



## Foxhole atheism, revisited: The effects of mortality salience on explicit and implicit religious belief

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### ABSTRACT

Although fear of death features prominently in many historical and contemporary theories as a major motivational factor in religious belief, the empirical evidence available is ambivalent, and limited, we argue, by imprecise measures of belief and insufficient attention to the distinction between implicit and explicit aspects of cognition. The present research used both explicit (questionnaire) and implicit (single-target implicit association test; property verification) measurement techniques to examine how thoughts of death influence, specifically, belief in religious supernatural agents. When primed with death, participants explicitly defended their own religious worldview, such that self-described Christians were more confident that supernatural religious entities exist, while non-religious participants were more confident that they do not. However, when belief was measured implicitly, death priming increased all participants' beliefs in religious supernatural entities, regardless of their prior religious commitments. The results are interpreted in terms of a dual-process model of religious cognition, which can be used to resolve conflicting prior data, as well as to help explain the perplexing durability of religious belief.

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### Introduction

Religious belief—particularly in supernatural agents such as gods, angels, and souls—seems an indelible feature of human cognition. Indeed, while the demise of religion has been prophesied since the Enlightenment, it has proven resistant both to intellectual counterarguments (e.g., d'Holbach, 1835; Hitchens, 2007; Russell, 1957) and to political persecution (e.g., in Soviet Russia, Communist China, Socialist Albania), and it shows no signs of waning at a global level (Berger, 1999; McGrath, 2004).

What makes religion's hardiness particularly puzzling is that, even in ideal socio-political climates, it exacts substantial material and reproductive costs. From church tithes and taxes to Aztec human sacrifice, prayers five times daily to pilgrimages to holy sites halfway across the world, bans on premarital sex to celibate castes, devotion to supernatural agents is individually and societally costly. To paraphrase Barrett's (2004) titular phrase, why would anyone believe in gods, when there are such powerful motivations not to?

The answer, many researchers have argued, lies in the even more powerful fear of death (e.g., Donovan, 2003; Freud, 1961; Malinowski, 1948; Vail et al., 2010). Although particular accounts differ in their motivational details, a recurring theme in theories of religion is that humans' awareness of and concern over their own mortality create potentially crippling anxiety. Religious beliefs, and especially beliefs

in supernatural agents, can help relieve this anxiety by offering the possibility of literal immortality (Atran, 2002; Freud, 1961; Malinowski, 1948) and/or by providing means to symbolically live on after death (Landau, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2004). In the former case, religious beliefs provide a buffer against fear of death by virtue of their content: they acknowledge the existence of agents who do not die, and who can ensure that the believer might not either. In the latter case, religious beliefs provide a buffer against fear of death by virtue of their location in a cultural worldview, which allows individuals to feel like valuable parts of something larger and more enduring than themselves. On this point, previous research has shown that the affirmation of aspects of one's worldview (e.g., values) indeed reduces the cognitive accessibility of death-related thoughts. Furthermore, there is also evidence that increased salience of participants' mortality leads to worldview defense—typically manifested as increased adherence to their own or ingroups' worldviews and/or increased derogation of outgroups—in multiple domains, including ethnicity, gender, nationality, and even minimal groups (see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010 for review).

While the case for death-motivated religious belief seems strong, even intuitive, there are theoretical and empirical complications. First, despite the cross-cultural ubiquity of religious and afterlife beliefs in funeral rites, anthropologists are quick to point out that religious beliefs are often far from comforting (Boyer, 2001; Guthrie, 1993). The ancient Mesopotamian belief that people are invariably cast into a terrifying netherworld populated by monsters (Bottéro, 2001; Katz, 2003); the fire and brimstone preaching, which had its heyday in the 18th century Christian revivalist movements (e.g., Edwards, 2003); and the Calvinist belief in a God who pre-determines souls to salvation or damnation

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(Thuesen, 2009) are all clear examples of such disquieting models of the afterlife.

Second, it turns out that the evidence for a relationship between religiosity and death anxiety is mixed (Donovan, 1994; Gartner, Larson, & Allen, 1991; Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985). For example, Donovan (1994) reported that in only 57% of the 137 correlational studies he reviewed were religious people indeed less fearful of death than less religious people. In 9% they were more fearful of death, and in 33% they were neither more nor less fearful (or the results were inconclusive). Other researchers have reported that both religious and non-religious people are less fearful of death than those with more ambivalent religious attitudes (i.e., a curvilinear relationship; Aday, 1984–1985; Dolnick, 1987; Downey, 1984; Leming, 1979–1980; McMordie, 1981; Nelson & Cantrell, 1980; Wen, 2010; Wink & Scott, 2005).

Experimental research on death and religiosity is equally ambiguous. Some studies have found that mortality salience strengthens religious belief (e.g., Osarchuk & Tatz, 1973), but others have not (e.g., Burling, 1993). Some have found people to be highly sectarian in their beliefs, with mortality increasing religiosity for religious people but decreasing religiosity for non-religious people (Weisbuch, Seery, & Blascovich, 2005), but others have found them quite promiscuous, willing to endorse even other people's gods after thinking about their own death (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006, Experiment 4).

Progress toward deciphering the actual relation between death and religious belief has been limited, we believe, by two methodological issues. First, as previous commentators have noted (e.g., Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006), assessing differences in "religiosity" has been hampered by the variety and ambiguity of instruments used to measure it. For example, Burling (1993) measured participants' religious orientation (their "way of being religious"; Batson & Ventis, 1982); Weisbuch et al. (2005) asked about participants' religious experiences; and Osarchuk and Tatz (1973) and Norenzayan and Hansen (2006) measured participants' afterlife and supernatural agent beliefs respectively. As recent cognitive anthropological and psychological research has shown, these various aspects of religiosity are related, but theoretically and empirically distinct (Boyer, 2011).

More importantly, previous research has relied exclusively on self-reports. Not only are such methods susceptible to strategic responding—demand characteristics, social desirability, and other self-presentational biases—they are also unsuitable for detecting changes in cognition that might occur beneath conscious awareness. Moreover, recent dual-process models of cognition (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006; Nosek, 2007) propose that implicit cognitive associations and processes are empirically and functionally dissociable from explicit attitudes or conscious deliberations, such that measures of the latter (e.g., self-report questionnaires) do not measure the former in principle. The social psychological literature on prejudice, for example, suggests that explicit and implicit prejudice have independent effects on behavior and, indeed, predict different behavioral outcomes (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Knowles, Lowery, & Schauberg, 2010).

Although dual-process models of religious cognition in particular have yet to be formalized, there is increasing evidence for "implicit theism" among ostensibly non-religious individuals (Uhlmann, Poehlman, & Bargh, 2008, p. 71). Bering (2002), for example, found that about a third of participants who explicitly denied belief in an afterlife nevertheless endorsed statements that implied post-mortem psychological functioning; furthermore, participants consistently took longer to deny emotional, motivational, and epistemic states (e.g., happiness, desire to live, knowledge of own death) than biological, psychobiological, and perceptual states (e.g., brain function, hunger, vision). Similarly, Haidt, Björklund, and Murphy (2000) found that avowed atheists refused to sign a contract stipulating the sale of their souls to the experimenter, even when the contract was explicitly identified as meaningless. Heywood (2010) recently found that atheists interpreted important life events in "teleo-functional"

terms: when attempting to explain personally significant occurrences, they frequently referred to some sort of purpose, meaning, or lesson—as if there were someone behind the events, intending to communicate something—rather than simply providing a naturalistic causal account.

The success of dual-process models in general, and the striking dissociations between religious attitudes and behaviors in particular, raise the intriguing possibility—to be examined in the present research—that death-related affect and cognition motivates individuals' explicit and implicit beliefs in different ways. In Study 1 we examined participants' explicit reactions to mortality salience using the Supernatural Beliefs Scale (SBS; Jong, Bluemke, & Halberstadt, 2011). In contrast to previous research that has indiscriminately measured religious attitudes, values, experiences, and behaviors, the SBS targets respondents' tendency to believe in supernatural entities and events (e.g., god, heaven, miracles). Study 2 then explores the effect of mortality salience on implicit religious belief via the single-target Implicit Association Test (ST-IAT; Wigboldus, Holland, & van Knippenberg, 2006), a version of the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) adapted to measure the relative strength of association between a single target and two attributes. In this case, we measured the relative strength of association between religious concepts (i.e., the items in the SBS) and the concept "real" in comparison to the concept "imaginary", and operationalized religious belief in these terms (cf. Shariff, Cohen, & Norenzayan, 2008). Finally, Study 3 extends this examination of implicit religious belief via a property verification task, in which respondents categorize religious and non-religious entities as "real" or "imaginary" as quickly as possible; in this case, the strength of religious beliefs is inferred from response latencies (cf. Gibson, 2005).

Together, these three studies represent the first examination of the effects of death priming on both explicit and implicit religious belief. Additionally, by considering mortality salience effects in light of participants' prior religious commitments, the studies can also shed light on the mechanism(s) by which belief exerts any buffering effects. As noted above, religious beliefs might, on the one hand, mitigate existential anxiety by virtue of their unique content, which include reference to supernatural entities with the power to grant a literal reprieve from death. If so, then all individuals, regardless of whether they self-identify as "religious", should recognize the potential of religious belief to provide some emotional salve, which should motivate them to entertain such belief; mortality salience should therefore increase religious belief (or at least decrease religious skepticism) regardless of prior religious commitments (cf. Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006, Experiment 4).

On the other hand, religious beliefs might mitigate existential anxiety by virtue of their role in an individual's enduring, socially-validated value system (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Landau et al., 2004). If so, then "religious" individuals should be motivated to bolster religious beliefs, but "non-religious" individuals should be motivated to denigrate religious beliefs. Even among non-religious individuals who do not identify strongly with being non- or anti-religious, the pursuit of symbolic immortality should be manifest in much the same way as with other demographically-based outgroups; previous research has demonstrated worldview defense against various kinds of outgroups (e.g., age; Martens, Greenberg, Schimel, & Landau, 2004), even minimally-defined, arbitrarily-assigned ones (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996). Likewise, mortality salience should lead to increased religious belief among religious participants and increased religious disbelief among non-religious participants.

Finally, and most interestingly, these two predictions might not be mutually exclusive. It is possible that, consistent with previous demonstrations of implicit theism, and a dual-process perspective on religious cognition more generally, religious belief could simultaneously offer both literal and symbolic immortality, at different levels of representation. Such effects would be most evident for non-religious individuals, who may explicitly deny religious belief (i.e., bolster their non-religious

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