

The well-known dictum that there are no atheists in foxholes (the source of this phrase is uncertain) is false. After all, there is even a military organization for atheists, the [Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers](#). Having read several the testimonies from these military men and women, I was struck by the extent to which (Christian) religiosity (regular prayer, semi-compulsory meetings with chaplains) is an ingrained part of military practice, and how tough this must be for atheists. As one MAAF member put it: "I was there for most of these prayers thinking, 'Religion is why we are in this war [Iraq] in the first place, haven't you guys figured that out yet?'"



Gary Cooper in Howard Hawk's *Sergeant York* (1941)

Cognitive scientists of religion do not deny that people can remain atheist in the face of mortal danger. But there is a steady stream of literature indicating that, although one can be an explicit atheist in such cases, priming people with mortality-salient stimuli seems to increase implicit religiosity. For instance, Tracy et al. (2011) found that reminding people of their mortality increases their propensity to accept creationist accounts and to reject evolutionary theory. This result was obtained regardless of the participants' religion (or lack thereof), religiosity, educational background, or preexisting attitude toward evolution. Jong et al. (accepted manuscript) showed that although mortality primes do not increase people's explicit religious convictions, they do increase implicit measures of religiosity. I will refer to this phenomenon as Implicit Foxhole Theism (IFT).

The theoretical framework in the literature to explain IFT is terror management theory (TMT). Accordingly, people cope with their awareness of death by investing in some kind of immortality. Religious beliefs, which cross-culturally, but not universally, have a literal form of immortality in their package deals, play a salient role in this.

Admittedly, not all religions paint a rosy picture of the afterlife.

Ecclesiastes, that wonderful bible book that, according to theologian Jenson makes Nietzsche and more recent nihilistic authors seem pusillanimous, mentions the Sheol (and God), but seems for all intents and purposes not to hold belief in an afterlife:

Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. Go, eat your food with

gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. [...] Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave [sheol], where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom (Ecclesiastes, 9:4-10).

Grim pictures of the afterlife (or lack thereof) are not limited to the Judeo-Christian and Greek traditions. In Shintoism (Japan), the pre-Buddhist hereafter was Yomi, is a Sheol-like place where the dead are in a continuous state of decomposition (see image).



It is even worse in Vanuatu, Oceania, where the hereafter (Wies) is described as follows:

The life in Wies is not a particularly pleasant one, it seems. The king of this land of the dead is a being called Anrum Mbwilei, who was himself never a living person. He stands in the centre of the village dancing ground in Wies and beats the gongs. He beats them so hard that he excretes continually. His excrement is the food of the dead, but ghosts may escape having to eat it by bringing with them from the land of the living the rotten stump of an Erythrina (nendar) tree (this is from Deacon's 1934 classic *Malekula: a vanishing people in the New Hebrides*).

Conjoined with the fact that young children believe in an afterlife even before they know they are mortal, as studies by Jesse Bering and other have shown, terror management theories seem in a pretty hopeless state. And it is especially in the light of this that I am wondering how death salience prime studies should be interpreted. If TMT doesn't explain why we believe in an afterlife, and if reliable witnesses (military people) testify that they do not burst out in spontaneous prayer in life-or-death situations, how can we explain that death primes increase implicit measures of religiosity?

My proposed answer to this puzzle (and I would be interested to hear others' thoughts on this) is first, that fear of death is a real problem for animals that are capable of mental time-travel like us. Second, although TMT does not explain the origin or prime function of religion, it does explain one of the several functions that religions can have. I am not endorsing a functionalist account of religion, where we can explain the origin and transmission of religious beliefs and practices in terms of what they accomplish. If, for instance, Stewart Guthrie's view is correct, and religion emerges out of a form of agency detection (more specifically, anthropomorphism) it could still be the case that religions have many different functions, which they can fulfill to various extents. Given that religion is not a natural kind, but a differentiated activity, we can expect that some religious traditions have functions that others lack. For instance, faith healing cannot cure cancer but can provide some subjective forms of relief and may also help some psycho-somatic problems. Thus healing (or providing some form of psychological relief from physical distress caused by illness, infertility and other conditions) can be an important function of religion. In some religions, healing has this function, not in others.

Similarly, in western culture (as in many other cultures) the imagined hereafter happens to be a pleasant place. In his fascinating review of afterlife beliefs, Nähri proposes that concepts of the afterlife often adhere to evolved aesthetic and other dispositions, e.g., the afterlife is a beautiful garden (Islam, Jehovah's witnesses), a planet where one has all comforts and is united with family and friends (mormonism), a hall where one can feast, booze and have sexual intercourse at will (Valhalla in ancient Scandinavian religion) and so on. Given that we happen to live in a culture that has an elaborate belief in an afterlife, and that atheists (even those who were atheists as children) do grow up with public representations of this afterlife all around them, it seems rather straightforward to explain IFT. I would predict that people from cultures without rosy afterlife beliefs would have less strong measures of IFT when confronted with mortality primes. Perhaps there are studies that confirm this prediction, of which I am not aware?

In sum, it seems to me that by rejecting TMT wholesale, some cognitive scientists of religion have thrown out baby with bathwater. Even if TMT cannot explain religiosity, the occurrence of IFT, conjoined with the cultural success of religions with happy, positive outlooks on the afterlife (e.g., the introduction of Buddhist funeral rites in Japan), does suggest an interesting connection between religion and management of fears of death. This is not a straightforward causal connection: it is not the case that fear of death engenders belief in an afterlife, since young children already believe in an afterlife prior to realizing they are mortal. But it might be the case that fear of death promotes the cultural transmission and invention of pleasant hereafters.

This leads to some empirical predictions: religions with pleasant hereafters would, from an epidemiological perspective, be more culturally successful than those with unpleasant or no afterlife beliefs. Also, one would expect that the evolution of beliefs within particular religions would be more frequently in the direction of pleasant afterlife beliefs than in the direction of unpleasant afterlife beliefs.

See also on ICCI blog: [Is terror management theory dying?](#) by Nicolas Baumard.

## References

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