

## Guest editors' foreword: On the importance of integrating terror management and psychology of religion

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## Guest editors' foreword: On the importance of integrating terror management and psychology of religion

Since its original formulation 30 years ago, Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) has developed into a dominant and generative research program in social psychology, spawning well over 500 studies and garnering over 1000 hits on the American Psychological Association PsycINFO database. Like many successful theories, TMT has evolved over time, and grown in complexity. However, the core of the theory may be succinctly stated: TMT posits that much of human thought and action is an attempt to mitigate humanity's anxiety about mortality. In support of this position, hundreds of experimental studies have found that the activation of death-related thoughts has wide-ranging and surprising effects. For example, when reminded of their deaths, people attempt to enhance their self-esteem, express a desire for more offspring, become more punitive of cultural norm violators, become more nationalistic, become more racially prejudiced, and become more likely to support politically conservative leaders (see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010 for meta-analysis). TMT theorists argue that the search for *symbolic immortality* and the expression of heightened *worldview defense* represent personal attempts by people to align themselves with something that will survive beyond their own death: a reputation, a family, a cultural group, a nation, or even an abstract ideal to be upheld by others for generations. Some research has also found *proximal* defense mechanisms by which individuals attempt to deny the reality or inevitability of their mortality, for example by underestimating their mortality risk (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

Notably, relatively little of the empirical research in Terror Management Theory has looked into its relevance to religion (e.g., Heflick & Goldenberg, 2012; Vail, Arndt, & Abdollahi, 2012; van den Bos et al., 2012; Vess, Arndt, & Cox, 2012). This gap is surprising because religious beliefs offer both personal and symbolic immortality. On the face of it, religion appears to be the paradigmatic means by which to manage our terror of death in which we can belong to something larger than ourselves that will live on past any individual believer, but also due to the promise of an immortal afterlife. Such a position was held by American cultural anthropologist Ernst Becker, commonly regarded as the philosophical source of modern TMT (Becker, 1973; Jong, 2014). Recently, TMT theorists have also claimed that “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” (Vail et al., 2010, p. 65).

This special edition of *Religion, Brain, and Behavior (RBB)* reviews the state-of-the-art in TMT research on religion. We strongly believe that there can and should be important and fruitful interaction between the multidisciplinary readers of *RBB* and social scientists interested in the psychological role of existential concerns. Given the recent cognitive turn in the scientific study of religion, TMT can contribute by making salient the motivational and affective aspects of religion. Conversely, TMT stands to benefit from submitting itself to critical engagement by *RBB* readers, whose expertise in religion as a content area is much needed in social psychology. Only through collaboration between the fields of the scientific study of religion and the traditional social sciences that are studying TMT can TMT grow, ultimately leading to a greater understanding of religion's role in the denial of death.

The seven articles included in this special issue report original research, each adopting a terror management framework to understand religion and closely associated phenomena. In the first article, Jong et al. (2017) systematically review and meta-analyze the correlational research on death anxiety and religiosity. Specifically, Jong et al. suggest that death anxiety holds a curvilinear relationship with religious belief in which belief increases with death anxiety among non-believers and anxiety decreases as belief increases among believers. This is followed by three articles on the interaction among mortality salience (MS), religiosity, and other attitudes, including apocalyptic beliefs (Routledge, Abeyta, & Roylance, 2017), support for indefinite life extension (Lifshin, Greenberg, Soenke, Darrell, & Pyszczynski, 2017), and the perception of meaning in life (Vail & Soenke, 2017). Routledge et al. found that MS increases apocalyptic beliefs among religious fundamentalists, but decreases such beliefs among non-fundamentalists. Lifshin et al. provide evidence that, for people low in religiosity, MS increases support for Indefinite Life Extension technologies; this effect was mediated by decreased afterlife belief. Vail and Soenke looked at the effect of MS on people's sense of meaning in life, and found that MS decreased meaning in life for atheists, but not Christians. Thus, religiosity is an important moderator for the well-established effects of MS on various kinds of beliefs. The next two articles focus on more affective consequences of religion: death anxiety (Jackson et al., 2017) and self-esteem (Arrowood, Coleman, Swanson, Hood, & Cox, 2017). Jackson et al. experimentally manipulated participants' religious beliefs, and found that increased belief reduced self-reported death anxiety for religious people and heightened it for nonreligious people. However, the religiosity manipulation decreased implicit death anxiety for everyone, regardless of initial religiosity. Turning to psychological costs of religiosity, Arrowood et al. found that quest religiosity exacerbated the negative effects of MS on self-esteem. Finally, Shults, Lane, Diallo, Lynch, Wildman, and Gore (2017) present computational models that simulate the relationship between MS and religiosity, and propose suggestions for future research.

These articles, although diverse in specific scope, highlight the importance of religion within a TMT framework and show the need for future research from a religious studies standpoint. Overall, each study further clarifies the need for collaboration between the two fields in order to garner a comprehensive understanding of religion's role in TMT. We anticipate that readers also understand the need for collaboration and are further motivated and challenged to improve our understanding of this incomplete research paradigm. It is our sincere hope that this initiative will instigate many future endeavors in which TMT and the scientific study of religion may productively interact.


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