Face to Face with Death:
The Role of Religion in Coping with Suffering

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Abstract

Human suffering is a focal point of religion, yet it also poses a problem for many religions: how could a loving God or sacred deity allow evil into the world and pain to torment humanity? Suffering is an existential concern that often erodes meaning, results in cracks in people's fundamental assumptions about the world, and leaves people prone to existential anxiety. Moreover, suffering also makes threats of death unavoidable or undeniable—they must be directly confronted. In this chapter, I review the existential function of religion, discuss how the nature and content of religious beliefs play a role in how people manage the threats of death created by suffering, and consider how religious responses to death include fighting, freezing, fleeing, and flourishing. I conclude by discussing future areas of research to advance the scientific study of religion through the perspective of existential psychology.

Key Words: religion, death, suffering, meaning, trauma, coping, existential, mortality salience

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“I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?”

“Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'”

— C. S. Lewis

Human suffering is both the central focus of many religions as well as one of the biggest obstacles for maintaining a serious religious belief. As C. S. Lewis astutely reveals in two very different quotes, religion helps address the problem of suffering, but suffering also can become problematic for religion. On the one hand, most religions directly address human suffering, often making promises regarding how to solve or overcome the problem of suffering. For example, Islam and Christianity make promises of an afterlife free from suffering for faithful believers, and Buddhism contends that suffering is inherent to the human condition yet enlightenment can lead one to nirvana, in which suffering ceases. For those who are suffering, religion seems to have promising answers.

On the other hand, making sense of suffering often leads people to question the benevolence of any potential deity or sacred being who might permit, or even cause, such suffering. *Theodicy*—the problem of evil or suffering in the world—is a major source of religious strain and struggle (Wilt, Exline, Grubbs, Park, & Pargament, 2016). Evil is problematic because it creates a tension between what people often believe about the nature of God (e.g., omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent) and the reality of the world (e.g., the existence of pain, suffering,

and death). When tragedy strikes, people are left attempting to make sense of their suffering. For example, the Christian story of Job details the capriciousness of life and death, and the struggle of trying to understand God's role in adversity. How could a loving or good God (or sacred force) allow or cause such horrible things to happen? Either that deity is not as powerful as people imagined or is not as good as they hoped. The necessity of pain and inevitability of death can lead people to wonder what role God plays in the world. Thus, suffering may cause people to rethink, doubt, or leave their religious beliefs.

In this chapter, I discuss the interactive relationship between religious beliefs and concrete threats of death—notably, those made clear by suffering. Religious beliefs affect how people view and interpret various features of suffering, and suffering also shapes people's religious beliefs. How people reconcile their confrontation with death in light of their religious beliefs may cause some people to fight, others to freeze, still others to flee, and, perhaps in some cases, others to flourish.

How Do People Usually Cope with Existential Concerns?

A long line of psychological research purports that the human awareness of death motivates a wide range of social thought and behavior (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Koole, & Solomon, 2010). Terror management theory (TMT) contends that humankind's superior intellectual capability, coupled with their capacity for self-awareness, uniquely positions them to be keenly aware of their eventual death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Although this awareness of mortality should leave people gripped with the existential anxiety of knowing that the only certainty in life is death, humans have evolved complex responses to this terror through the development of cultural worldviews, the pursuit of self-esteem, and the cultivation of close relationships (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015).

First, TMT posits that humans have created, and adhere to, cultural worldviews, which are socially-validated sets of beliefs regarding the nature of humanity and its relation to the world (Solomon et al., 2004). Many cultural worldviews make claims about how the world came into existence (e.g., creation myths or origin stories), how humans should live (e.g., codes of morality), and what happens to people after they die (e.g., afterlife beliefs). These cultural worldviews are meaning-making systems: they help people make sense of the social world (Van Tongeren, in press), and by providing meaning, help reduce death-related anxiety (Van Tongeren et al., 2017). Cultural worldviews can offer symbolic immortality (ways for people to “live on” through accomplishments, legacies, or memories after they die) or literal immortality (promises of continued life, in some form)—both of which reduce the sting of death (Dechesne et al., 2003). According to TMT, the ability of cultural worldviews to address the fear of death is a primary anxiety-reducing mechanism, and it is a central reason why people defend their worldviews with such ferocity. And for many, religious beliefs comprise these cultural worldviews that individuals defend so vigorously (Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2017).

Second, TMT contends that another route to mollifying death-related anxiety is through viewing oneself as a significant, meaningful contributor to the world who is making a lasting difference that will be remembered long after one has perished (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Thus, humans are strongly motivated to pursue and obtain self-esteem, which is often granted when people live up the standards set forth by their cultural worldview. That is, when they achieve the cultural standards of beauty, worth, accomplishment, goodness, or piety that their worldview lauds, they feel good about themselves and are likely to report high self-esteem. When people have positive evaluations of themselves and have lived up to these valued standards, they think their life is meaningful and their memory will live on.

Third, research has found that when threats of death are made salient, people turn toward the safe haven of close relationships to manage potential anxiety (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002). Indeed, researchers have found that people seek out secure relationships to help manage death-related anxiety (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). This has led researchers to contend that terror management defenses involve a tripartite response of cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships (Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005). These relationships can offer actual protection and safety from impending physical threats, symbolic validation of being around ideologically like-minded individuals who support one's way of seeing the world, and loving affirmation that may distract from the threat of death or imbue everyday life with significance, purpose, and meaning.

To be sure, these three defensive processes work in tandem. Individuals live in societies where cultural worldviews are socially validated and communally expressed (though with individual variation), and they seek self-esteem by living up to the standards of their particular worldview, often under the scrutiny and judgment of others, who may assess the degree to which they are meeting such standards. People often surround themselves with others who share their beliefs and can offer validation that their way of seeing the world is correct; moreover, when one does embrace the views of others and feels included, they may report greater self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, a highly effective and optimally operating defense against death involves a coherent set of beliefs in which one can clearly discern its standards and ascertain self-esteem while being supported and affirmed by ideologically similar close others. Religion appears to fit all these criteria quite well.

The Existential and Individual Functions of Religious Beliefs

Terror management theory suggests that existential function of religion is to mitigate death-related anxiety through adherence to a worldview that promises both symbolic and literal immortality (Vail et al., 2010). For example, religious adherents are not only promised to live on in the minds and memories of other because of living moral lives dedicated to a higher purpose, but they are also promised *actual* immortality in an afterlife, where their soul lives on in eternity. The belief in the supernatural, which provides a meaning that transcends this world, the existence of everlasting souls, and faith in a literal afterlife all reduce the meaninglessness of this life and virtually vanquish the fear of death by promising the continuance of life and by imbuing this life with meaning (e.g., Van Tongeren et al., 2017). Religion appears to offer a solution to the thorny problem of death.

The aforementioned research on cultural worldviews in the wake of existential concerns suggests that the bulk of the psychological defenses oriented toward the management of death-related anxiety reside in one's meaningful conception of reality and the ability to live up to the standards set forth by this set of beliefs, including those that are validated by a community of like-minded others. For this reason, religion is often considered a prototypical cultural worldview (Jonas & Fischer, 2006): religions have narratives regarding how humans came into existence, set forth standards of moral conduct and righteous living, and often make claims about how to vanquish death through the securing literal immortality in an afterlife (Vail et al., 2010). These beliefs help reduce death-related anxiety (Van Tongeren, McIntosh, Raad, & Pae, 2013). Accordingly, religion serves a powerful existential function.

Religious beliefs are substantively varied, and people can hold religious beliefs with similar variability. A primary way of conceptualizing religious beliefs is by understanding an individual's religious orientation. Individuals who have an *intrinsic religious* view religion as a

central and organizing feature in their thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behavior (Allport & Ross, 1967). They hold their religious beliefs because they believe them to be true, and the existential benefits of such beliefs are clear. Individuals high in intrinsic religiousness, for whom religion is of central importance, are less defensive following death if they are first reminded of their religious beliefs: that is, affirming religious beliefs serves an existentially soothing function for intrinsically religious individuals (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). Similarly, those high in intrinsic religiousness report lower death-related anxiety and greater intercultural tolerance following reminders of religion (Van Tongeren et al., 2013). Moreover, such individuals are likely to hold beliefs in literal immortality, which reduces afterlife-related anxiety, in part by enhancing perceptions that life is meaningful (Van Tongeren, Pennington et al., 2017). It appears that intrinsic religiousness is ideally suited to manage existential concerns.

Individuals who have an *extrinsic religious* orientation are motivated more by the personal, social, or protective benefits of religious beliefs (Allport & Ross, 1967). Such individuals may engage in religious practices or hold religious beliefs because they enjoy the social features of a religious community (e.g., making friends, establishing business connections), desire personal benefit or gain (e.g., asking God or some divine power for peace and happiness), or seek protection and comfort in times of need (e.g., God's protection from threat, illness, misfortune, or harm). Accordingly, religious beliefs are instrumental for an alternative motivation, and these beliefs may not occupy a central feature in their life. Previous research has found that existential reminders are particularly unsettling for individuals high in extrinsic religiousness (Van Tongeren, Hook, Davis, Aten, & Davis, 2016).

Still some individuals view *religion as a quest* (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). Such individuals do not think religion is necessarily a set of fixed beliefs that one must learn and hold

with certainty, but rather, they view religion as a journey in which they, and their beliefs, continually grow, evolve, and change. Doubt and uncertainty are not signs of deficiency but rather are lauded important features of honestly holding any religious beliefs. Thus, individuals with a quest orientation are typically more open, less defensive, and more likely to change their beliefs (Beck, 2006).

A helpful approach to viewing religious orientations is to locate them on a spectrum ranging from *security-focused* on one endpoint and *growth-focused* on the other (Van Tongeren, Davis, Hook, & Johnson, 2016). Security-focused beliefs highlight the defensive nature of religious beliefs and are principally marked by: the belief that God (or the divine or sacred) protects adherents from danger; the specialness of the individual and ingroup; suspicion and mistrust of nonbelieving outgroup members; dogmatism and certainty; and believing that one's beliefs are superior to other beliefs (Beck, 2004). Moreover, these beliefs are exclusive: they rule out the possibility that other views may be valid. Examples of beliefs frameworks that are chiefly security-focused include religious fundamentalism, such as believing in the inerrancy and literal interpretation of biblical scripture, and defensive theology, which are theological beliefs held dogmatically and with certainty. Research has found that individuals holding security-focused beliefs typically report greater meaning in life and lower death-related anxiety, though they also report less tolerance and greater intergroup conflict (Van Tongeren, Hook, & Davis, 2013; Van Tongeren, Davis et al., 2016).

Growth-focused beliefs are those in which the individual is oriented toward openness, tolerance, and expanding one's potential repertoire of beliefs. Such individuals prioritize questions over answers, doubt over certainty, and tentativeness over conviction. A hallmark growth-focused religious orientation is quest religiousness. Such individuals are more likely to

value cooperation across ideologically different groups rather than defending the veracity of their beliefs. Accordingly, research has found that embracing growth-focused religious beliefs is associated with greater tolerance and less prejudice (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005), though with the cost of lower meaning in life (and a more pronounced search for meaning), greater death-related anxiety, and more existential anxiety (Van Tongeren, Davis et al., 2016).

Taken together, how one holds their religious beliefs can have profound effects on their reaction to existential reminders. Security-focused religious beliefs, such as defensive religiousness, provide people with meaning in life and can offer a steadfast buffer against the negative effects of existential reminder such as death (Beck, 2004, Van Tongeren, Hook et al., 2013; Van Tongeren, Davis et al., 2016). However, they are typically rigid and inflexible, and they often carry significant interpersonal and intergroup costs. Conversely, growth-focused beliefs promote interpersonal and intergroup functioning, especially in situations where ideological differences are powerful and salient, but are less effective in reducing existential anxiety (Beck, 2006; Van Tongeren, Davis et al., 2016). So, *how* people hold their beliefs matter; but, so too, does the specific *content* of what people believe.

Conceptualizing God

People vary in what they believe about God or the divine. And in the wake of suffering and existential threats, sometimes these beliefs help and other times they hinder. For example, people vary in the degree to which they make supernatural attributions, or assertions about how, and how much, supernatural agents may have been involved in aspects of human life (Ray, Lockman, Jones, & Kelly, 2015). Some may believe that God is controlling and plays a central role in every aspect of daily life. Others may believe that God is more passive, either allowing events to occur or perhaps only mildly interested but mostly disengaged. The differences

between those who believe in an interactive God, who is actively involved in the daily life of humans, and a detached “blind watchmaker,” who set the world into motion and is rather inactive or passive in everyday life, should yield profound variation in the psychological experiences following negative events. Although both views of God may view God as somewhat “responsible” for events (depending on whether people believe that God predestined all events to unfold in a particular way, even if God is somewhat “detached”), if God is actively involved in daily life, and in fact *causes* everything in life, it stands to reason that people may blame God—and harbor anger and resentment—when life does not go as expected. Indeed, people who make such attributions often report greater anger toward God, which can have negative mental health effects (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011; Stauner, Exline, Pargament, Wilt, & Grubbs, in press). On the other hand, if people believe that God is generally disinterested or uninvolved in human life, there is little to reconcile when things goes wrong, other than the larger question of why God isn’t more active at all. In the case of suffering, trauma, or concrete threats of death, people must come to terms with their beliefs about the role of God.

Closely related to beliefs about the role of supernatural agents, such as God, in (particularly negative) events, are beliefs about the nature and character of God or the sacred. Is God perceived to be loving, kind, and compassionate, or angry, vindictive, and judgmental (Zahl & Gibson, 2012)? Beliefs about God’s nature can include beliefs that God is a “strict father” style authoritarian (demanding obedience and punishing violators), and a “nurturing mother” style benevolent being (forgiving, gracious, and merciful) (Johnson, Li, Cohen, & Okun, 2013). People hold doctrinal beliefs about God’s nature, known as god-concepts, which are types of cognitive knowledge structures or schemas about God. However, these beliefs are not simply taught, but can also be formed through experiences. Thus, people also develop god-images,

which are experiential representations of God that people hold in their mind (for a review, see Davis, Granqvist, & Sharp, in press). These two ways of understanding God are related, and people may flexibly adjust their doctrinal views of God as a result of their perception of God's character during times of stress or adversity (Van Tongeren, Sanders et al., in press).

The beliefs that people hold about God's nature carry certain assumptions—which may or may not hold up to reality. And some of these beliefs may be particularly challenging to hold together. For example, if people believe that God is very benevolent *and* that God is in control of all things, how can they reconcile God's goodness and ultimate power when tragedy befalls them? How could a loving God cause their house to be obliterated by a hurricane? Or why would a merciful God fail to answer their prayers to heal their ailing child? When life is going well and the positive features of life are most salient, these beliefs likely operate without question. But the cold reality of suffering cast these assumptions into bold relief, and people must come to terms with the possibility that their beliefs may not support the weight of reality. And suffering may expose cracks in their worldviews that leave them prone to facing existential realities and dealing directly with the concomitant anxiety.

When Beliefs Fail

Systems of meaning—most notably, religion—play a powerful role in maintaining psychological equanimity both in the absence of threat and when threats are salient. So, what happens when the very beliefs designed to mitigate the fear of death fail to bear the weight of existential pressures elicited by suffering? That is, what happens when cultural worldviews cannot account for the reality that people experience in their lives? When the assumptions promoted by religious teachings (or any other cultural worldview) are shattered, people often face existential realities and are gripped with anxiety.

According to anxiety buffer disruption theory (ABDT; Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2011), which is a clinical application and extension of TMT, when people's cultural worldviews are sufficiently disrupted and unable to manage the potential existential terror elicited by facing certain realities of life (e.g., one's mortality), people experience severe anxiety and may be predisposed to demonstrate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)-like symptoms. Individuals who report PTSD often have experienced a severe, life-threatening traumatic event, in which their own safety or life was jeopardized. This encounter with trauma can shatter one's beliefs (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, 1992), rendering such beliefs unable to account for the complexity of life and ineffectual in allaying existential fear. ABDT contends that worldviews are anxiety buffers to existential concerns, such as death. For example, people hold religious beliefs that mitigate the anxiety associated with death (e.g., beliefs in the afterlife), isolation (e.g., perceiving God as intimate and close), identity (e.g., conceptualizing oneself as a child of God), freedom/groundlessness (e.g., basing decisions on perceptions of "God's will"), and meaninglessness (e.g., finding purpose in following religious teachings and serving God). When these cultural worldviews are disrupted and their assumptions are shattered—through suffering, trauma, or some event that pressures these assumptions—one is left to face the full terror of existential realities. According to ABDT, when people's assumptions are shattered, and they do not have the protective comfort of their cultural worldviews, their ability to cope with existential anxiety breaks down and they suffer from fully facing these grave concerns.

It is possible that some beliefs in one's (religious) cultural worldview are proven false, such as *just world* beliefs in which people assume that life is fair and everyone "gets what they deserve" (Lerner, 1980), or that one's entire belief structure is cast into doubt, such as in the case of religious deidentification or deconversion. Whether the incompatibility between one's beliefs

and experiences centers around a major component or involves the wholesale abandonment of beliefs, the key feature is a *discrepancy* between how people believed the world should work and their experience of trauma and suffering (Park, 2010). According to Park's meaning-making model, people tend to appraise the meaning of a situation relative to their global meaning structures, in order to make sense of the event. For example, when there is congruence between beliefs (e.g., God is loving and good toward those that love God) and experiences (e.g., my life is going well and I feel loved by God), people tend to flourish. But when beliefs fail to account for people's experiences in life (e.g., a sudden death of a family member feels like a spiritual violation from an unloving or cruel God), and there is an incongruence between beliefs and reality (e.g., my belief that God is loving is not my experience), people are no longer safely hidden behind their abstract belief systems and must come face to face with concrete existential certainties, such as death. Such an encounter reduces people's felt meaning in life. In order to address these concerns, and recover lost meaning, people strive to make meaning, either by adjusting their beliefs or reevaluating their situation—either process is aimed at restoring psychological equanimity through achieving coherence between beliefs and reality.

Suffering Elicits Existential Concerns

Suffering is an existential issue. New clinical frameworks have emerged that conceptualize and treat suffering in this context (Van Tongeren & Van Tongeren, 2020). Previous work has argued that suffering—defined as experiences of persistent distress or emotional pain, often when there is little to no resolution in sight—is intricately linked to meaning in life (Edwards & Van Tongeren, in press). Those who reported active suffering reported lower meaning in life, and this reduction in meaning impaired overall well-being. Meaning is a multidimensional construct that includes making sense of the world (i.e.,

coherence), feeling valued and important (i.e., significance), and having a direction or orientation that links to something greater than oneself (i.e., purpose) (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Meaning provides people with a sense of existential security and psychological equanimity (Yalom, 1980), and it is positively associated with mental health (Kashdan & McKnight, 2013; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), physical health (Czekierdaa, Banika, Park, & Luszczynskaa, 2017; Hooker, Master, & Park, 2018; Roepke, Jayawickreme, & Riffle, 2014; Steger, Fitch-Martin, Donnelly, & Rickard, 2015), and longevity (Cohen, Bavishi, Rozanski, 2016; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Krause, 2009).

When people experience ongoing periods of stress or suffering, their sense of meaning in life erodes, leading to deleterious effects on mental and physical health (Edwards & Van Tongeren, in press; Van Tongeren, Krause, Hill, Ironson, & Pargament, 2017). As meaning fades, people may come face to face with existential concerns, such as death. Indeed, previous research has found that meaning helps manage death-related concerns (Van Tongeren & Green, 2018). Thus, suffering can predispose people to existential concerns, especially when their expected ways of understanding the world do not match up with their experiences of adversity. Suffering erodes meaning and people face the harsh realities of death and other ultimate concerns.

Facing Death

Previous work on TMT has shown that as a first line of defense, people tend to avoid or deny their vulnerability to death: they rid their mind of conscious reminders of death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). However, for those who are persistently suffering, these reminders of death cannot be denied or suppressed—death is a concrete and unavoidable possibility or reality. How might people come into direct confrontation with death? That is, how

might one's mortality become salient through experiences of suffering? Although there are numerous ways in which people might become aware of their eventual demise, I briefly discuss threads of research from three direct threats of death (that are hard to avoid) in which religion may play a significant role: disasters, terminal or chronic illness, and traumatic events.

Disasters

Disasters can pose a significant threat of death to a large number of individuals, and it is often a reminder of mortality to those who were less directly affected. Disasters can take numerous forms. Natural disasters can cause massive damage and lead to a staggering number of fatalities, which is why natural disasters are a concrete threat of death. In times of need, people often turn to religious beliefs to help cope with these threats. Research has found that among disaster survivors, those who are able to create a sense of spiritual meaning are less likely to report PTSD-related symptoms when the effects of the disaster are high; but among those who are unable to find spiritual meaning, the greater the negative effect of the disaster, the worse their PTSD symptoms (Haynes et al., 2017). Spiritual meaning acted as a buffer against deleterious mental health consequences following a disaster. For example, when survivors are able to view their suffering as having some higher or nobler spiritual meaning, they report fewer symptoms; perhaps viewing one's loss as "part of God's plan" serves a meaning-preserving function that feel less congruent and traumatic.

Sometimes, disasters are less of an "act of God" and more precisely caused by humans. Human-made disasters, such as 9/11, are often concrete threats to death. Research has found that reminders of 9/11 operate similarly to mortality salience inductions, eliciting defensive reactions (Landau et al., 2004). Recent research has found that priming video of images of natural disasters and 9/11 operated similarly among research participants: it increased the perceived discrepancy

between people's beliefs about God and their experiences of God, unless participants were high in intrinsic religiousness (Van Tongeren, Davis et al., 2019). Intrinsically religious individuals maintained a consistent view of God that was congruent with their experiences, suggesting that among individuals for whom religion is central and deeply integrated, religion is a powerful coping mechanism to help them deal with concrete, personal threats of death. When people can draw from their own religious sources of comfort, they are less likely to need to readjust their views of God in the wake of tragedy.

Other disasters also elicit responses that vary based on religious beliefs. Following the Ebola outbreak in 2014, research examined the effects of making Ebola salient on political and social attitudes (Van Tongeren et al., 2016). Importantly, reminders of Ebola operated very similar to mortality salience: among those who were high in extrinsic religiousness, these personally threatening reminders lead to endorsement of more restrictive social policies (e.g., travel restrictions to and from Africa). However, this was not found among individuals high in intrinsic religiousness. When religion is peripheral, people may act defensively in the wake of death-reminders; however, those whose lives center around their important and cherished religious beliefs may be better protected from such threats and react with more tolerance.

Because disasters are broad and often escape easy causal explanation, people may turn toward their religious beliefs to make sense of this tragedy. Some may blame God or lean on supernatural attributions to explain the events as "acts of God." Across diverse lines of research, the reviewed findings suggest that: (a) disasters are often personally threatening, concrete threats of death, (b) intrinsically religious individuals are able to draw from their religious beliefs to cope with disasters, with fewer negative effects on their views of God and greater psychological

equanimity, and (c) extrinsically religious individuals may respond defensively to disasters and do not reap the positive benefits of religion in times of threat.

Terminal and Chronic Illness

The receipt of negative health diagnosis, such as a chronic medical condition or terminal illnesses, can elicit significant concerns about death. Toward this end, the terror management health model (TMHM; Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008), which is a theoretical extension of TMT in the health domain contends that the physical body, and notably physical illness, pose a significant threat because of the relationship of the physical body to eventual death. When people receive a diagnosis (and especially one that is persistent and inescapable), it is stark reminder of their mortality. Although religion is often employed as an effective coping mechanism among individuals living with serious illness (e.g., Tarakeshwar et al., 2008), some religious beliefs may impede seeking medical care. Research has found that when mortality is salient (which is often the case among the chronically or terminally ill), believers high in religious fundamentalism are more likely to refuse medical treatments and rely on religious solutions (e.g., prayer, hoping for divine intervention) for their illnesses (Vess, Arndt, Cox, Routledge, & Goldenberg, 2009). However, other research has found that religious individuals are more likely to engage in intensive, often heroic, measures to prolong life when they are nearing death (Phelps et al., 2010).

When death is near, people may turn toward religion. However, the type of religious beliefs that one holds plays a large role in how individuals come to terms with, and live in the reality of, their medical diagnoses. Highly intrinsically religious individuals may employ religious coping, whereas those high in religious fundamentalism may refuse medical treatment and rely on their own faith, or hope for divine intervention, to stave off the impending threat of

death. This work suggests that it is not merely that religious individuals fare better (or worse) when facing death. Rather, the content of one's beliefs and how people hold such beliefs matter greatly.

Trauma

When individuals experience a traumatic event, it is possible that death becomes a central concern. Trauma—which can include severe emotional or physical abuse, realistic threats of injury or death, surviving war or combat, or the witnessing of loss of life—may cause one's mortality to become poignantly salient. Previous research has found that people often report experiencing positive growth following a traumatic event (i.e., posttraumatic growth; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Linley & Joseph, 2004). However, the concept of posttraumatic growth has received some criticism (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). Nevertheless, whether these reports of growth accurately indicates actual growth (Frazier et al., 2009), or are instead a coping mechanism motivated by a desire to see one's life as improving (MacFarland & Alvaro, 2000), research has found that religion is positively associated with reports of growth following a trauma (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). People who employ religious coping strategies that brought them closer to God reported experiencing posttraumatic growth; this relationship was found among those who faced death: survivors of cardiac surgery (Ai, Hall, Pargament, & Tice, 2013). In some cases, religion can be helpful perceiving growth after trauma. Some people view their lives as somehow better off because of spiritual and personal lessons learned through suffering.

There are many possible pathways by which religion helps individuals perceive growth, but researchers contend that finding meaning often plays a central role in this process (Linley & Joseph, 2011). When individuals are able to make sense of the event (finding coherence), can

still feel valuable and loved in the wake of trauma (achieving feelings of significance), and have a direction or broader goal that they are working toward (having purpose), life will feel more meaningful, and they may more readily identify ways in which they have experienced positive growth since the traumatic event. Religion can help facilitate this process (see Hall, Shannonhouse, Aten, McMartin, & Silverman, 2018 for a review). More specifically, religion can help individuals (a) translate an experience of trauma into spiritual terms that makes sense and imbue it with new meaning (e.g., viewing the trauma in a way that places it in a religious context), (b) transcend themselves and connect with others to feel significant (e.g., developing relationships in one's religious community or seeking closeness with the divine), and (c) transform their suffering into something greater by having a bigger and broader purpose (e.g., viewing their trauma or suffering as part of "God's will" or facilitating the development of character, resilience, or virtue).

Religion and Suffering: Fighting, Freezing, Fleeing, or Flourishing

The psychological reaction to the discrepancy between one's beliefs and experiences (often found during ongoing suffering) typically leads to compensatory processes that can look quite different depending on the individual (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). From a meaning-based perspective, individuals usually attempt to assimilate their experiences to fit into their existing belief frameworks, or they accommodate their belief structures to better match their experiences (Park, 2010). People are motivated to address the potential anxiety resulting from the confrontation with existential realities that are made salient by suffering in myriad ways. Specifically, I propose that they may do so by responding defensively, denying, de-identifying, or possibly by experiencing growth and maturation. A hypothetical model of understanding the religious response to suffering is depicted in Figure 1.

The most common experience of religious suffering is one in which one's beliefs and experiences are incongruent. In these situations, three responses may be typical. First, one may respond *defensively*, or *fighting*. Rather than attempt to modify one's beliefs, defensive reactions are those in which an individual doubles down on their commitment, engages in worldview bolstering behaviors, and increases faith in their own beliefs, often through the derogation of alternative beliefs (and the proponents who advocate such beliefs) (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997). A long line of TMT research has found that following reminders of mortality salience, when the cognitive accessibility of death has been elevated and existential anxiety is rampant, individuals react defensively by bolstering aspects of their cultural worldview either directly (reaffirming one's core values, increasing commitment to beliefs) or indirectly (disparaging alternative viewpoints, derogating those that hold different beliefs) (Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004). This can bear out in religiously motivated violence (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2006) and interpersonal aggression toward critical religious outgroup members (Van Tongeren, Stafford et al., 2016). By affirming their existing beliefs, the perceived discrepancy appears smaller, and these defensive maneuvers are aimed at reestablishing psychological equanimity. However, according to ABDT, if the trauma is severe enough, if the encounter with death is potent enough, or if one's cultural worldview is completely shattered, by suffering people tend to respond with PTSD-like symptoms, and do not turn toward typical terror management defense mechanisms (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2011). Rather, their coping mechanisms are undermined, leaving them more fully prone to the anxiety of death (or another existential concern).

Second, individuals may respond by *denying* any potential discrepancy and cognitively *freezing*. Rather than address a potential incongruence between beliefs and experiences, some

individuals are unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge this mismatch and instead explicitly maintain that their religious beliefs and their experience of suffering are not incompatible, even when they are privately, or implicitly, experiencing stress and anxiety. That is, in their conscious mind, their religious beliefs simply pose no problem at all. They may maintain positive illusions that their beliefs can account for their severe emotional distress, although they are experiencing internal strife and uncertainty. They may engage in cognitive freezing (Kunda, 1990), where they fixate on their established beliefs and continue to work to force their experiences to align with such beliefs. Here, growth is unlikely, because all efforts are directed toward keeping all current beliefs intact and unaltered. This differs from an actual congruence, or the hard work of experiencing growth, in that such individuals fail to recognize any potential for a discrepancy or concede that they are experiencing any stress, uncertainty, or anxiety. So, for some, they go on living as though nothing ever happened.

Third, some individuals may find the gap between their beliefs and life experiences to simply be too great, and so they *flee* religion by *de-identifying*. That is, they leave religion. By jettisoning their religious beliefs, there is no longer a discrepancy between their (newly updated) worldview and their experiences of suffering. In this way, they deal with the incongruence by abandoning their religious identity. Although work on religious de-identification is relatively novel, recent research reveals that as many as 20% of Americans (drawn from a nationally representative sample) may have experienced religious de-identification: they once identified as religious but no longer do so (Van Tongeren, DeWall, & Chen, 2019). Although the motivation for becoming a religious “done” (i.e., religious de-identifier) varies, it is possible that some are compelled to do so because their beliefs can no longer sufficiently explain their life, so they alter this component of their identity. Interestingly, following de-identification religious psychological

processes and associated behaviors often persist, suggesting that religion may leave a “residue” that remains after one’s identity changes. After suffering or trauma, some people might find that the most authentic response to adjust their worldview to match reality by abandoning their religious identity (and perhaps even many of their religious beliefs or practices) altogether, and so they leave religion. Indeed, in the wake of senseless abuse and countless scandals, many people have left the Church.

Finally, in the face of suffering, some actually do experience positive *growth and maturation*—that is, some experience *flourishing*. For some, the incongruity of life’s experiences with their own beliefs leads them to revise, expand, alter, or deepen their religious beliefs in ways that are positive, prosocial, more authentic, and non-defensive (e.g., accommodation; Park, 2010). Previous research has found that the encounter with mortality can lead to a “roar of the awakening,” in which people clarify their priorities in life, decide to live more authentically, and engage in purposive actions oriented toward living lives of meaning and significance (Martin, Campbell, & Henry, 2004). Once people have come face to face with death, it shifts their perspective in ways that change their values, broaden their perspective to go beyond themselves, and invest in ways of building lasting meaning (see Vail et al., 2012). I hasten to clarify that for some, a sense of flourishing can be gained by fleeing. Some individuals experience personal growth by embracing a newly nonreligious identity, which provides them with a greater sense of coherence and meaning than holding on to a religious identity that no longer fits. Indeed, some people might find considerable relief by shifting their religious identity, beliefs, or practices in a way that is authentic to their experience of suffering. Still for others, they are able to integrate their beliefs and the reality of suffering that yields a deeper, richer set of religious beliefs and experiences and may lead to spiritual maturation.

Although suffering—and the direct confrontation with death—does lead many people to respond defensively, there are situations where positive growth, deepening of one's faith, a maturation of spirituality, and a more prosocial response may be possible. Although individual differences in personality and the contextual differences in people's specific suffering play a role, it also stands to reason that certain features of religion may be more prone to positive responses to suffering.

Toward Existentially Resilient Religion

Not all religious beliefs are created equal. That is, not all systems of religious meaning are equitable in their ability to address existential concerns. First, how one holds beliefs matters. Various threads of research suggest that an internalized form of religion in which such beliefs are of central importance and direct one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—notably, intrinsic religiousness—may be particularly well-suited to reduce existential anxiety (e.g., Jonas & Fischer, 2006; Vail et al., 2010; Van Tongeren et al., 2017, 2018, 2019). Religious beliefs that loom large in one's sense of identity are valuable to managing existential fears, such as death.

Second, as previously mentioned, the content of such beliefs matter. Religious beliefs that are oriented toward maintaining security often protect individuals from existential anxiety but elicit defensiveness when existential concerns are made salient, whereas religious beliefs oriented toward growth are less effectual in dealing with such concerns, but promote tolerance, openness, and more favorable reactions toward attitudinally dissimilar others (Van Tongeren, Davis et al., 2016). Surely, as mentioned before, these different belief systems have tradeoffs; some are better at reducing existential concerns whereas others are better at promoting interpersonal and intergroup functioning. That is, either ultimate concerns are quieted by making social life more tumultuous for those with whom one disagrees, or one is able to interact

peacefully with new cultures and explore novel ideologies but doing so undermines the ability to calm existential terror. Looked at this way, social and existential goals appear to be at odds.

However, might there be a religious response that is effective in mollifying existential anxiety elicited by direct threats and does not incur negative social consequences? That is, might there be a religious orientation or set of beliefs that offer both social benefits (e.g., prosocial interpersonal and intergroup functioning) *and* reduces death-related anxiety (e.g., promise of an afterlife) for the future? Are certain adaptations of religious orientations that can handle doubt, questioning, and uncertainty while promoting intergroup tolerance and openness (e.g., quest religiousness) that might be particularly useful? A religious meaning system that is able to effectively handle existential concerns without incurring negative social costs would be an *existentially resilient religion* (see Van Tongeren & Van Tongeren, 2020). By existentially resilient religion, I mean a set of religious beliefs that (a) provides sufficient structure to mitigate existential anxiety, but (b) is adaptively flexible enough to account for reality of suffering, and (c) promotes remaining humble and open to new perspectives held by others. Such an approach to religiousness might be particularly powerful.

Future research may benefit from exploring the nature, predictors, correlates, and consequences of such an existentially resilient form of religion. What types of beliefs, and what manners of holding such beliefs, are associated with balancing demands for managing social relations and reducing existential anxiety? For example, quest religion has been associated with increased tolerance toward dissimilar others but is often poorly suited to allay existential anxiety; similarly, religious fundamentalism provides security and structure but often at the cost of tolerance and openness (Van Tongeren et al., 2016). Is there a religious approach that is balanced enough to satisfy security *and* growth motivations? And what would predict this form of

religiousness? What are some intrapersonal, interpersonal, and existential consequences of such beliefs? Finally, how might such beliefs be maintained when the threats of death are concrete, direct, and unavoidable?

There are several exciting avenues of future research that could catalyze research on the existential function of religion in response to direct threats of death. First, recent research has started to explore the idea of *spiritual fortitude*, which one's perceived degree of spiritual resources in the wake of extreme adversity (Van Tongeren, Aten et al., 2019). Initial work with disaster survivors has been promising, suggesting that individuals high in spiritual fortitude may engage in positive religious coping, which can lead to meaning in life and spiritual well-being (McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2018). Future work could explore this burgeoning area of research. Second, more work has been focused on religions "nones," including those that are "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). SBNRs may be a growing segment of the population, yet less research has focused on this group than those who adhere to more traditional forms of religion. Might such individuals reap the existential benefits of spirituality without the intergroup conflict associated with religion? Future work should examine how such individuals fare when threats of death are direct and salient. Finally, how might religious deconversion, reversion, or religious switching affect how people respond to suffering and threats of death; and to what degree might they be a result of such adversity in life? I have suggested that some might leave religion following adversity, but perhaps those who have switched or reconverted might be more existentially resilient to threats and may instead experience religious growth and spiritual maturation when future adversity strikes. Future research could address this possibility.

Concluding Thoughts

Suffering often makes existential concerns an inescapable reality. Threats of death, and other ultimate fears, become salient and unavoidable. As people turn toward their religious beliefs to make meaning and cope with these negative events, both what people believe and how they hold such beliefs play a central role in their responses to these deep and profound questions. As the only animal that is aware of its future death, and the only animal that is religious, and given the consequences of various religious beliefs, better understanding how people turn toward, and engage, the Sacred in times of need is an important intellectual and social endeavor.

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Figure 1. Religious responses to existential suffering.