

What the Fear of Death Does to Your Beliefs

Ross Pomeroy

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Over a decade ago, psychologists John Jost, Jack Glaser, Arie Kruglanski, and Frank Sulloway launched a far-reaching and in-depth analysis of politically conservative belief. Sweeping through the scientific literature, they sought to determine what psychological variables predicted conservatism. Their resulting meta-analysis consisted of 22,818 cases from twelve countries. What they found was intriguing, yet unsurprising. Conservatism was tied to a need for order, structure, and closure as well as intolerance of ambiguity. It negatively correlated with being open to new experiences.

One trait in particular led the pack, however, and this one was somewhat surprising. That trait? Death anxiety. That's right. There was no stronger predictor of conservative political belief than a "persistent fear of one's own mortality."

Death is inevitable, a fate destined for all of us. Yet despite its universality, it is the ultimate unknown. We can peer into the distant reaches of space and time, yet we will almost certainly never see past our own mortality. Death is an end. As conscious, living beings, it is only natural to be afraid of it.

And those who fear it more, it seems, tend to be ideologically conservative.

They also tend to be more religious.

A 2011 study measured religiosity and fear of death in college students in Malaysia, Turkey, and the United States. The researchers behind the study discovered that subjects who reported a greater fear of death were also more religious. Interestingly, another study examining death anxiety within religious groups showed that parishioners who reported stronger belief showed reduced death anxiety than those reporting weaker belief. Fear may drive people to religion, but religion also alleviates their fear of death.

Even nonbelievers aren't completely immune to death's belief-altering effects. In 2012, psychologists at the University of Otago in New Zealand brought students into the lab and asked them to write about their own deaths. Freshly primed with their own mortality, both religious and nonreligious students unconsciously showed increased levels of belief. In a subsequent computer questionnaire, religious participants were faster to press a button to affirm God's existence than those who weren't primed with thoughts of death, but non-religious participants were slower to press a button denying God's existence compared to their control counterparts.

"While death-priming made religious participants more certain about the reality of religious entities, non-religious participants showed less confidence in their disbelief," Associate Professor Halberstadt stated in a press release.

So why does fear of death seem to drive people to conservatism and religious belief?

The intuitive answer where religion is concerned is that religion offers a reason not to be afraid of death, specifically, that death is only a doorway to a wondrous new existence in some sort of shimmering afterlife. However, after conducting a longitudinal analysis of 155 men and women in San Francisco, Wellesley College psychologists Paul Wink and Julia Scott reported a more nuanced explanation, "that firmness and consistency of beliefs and practices, rather than religiousness per se, buffers against death anxiety in old age."

What about conservatism?

“The core ideology of conservatism... is motivated by needs that vary situationally and dispositionally to manage uncertainty and threat,” Jost and his colleagues explained. Look at the issues American conservatives tend to tout: a strong military, border control, the 2nd Amendment. All of these are intended to foster safety and security, and ultimately guard against mortality.

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