker’s psychology of religion. This is not to be pessimistic about making empirical observations about his theory of immortality projects more generally. Indeed, under the rubric of terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1998), many of Becker’s hypotheses have been successfully operationalized and, thus far, vindicated. In experiment after experiment, we find that reminders of mortality lead individuals to bolster cultural norms and derogate dissenting ideas, groups, and persons (see Burke, Martens, and Faucher 2010 for a review). Indeed, Harmon-Jones

et al. (1996) found that this was so even when the groups in question were artificial inventions of the experiment itself, minimally defined and arbitrarily assigned. Furthermore, the affirmation of cultural norms keeps thoughts of death at bay and renders them less accessible to conscious awareness (Schmeichel and Martens 2005). Conversely, challenging an individual's values bring such thoughts of death to mind (see Hayes et al. 2010 for a review). While this research is not about religion as construed by contemporary cognitive anthropologists and social psychologists, this evidence is hardly irrelevant to that inquiry, not least because religion as practiced is often just another immortality project: religious worldviews are worldviews like any other, stuck at a kind of idolatrous hero worship, circumscribed within "beyonds that are near at hand" (Becker 1973, 174). Or, as Becker would have preferred, all worldviews are religious. We are back at the problem of definitions. In what sense are all worldviews religious?

Becker has multiple answers to this question, or multiple facets to his answer. First, Becker saw that culture and civilization are, however expressed—whether in theological systems or positivistic ones, in ornate cathedrals or austere laboratories—means by which we create value and meaning. Thus:

It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a sky-scraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. When Norman O. Brown said that Western society since Newton, no matter how scientific or secular it claims to be, is still as "religious" as any other, this is what he meant: "civilized" society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money and goods make man count for more than any other animals. In this sense everything that man does is religious and heroic, and yet in danger of being fictitious and fallible. (Becker 1973, 5)

The second way in which all worldviews may be religious is related to the first. For Becker, the fear of mortality and meaninglessness are inseparable; the quest for meaning is the quest for symbolic immortality. Thus, underlying the first mark of the religiousness of all worldviews is the fact that all worldviews are means by which to obtain immortality, symbolic or literal. Religion just is that human enterprise which fulfills this fundamental human need. Indeed, introducing a recent anthology of Becker's work, Daniel Liechty (2005, 22) goes so far as to say that "Any legitimate distinction between the secular and the sacred . . . collapses at the psychological level." This is, in my view, an exaggeration, for reasons that will become clear when we consider the different ways in which Becker uses the word religion and its cognates.

Third, all worldviews may be religious insofar as they are unverifiable sources of meaning and immortality. Becker (1971) posits four levels in this pursuit: the personal, the social, the secular, and the sacred. He discusses the limitations of the first three, but about the last he almost waxes lyrical: “By serving the highest power you serve the best power, not any second rate one; by linking your destiny to that of creation you give it its perfect fulfillment, its proper dignity, its only genuine nobility” (1971, 189). In the next breath however, Becker quickly withdraws into caution, conceding that there is no way to know if there is any reality to the sacred level. Again, it is in danger of being fictitious and fallible. In the final analysis, we “cannot know the nature of ultimate reality, since we are ourselves transcended by it” (1971, 190). Thus, he proceeds to say, it is all a gamble, and “one hero-system seems to serve as well as the next”; worldviews cannot be falsified, except to be shown “false to our lives . . . [and] the life of a whole society” (1971, 190).

There is an apparent inconsistency in Becker’s work concerning whether or not religion is unique as a death-denying—or, better still, death-defeating—enterprise. One way to resolve the inconsistency is to distinguish “religion” from religion from Religion.² Let “religion” be that big tent that covers a multitude of worldviews, which have in common their promise of meaning and immortality (literal or otherwise), as well as their unverifiability. Let religion *simpliciter* be that curious human enterprise of worshipping deities and building temples and the like, that so often reduces to the sycophantic simpering after ageless anthropomorphs. Finally, let Religion be that impossible heroism of being “fully in the world on its terms and wholly beyond the world in trust in the invisible dimension” (Becker 1973, 258). The problem with undertaking a scientific study of the latter has already been mentioned: “for man not everything is possible” (1973, 259), and if Religion is impossible for human beings, then it falls outside the remit of empirical psychology. The study of “religion” suffers the opposite problem: it is too promiscuous a category, such that a science of “religion” would be the science of all culture and civilization. And yet, of course, this is the ambitious research program of TMT.

Finally, then religion is a proper subset of “religion,” and yet Becker’s writings give us reason to put religion head-to-head against its secular counterparts. *Pace* Liechty (2005), Becker does not quite allow us to conflate the sacred and the secular. To say with him and Norman Brown that scientific and secular worldviews are “still as ‘religious’” (Becker 1973, 5) as religions proper is not to assert equivalence, but to posit an asymmetry: the secular gropes at what the sacred naturally offers. Even religious beliefs that Becker may have deemed idolatrous—those that consider God a (transference) object among other (transference) objects, rather than the unknowable mystery that “answers directly the problem of transference by expanding awe and terror to the cosmos” (1973, 202)—promise literal

immortality, rather than the cheap imitations offered by earthlier and earthier enterprises. As Vail et al. (2010, 65), working from within TMT, write, “religious worldviews provide a uniquely powerful form of existential security. Indeed, there may be no antidote to the human fear of death quite like religion.”

The hypotheses are clear enough. First, there should be a relationship between individuals’ religiosity and the extent to which they fear death. As we shall see, it is not obvious what precise relationship this theory predicts; nevertheless, if death anxiety and religiosity are found to be uncorrelated, this would pose a serious challenge to the notion that they are causally connected. Second, we should expect reminders of death to increase religiosity; indeed, if religious beliefs are uniquely powerful sources of existential security, we might expect even self-described nonreligious individuals to be tempted toward faith in the face of death. Third, religious belief should effectively protect individuals from death anxiety and its effects. In the second half of this article, these claims will be evaluated in turn, against the available empirical evidence.

HYPOTHESIS 1: THE MORTAL FEARS OF THE RELIGIOUS (AND IRRELIGIOUS)

There are over 100 published studies of the statistical relationship between death anxiety and religiosity. It might come as little surprise that they do not always agree with one another. Reviewing 36 studies, Spilka, Hood, and Gorsuch (1985) found that in 24 religiosity predicted lower levels of death anxiety. The opposite trend was found in three of them, while the remaining were either inconclusive or found no statistical relationship whatsoever. In his more recent and more exhaustive review of 137 studies, Donovan (1994) likewise found that in over half of them religiosity predicted lower levels of death anxiety, while the opposite trend was found in about a tenth of the studies; the remaining third showed no relationship or were otherwise inconclusive. So, the evidence is ambiguous, with a bias toward a negative correlation.

It seems likely that this evidential ambiguity is at least partly the result of sampling biases and measurement differences. On the former point, as Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009) note, most research in this area has been conducted with American college students, who are predominantly religious. We have relatively little information about nonreligious individuals. Most of the studies therefore provide a truncated, lopsided view. On the latter point, the multifaceted nature of religiosity has long been recognized by scholars; alas, this has resulted in the proliferation of scales of a “hodgepodge nature” (Gorsuch 1984, 234) that often conflate diverse aspects of religion. That is, rather than independent validated measures of specific constructs, we have a whole host of multidimensional measures

that attempt to do too much at once. Thus, for example, Hill and Hood's (1999) collection of over a hundred measures contains no straightforward, generalizable measure of individuals' tendency to believe in supernatural entities.

Neither of these methodological difficulties is insurmountable. Indeed, to address both, Jong, Bluemke, and Halberstadt (2013) designed and validated a supernatural belief scale, and examined the relationship between this aspect of religiosity and the extent to which one feared death. We predicted a curvilinear relationship between religiosity and death anxiety, such that, *pace* the slight majority of previous research, a tendency toward religious belief would be associated with greater fear of death, but only among the nonreligious, those who classified themselves as such. Among the religious, we predicted—following that same slight majority report—that greater faith would come with lesser fear. This hypothesis did not come from out of the blue. Rather, a closer examination of recent studies suggested that studies with predominantly religious participants found negative correlations between death anxiety and religiosity (e.g., Harding et al. 2005), whereas those with predominantly nonreligious participants found positive correlations (e.g., Dezutter, Luyckx, and Hursebaut 2009). Furthermore, other studies have found curvilinear relationships between religiosity and death anxiety before (Leming 1979–1980; Nelson and Cantrell 1980; McMordie 1981; Aday 1984–1985; Downey 1984; Wink and Scott 2005; Wen 2010); such a finding would not be unprecedented. Finally, from a theoretical perspective: if the belief in supernatural entities is an attractive and effective death-denying strategy, then we would expect death anxiety to motivate the nonreligious toward religious belief and, among those who already believe, we would expect religious certainty to reduce death anxiety. In other words, we would expect a quadratic relationship between the two dispositions. And indeed, this is exactly what Jong et al. (2013) found, with their new measure and in their sample of about 150 religious and nonreligious participants. But of course, as all budding psychologists are (religiously) informed, correlation does not entail causation. Enter experimentation.

HYPOTHESIS 2: I THINK (ABOUT DEATH), THEREFORE I BELIEVE IN GODS

In contrast to the plethora of relevant correlational studies, experiments on this topic are fewer and further between. What little evidence there is strongly suggests that, as Becker would have predicted, reminders of mortality do motivate religious adherents to believe more firmly. But what of the self-described nonreligious? Would they dig their heels in, repudiating religion ever more fervently and heroically in the face of death? Or might the thought of dying even tempt atheists toward theism? In nearly

300 published studies, terror management theorists have shown time and time again that, confronted with reminders of their mortality, individuals bolster their own and their in-group's values, beliefs, and practices, concomitantly derogating those of others (Burke et al. 2010). As mentioned before, this intergroup bias emerges even when the groups in question were artificially created for the experiment itself (Harmon-Jones et al. 1996). It would therefore be surprising—and a testament to the allure of promises of literal immortality—if the self-defined nonreligious ceded ground when mortality is salient. Indeed, Landau, Greenberg, and Solomon (2004) have argued that the terror management functions of religion are mediated by the acceptance of particular religious worldviews. They therefore predict that one's religious (or antireligious) responses to death will depend on whether one subscribes to a religious worldview in the first place. These competing predictions seem easy enough to test, and as we shall see experimental psychologists have begun doing so.

Perhaps the first systematic examination of this phenomenon was Osarchuk and Tatz's (1973) seminal study, in which participants were exposed to reminders of death, threats of electrocution, or a benign control task. They found that participants in the first condition—who sat through a slideshow of death-related scenes, accompanied by dirge-like music and narration that provided exaggerated mortality rate estimates—reported greater belief in an afterlife after the treatment, but only if they held moderate or strong afterlife beliefs in the first place. That is, those initially skeptical remained unmoved: they were neither tempted toward faith, nor did they cling to their skepticism more fervently. More recent studies of this kind are, in some ways, more favorable to the standard terror management view, in which reminders of death should lead to the defense of one's own worldview, religious or otherwise. Weisbuch, Seery, and Blascovich (2005), for example, showed that a death thought exercise—much milder than the one Osarchuk and Tatz (1973) employed, but one that is the standard protocol in terror management research—did increase self-reported religiosity among religious participants, but had the opposite effect on those who considered themselves nonreligious. Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke (2012) recently improved on and replicated this study, employing their validated supernatural belief scale. Like Weisbuch et al. (2005) and consistent with terror management orthodoxy, our religious participants reported stronger religious belief after thinking and writing about their own deaths, while nonreligious participants reported stronger religious disbelief. To complicate matters, Vail, Arndt, and Abdollahi (2012) also recently investigated this question, and found—as did Osarchuk and Tatz (1973) earlier—that while religious participants bolstered their own religious beliefs, self-declared atheists did not. Self-described agnostics, however, behaved like religious participants in this study, reporting increased religious belief after reminders of mortality. The inconsistency with regard to nonreligious

participants' responses is perhaps partly a function of a sampling difference: Jong et al.'s (2012) and Weisbuch et al.'s (2005) "nonreligious" is arguably a more permissive category than Vail et al.'s (2012) "atheists." That said, if Vail et al.'s atheists were more, as it were, seriously antireligious, the null effect they found violates the supposition that they should become more fervent atheists when confronted with the fact of their mortality. Being an atheist is surely more existentially significant than being a member of some minimal group artificially contrived by an experimenter (Harmon-Jones et al. 1996).

The standard "worldview defense" account—in which reminders of death lead people to bolster their own worldviews and derogate others'—is further problematized by inconsistent findings on the effects of death thoughts on religious promiscuity. Vail et al. (2012) also showed that, after reminders of death, Christians reported increased belief in Jesus and decreased belief in Buddha and Allah, whereas Muslims reported increased belief in Allah and decreased belief in Buddha and Jesus. However, Norenzayan and Hansen (2006) found that Christians who were reminded of their mortality reported stronger belief in Shamanic spirits and paranormal clairvoyance. That is, far from becoming more vigilantly orthodox, they became more sympathetic toward foreign divinities. It seems that for these participants, in the face of death any god will do. These results are difficult to reconcile, though it is perhaps the case that Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam are more obviously competing ideologies in the way that beliefs about witchdoctors and clairvoyance, while technically heterodox, are much easier to assimilate into a major theological tradition. After all, syncretism between these kinds of folk superstitions and major religions (e.g., Islam and geomancy in Malaysia; Roman Catholicism and Confucian ancestor worship in South Korea) are common.

The research literature is easy enough to summarize. Religious people always believe more strongly when confronted with mortality; sometimes, they also begin to believe more promiscuously. Nonreligious people often seem unmoved; sometimes, they assert their disbelief more firmly. In two further experiments, Jong et al. (2012) added another dimension to this body of evidence. Rather than measuring religious belief by self-report, we employed two implicit measures of religious belief (Jong 2013): a single-target implicit association test (Wigboldus, Holland, and Van Knippenberg 2006) and a property verification task (Experiment 3). In both cases, we found that reminders of death increased religious belief, regardless of participants' religious self-identification. That is, both religious and nonreligious participants evinced increased implicit religious belief after thinking and writing about themselves dying. This finding is inconsistent with a strict "worldview defense" view in which death thoughts lead individuals to defend only their own worldviews over and against others. Rather, it shows that

individuals are able to defend their own worldview at one—explicit—level while also implicitly, perhaps unconsciously, moving toward another worldview that may provide greater protection against death.

HYPOTHESIS 3: TO GOD BELONGS ESCAPE FROM DEATH

If Becker is emphatic about one thing, it is the unique power of religion to quell existential anxiety. After all, if other ideological groups—ethnic tribes, nation states, and so on—can offer symbolic immortality by virtue of their largeness and longevity and by providing a system of norms and values, religious groups can too. What most theological systems promise, which secular ideologies do not, is cosmic significance and literal immortality. Gods are powerful; they are mighty to save; to them belongs escape from death. Or so say prophets and psalmists, theologians and teachers of the faith. For all his enthusiasm for Religion, Becker knew that it—as is also true for “religion” and plain old religion as practiced—was an illusion, in the Freudian sense of the word, meaning there was no way to know whether it was true or false. Who is to say whether the gods can really save us from death? Likewise, who is to say the belief in the gods can really save us from our fear of death?

Somewhat surprisingly, very little empirical work has been done to address this question directly. Rather than measuring the effects of religiosity on death anxiety *per se*, most of the existing research looks at how religion moderates other effects of increased death thoughts. Part of the reason for this might be that the standard mortality salience procedure, alluded to above, seems to have no emotional effect on participants (see Routledge, Juhl, and Vess 2012 for an exception). However, as Burke et al.’s (2010) review shows, the procedure is effective at triggering worldview defense strategies, including attempts to increase self-esteem by derogating out-groups. These behaviors are interpreted as means by which to repress thoughts of death and thus to manage our terror of death. Becker might recognize them as negative transference or scapegoating. Thus, the absence of such worldview defensive strategies is, *ex hypothesi*, taken as evidence of successful terror management by other means. A few studies have been run with this logic in mind. Friedman and Rholes (2008) found that religious fundamentalists engaged in less secular worldview defense after the mortality salience task than did their counterparts who were not religious fundamentalists. Similarly, in a more naturalistic quasi-experiment, Jonas and Fischer (2006, Study 1) found that those who scored low on intrinsic religiosity—that is, the extent to which one’s religious beliefs and practices are internalized and applied, rather than superficial and instrumental (Feagin 1964; Allport and Ross 1967)—engaged in worldview defense after the 2003 terrorist attacks in Istanbul, whereas participants who scored high on intrinsic religiosity did not. Looking at religiosity more generally rather than at particular

religious orientations, Norenzayan et al. (2009) also found that, while nonreligious participants reliably engaged in nationalistic worldview defense after a mortality salience task, religious participants did not.

In the three studies described above, it is the individual's religious disposition that protects them from the negative effects of death thoughts. There have also been experimental studies on how states of religiosity affect responses to increased mortality salience. Besides their naturalistic study, Jonas and Fischer (2006, Study 2) also had participants affirm their religiosity, and found that this further mitigated the negative effects of increased death thoughts. Focusing on afterlife beliefs more specifically, Dechesne et al. (2003) encouraged half their participants to believe in an afterlife before reminding them of their mortality, and found that those participants were less likely to strive after self-esteem and engage in other worldview defense strategies than participants in the control condition. Interestingly, given the mixed findings among nonreligious individuals regarding the previous hypothesis, Heflick and Goldenberg (2012) recently demonstrated that a pro-afterlife manipulation was effective at mitigating the effects of death thoughts among self-described atheists as well as religious believers. So, we have some evidence that religious dispositions and religious states can ameliorate some negative reactions against death anxiety. But this is not quite the same as evidence that religion protects us from death-related fear or anxiety or, indeed, terror. This dearth is somewhat surprising; it is not as though psychological science lacks the means by which to measure negative emotional responses. Indeed, efforts are currently under way to employ such methods to ascertain the efficacy of religious belief in reducing death anxiety (see Halberstadt and Jong 2014). Until these investigations are complete, however, it would be premature to conclude that this third hypothesis, so prominent in Becker's writings, enjoys scientific support.

DEATH AND DEITIES

Why do people believe in gods? The Western intellectual tradition is replete with attempts to answer this question, and there have indeed been diverse proposals. Among these, the notion that religion emerged as a means by which we can cope with the vicissitudes of life and the terror of annihilation runs right through, from Lucretius's Epicurean analysis in the first century CE, to the early pioneering psychological and anthropological work of Freud and Feuerbach and Malinowski, to contemporary cognitive and evolutionary approaches. That is to say, the idea is hardly unique to Becker. Even Freud (1927/1961, 22)—of whom Becker was so critical and yet in whose tradition Becker doubtless stood—recognized that the gods “must exorcise the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death.” And yet, it would

be unjust to dismiss Becker's existential psychology of religion as unoriginal and derivative.

If the association between death anxiety and religion is not a Beckerian innovation, the systematic way in which he expands a theory of religion into a theory of "religion," of culture and civilization more generally may well be, indebted though Becker was to Norman Brown on this point. Finally however, it is Becker's analysis of Religion, his synthesis of psychological science (as it was then) and the kind of existential theology associated most closely with Kierkegaard and Tillich that may be the most exciting, if also the most difficult for contemporary empirical social scientists to get our grips on. Whether Becker's synthesis works as theology, we shall leave to the theologians. The work of the cognitive anthropologist and social psychologist is a different one: it is to operationalize Becker's description of Religion in empirically tractable ways. What might a Beckerian-Kierkegaardian "knight of faith" look like or, if Becker is right to say that human beings are incapable of living up to this "most beautiful and challenging" ideal, what might the pursuit of such an ideal look like? And what might it entail? Becker hints that it may not be as comforting, as death-denying as either "religion" or religion, but it is at least more honest and less prone to the sectarianism and violence inevitably produced by other immortality projects. If so—and this too is an empirical question—then it is incumbent upon us to investigate the causal antecedents of this kind of faith, the conditions in which this kind of religiosity is made possible, is encouraged. There is, needless to say, much work to be done, and to be done between religionists and scientists. There is, that is to say as Becker himself did, work to be done on a kind of "fusion of science and religion" (1973, 281) that takes seriously theological analyses of the human condition as hypotheses to be verified or falsified.

NOTES

1. That said, Liechty's (1998, 5) description of Becker as "wittingly or unwittingly, speaking the voice of the Hebrew prophet" and of his theory as "in a very real sense [. . .] the age-old struggle with idolatry" is not unfair. There is much in Becker that apologists of traditional religion—of classical theism in particular—would find congenial. Compare, for example, Becker's view of God quoted above and the celebrated late Dominican philosopher Herbert McCabe's (2007, 76) complaint that "The idea that God's causality could interfere with my freedom can only arise from an idolatrous notion of God as a very large and powerful creature—a part of the world."

2. It should be made clear that taxonomy is not to be found explicitly in Becker's own work. However, I propose that it clarifies his meaning without altering his ideas.

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