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Spiritual and Religious Implications of Terror Management Theory: Recommendations for Church Leaders in Times of Disaster and Loss

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At times, churches can be powerful centers of renewal and comfort. But at other times, churches can behave in ways that are cruel and destructive, especially to those who are different from ourselves, those on the margins of society (Harris, Erbes, & Engdahl, 2008). In this paper, we propose to examine one factor that may contribute to that inconsistent behavior: fear, particularly fear of death.

After reflecting on several national church meetings, one writer stated, Fear wraps its paralyzing grip around us. Fear of foes does not sit silent. It mobilizes to lash out . . . against all those people causing all these problems. And like the farm worker yanking both, weeds and wheat out of the ground, a reckless band of fear-inspired warriors destroys God's harvest. (Lancaster, 2006, p.2).

After a review social psychological research (summarized below), we believe that much of the destructive fear described by Lancaster is explained by what researchers named "Terror Management Theory."

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory was originally developed using social psychological research methods to test the assumptions of existential psychology. Existential psychology argues that because people are conscious and self aware, we develop awe and dread (see for example Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004). Pyszczynski et al. (2003) describe the process like this:

First knowing that one is alive and being able to anticipate the future inevitably produces the unsettling awareness of one's inexorable death. . . . Second, people also recognize that death not only is unavoidable but also can often occur quite tragically and prematurely. . . Finally, we also know and are horrified

by the realization that we are corporal creatures . . . that may ultimately be no more enduring or significant than cockroaches and cucumbers. (pp. 15-16)

Pyszczynski and his colleagues go on to say that the awareness of our mortality creates in us “dread, fear, trepidation, anxiety, alarm, fright, horror, and in due course, unmitigated terror” that at any time could overwhelm us completely (Pyszczynski et al., 2003, p. 15).

Terror management theory was developed to determine how people continue to function when they live with the overwhelming terror of mortality. Pyszczynski et al. found was that “people rarely experience this terror directly. . . . What saves us is culture.” They define culture as “humanly constructed beliefs about the nature of reality that are shared by individuals in a group” (Pyszczynski et al., 2003, p. 16). Culture provides a way for us to believe that, even if we die, we endure. They suggest the process works in two steps. First, culture creates a worldview that creates order, stability, meaning, and permanence. And, perhaps more importantly, culture enables us to believe that we are meaningful contributors to that reality. Most of the time, the process of using culture to cope with the fear of mortality happens unconsciously. We are typically not aware of using culture to manage our terror, but social psychological experiments provide strong empirical support that we do indeed use culture to manage the terror of death (Pyszczynski, et. al., 2003).

Research Support for Terror Management Theory

Pyszczynski, Solomon, Greenberg, and their colleagues were quite creative in their efforts to develop and test their theory. Their research, summarized in Pyszczynski et. al. (2003) is impressive. Preliminary studies published in 1991 and 1992 confirmed a negative relationship between self-esteem and anxiety. Further, research was found (Quattrone and Tversky, 1984; Kunda, 1987) that indicated that increased self-esteem decreased people’s perceptions of their vulnerability to illness and death. Additional studies, measuring self-esteem in different ways, continued to show that increased self-esteem functioned to reduce anxiety in stressful situations (Pyszczynski et. al., 2003).

Terror management theory does not merely predict that self-esteem decreases anxiety, it predicts that the self-esteem *derived from adhering to a cultural worldview decreases the anxiety associated with awareness of our mortality*. That is, we use culture to manage the existential terror that, if not controlled, could paralyze us. Pyszczynski et. al. (2003) report that more than 120 studies explored this hypothesis. In many of these studies, participants were encouraged to think about their own death. In this state, called by Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg “mortality salience,” the participants were asked to evaluate people who either violate or support the participants’ cultural worldview. Terror management theory would predict that mortality salience would increase positive judgments about people who validate their cultural worldview while increasing rejection of people who do things that challenge the participant’s cultural worldview. The results of these studies found that this was almost always the case.

For example, in one study, Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon (1989) examined twenty two municipal court judges. The participants were told they were participating in a study of the relationship between personality traits, attitudes, and decisions about how much money (bond) a defendant must pay to be released from jail while awaiting trial. For half of the judges participating, the Morality Attitudes Personality Survey was included in the questions. The Mortality Attitudes Personality Survey consisted of two open ended questions that required the participants to think about their own death. The judges were then presented with a hypothetical legal case brief and asked to set bond for the defendant. Consistent with terror management theory, despite their formal training to be objective, judges in the mortality salience group set an average bond of \$455 while those in the control group set an average bond of \$50.

In the same paper, Rosenblatt et al. (1989) reported a study of students where participants were asked to set a monetary reward to a person who behaved heroically, thus measuring how they might behave toward someone who upheld their cultural worldview. As predicted by terror management theory,

those in the mortality salience group set an average reward of \$3476 compared to an average \$1112 set by the control group.

Further studies replicated the hypothesis that mortality salience increased positive judgments about people who validate participant's cultural worldview and increased rejection of people who do things that challenge their cultural worldview. These studies systematically ruled out alternative hypotheses that might have accounted for the results.

Not only did the studies support the basic hypothesis of terror management theory, but results of the studies expanded the theory. For example, Greenberg et al. (1990) found that mortality salience also increased positive reactions to individuals who praise the participants' country while increasing negative reactions toward people who criticized the participants' country. In their study, they asked American college students to read essays that either strongly favored or opposed the United States political system. Both essays were written by the experimenters. All participants liked the fictitious pro-American author more, describing that author as more knowledgeable than the anti-American author. However, the students in the mortality salience group were significantly more positive toward the pro-American author and significantly more negative toward the anti-American author. Pyszczynski et al. (2003, p. 51) report that this phenomenon of what they term "worldview defense" "has become the most commonly replicated effect of thoughts of one's own demise."

A second experiment confirmed that mortality salience engenders a strong need to protect one's world view in a natural setting as well as in the laboratory. Pyszczynski et al. (1996) found that German citizens interviewed in front of a funeral parlor (assumed to increase mortality salience) estimated that a higher percentage of others agreed with their views about immigration than those interviewed one hundred meters away from the funeral parlor. It is noteworthy that the effect was strongest for those holding a minority point of view, perhaps because they felt more vulnerable.

In what were, to us, more chilling experiments, mortality salience not only increased negative thoughts toward those who do not support one's world-

view, but that it also increased aggressive behavior and prejudicial stereotyping toward those perceived as different. McGregor et al. (1998) selected students with what they described as holding “fairly liberal or conservative political views.” The students were told they were participating in a study of the relationship between personality traits and impression formation. The participants were then asked to write a paragraph about their opinion of politics in the United States and were administered some standard personality assessments. The essays were collected and the participants were randomly given either a mortality salience induction or a control induction. The participants were then given an essay purportedly written by another, but unidentified, participant in the study. Actually the essays given to the participants were written by the experimenters and were designed to either conflict with a liberal worldview or conflict with a conservative world view. The essays were distributed so that half the participants read an essay that threatened their political worldview and half read an essay that agreed with their political worldview.

The participants were then told they were participating in a second study, examining the relationship between personality and food preferences. The participants were given a cracker and asked to rate how much they liked it. Then they were asked to prepare a sample of hot sauce, placing it on another cracker. They were told the hot sauce and crackers were to be given to another participant and, “to minimize confusion,” it would be given to the person who wrote the essay they had read in the previous study. Further, they were shown a bogus taste preference inventory which stated that person disliked spicy foods. The results were disturbing. Even in this relatively neutral environment, mortality salience increased worldview defense which was expressed as increased aggressive behavior toward those who were perceived to threaten the participants’ worldviews. Specifically, while the control group showed no statistical difference in the amount of hot sauce they gave people who agreed with them or disagreed with them politically (15.20 g vs 17.56 g respectively) those in the mortality salience group gave less hot sauce to people who agreed with them (11.86 g) and significantly more hot sauce to those who opposed their political

world views (26.31 g)! Interviews conducted after the study found that while the participants remained unaware of the actual purpose of the study, they were very aware that they were inflicting pain on someone who opposed their political worldview. In other words, it would appear that mortality salience can make us cruel.

The results of another study that focused on oppressive stereotyping was equally discomfoting. Schimel et al. (1999) found substantial evidence that mortality salience increased negative reactions toward people who violated the stereotypes of minority groups. This was true even when the stereotypes were negative. For example, they found that college students in a control group, that is those without the mortality salience induction, viewed Black and White confederates of the researchers without bias. The students in the control group expressed equal desire to get to know the person, regardless of the confederate's ethnicity. Whether the confederate they presented consistently or inconsistently with racial stereotypes also had no effect on the responses of the control group. However, college students in the mortality salience group reversed this pattern, showing much more positive attitudes toward the Black confederate who fit stereotypes (dressing in baggy pants, wearing a baseball cap and using stereotypical language to describe negatively stereotypical behaviors) and were "incredibly hostile" toward the same confederate who was well dressed, carried a briefcase, and described himself as scholarly and chess playing. Similarly, mortality salience led to increased support of individuals who conformed to negative stereotypes of women, Germans, and gays. In other words,

the same negative stereotypes that generally render minorities targets of constant derision become badges of honor when mortality salience inspires the need to bolster a culture worldview that includes minorities serving specific roles that are not valued in any absolute sense except to verify our sense of things being the way we believe them to be. (Pyszczynski, 2003, p. 80)

Further experiments provided some light on the process where the fear of death shifts from a conscious awareness to an unconscious motivation for behavior. Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Berus (1994) found that when they distracted the participants with another task after creating mortality salience, worldview defense increased more than when measured immediately after creating mortality salience. In fact, analysis of the data indicated that concerns about mortality must be present, but outside of active memory, to produce the defensive behavior. Based on a review of social cognitive research, Pyszczynski et al. (2003) suggest that the initial response to mortality salience is to defensively suppress the awareness of one's mortality. However, over time, that defense weakens and the terror of death becomes a strong, but unconscious, motivator. This particular hypothesis would appear to be very helpful in explaining behavior in America five years after 9/11. If Pyszczynski et al. (2003) are correct, 9/11 was a powerful reminder of our mortality. Initially, that terror was faced directly, as people prayed and tried to help by giving blood, or donating money. Then, as a nation, we suppressed that terror. However, our defenses appear to have weakened over the years as we saw increased worldview defense expressed as support for everything American and aggression toward those holding alternative world views, marginalizing many of them with labels like *insurgents* or *terrorists*.

To summarize, awareness of mortality creates terror. We repress this terror and, for most people, it has little effect on our behavior. However, when our mortality becomes salient, after an initial awareness of the terror, we defend against it more heavily and the long term defense we appear to use is what is termed worldview defense. Further, it would appear that the mere existence of those whose worldview is different from ours is unconsciously experienced as a threat to our worldview, and thus increasing our terror of death (Pyszczynski et al., 2003). Increased worldview defense results not only in increased unquestioning support of one's culturally determined worldview, it also results in increased aggression against those who hold a different world view.

Applying Terror Management Theory to Religion and Spirituality.

Perhaps as an attempt to defend our own worldview, we had hoped that religion could overcome some of the negative effects of mortality salience. After all, religion and spirituality deal directly with fear and mortality. Certainly history not only records examples of cruelty and aggression in the name of religion, it also records many examples of religious people showing sacrifice, peacemaking, and love in the face of death. Therefore, we had hoped that religion and spirituality, at least those religions that stress the hope of an afterlife and value love of the stranger and oppressed, might mitigate the effect of mortality salience on worldview defense.

There is some empirical evidence that when one's culture includes a major focus on tolerance, mortality salience does not increase aggression toward those who are different. Greenberg et al. (1990) found that, unlike high authoritarians, that is people whose culture includes a stress on hierarchical authority, low authoritarians did not respond to mortality salience with increased aggression toward those who were different. Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Chatel (1992) found that *priming the value of tolerance* (by adding a question about the importance of tolerance to the questionnaire presented to the participants) eliminated the effect of mortality salience on pro-American preferences. So it would appear that teaching tolerance, as many religions do, should decrease the negative effects of mortality salience.

But what of religion itself; does having a religious faith provide protection against at least the aggressive elements of mortality salience on worldview defense? The empirical evidence would imply it does not. Greenberg et al. (1990) found that Christian college students in a control condition showed no difference in their ratings of bogus descriptions of college students who were Jewish or Christian. Yet following mortality salience, similar Christian college students showed higher ratings for the Christian target and more negative ratings for the Jewish target. The results of the study were consistent with the lessons of history that show that religion frequently exacerbates aggressive behavior. However, in light of more recent studies, it should be noted that this

study failed to examine fundamental differences in religion and spirituality such as the differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation (Allport & Ross, 1967), or level of faith development (Fowler, 1981).

Not ready to surrender our hope that faith might mediate the effects of mortality salience, we followed the suggestion of Miroslav Volf (in press) to examine the quality of religious commitment as a variable that might affect world view defense. A review of recent studies, that attended to differences in religion and spirituality on the effects of mortality salience, found that Volf's prediction had some support. Jonas and Fischer (2006) reported three experiments conducted in Germany where they explored the effects of mortality salience on people who had intrinsic religiousness and those who had extrinsic religiousness. They used Allport and Ross (1967) differentiation of religiousness into extrinsic and intrinsic types. As summarized by Jonas and Fischer (2006),

Extrinsic religiousness involves a utilitarian approach to religion. Religion is used instrumentally to obtain other ends, such as safety, solace, social standing, and self-justification. . . . Intrinsic religiousness, on the other hand, can be characterized by the striving for meaning and value. (pp. 554-555)

They quote Allport (1966) as saying, intrinsic religiousness "regards faith as a supreme value in its own right. It is oriented toward a unification of being, takes seriously the commandment of brotherhood, and strives to transcend all self-centered needs" (p. 455). While there are problems with differentiating religion into intrinsic and extrinsic types (see for example the discussion in Spika, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003), Jonas and Fisher's research using these categories regarding terror management theory has shown some interesting results.

In their experiments, Jonas and Fisher (2006) found that if people with intrinsic religiousness had the opportunity to "affirm their religious beliefs" by completing a German version of the Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967) mortality salience had no effect on worldview defense. Further, those individuals also showed decreased "death thought accessibility," as mea-

sured by a German version of the word-stem completion task used in Greenberg et al. (1994). Individuals with extrinsic religiousness did show increased worldview defense in a mortality salience condition, as would be predicted by terror management theory.

In the United States, Beck (2006) also noted that people with different religiousness responded to mortality salience differently. Beck suggests that religion can be described as defensive or existential. He defined defensive religion as similar to James's healthy religion and existential religion as similar to what James called the sick soul, (James, 1902/1958). Beck chose the name "defensive religion" because that style of religion defends against existential anxiety. Defensive religion is devoted toward happiness, peacefulness, and optimism. Existential religion, however, is "willing to sit with or even embrace the confusions, doubts, and anxieties of belief" (Beck, 2006, p. 144). Existential faith, says Beck, is "held *in the face of death* rather than as a *denial of death*." Beck found that college students with existential religion showed no significant difference in worldview defense between mortality salience and control conditions, while students with defensive religion showed increased worldview defense in the mortality salience condition, as predicted by terror management theory. If we assume that students with existential faith do not suppress their awareness of their mortality, but rather chose to keep that awareness conscious, or at least accessible, then Beck's findings are consistent with those of Solomon et al. (1994) in showing that the conscious awareness of morality protects from world view defense. Beck, however, takes Solomon et al.'s results a step further as his work suggests that existential religion allows individuals to tolerate mortality salience without being overwhelmed or having to suppress the terror of mortality.

Applications of Terror Management Theory for Church Leadership

We believe that terror management theory could help religious and spiritual leaders be more effective responding to disaster and catastrophe. Based on terror management theory, we would suggest that the church can do three

things to prepare its members for the next disaster that will increase mortality salience. We suggest that there are also two things the church might do in response to such events that may decrease the negative behaviors consistent with worldview defense.

Love Your Enemies

Earlier we described the empirical evidence that, in a laboratory setting, merely reminding people of their previously held value of tolerance “completely eliminated the effect of mortality salience” (Greenburg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Chatel, 1992). Based on that research, when we presented a preliminary version of this paper, (Rose & Bigler, 2006) we recommended that the church emphasize the value of tolerance. However, Kamal Abu-Shamsieh, Director of the Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno, responded that he thought teaching tolerance was insufficient. He explained that he believed that tolerance implied that one tolerated, or “put up with,” the other. When understood this way, tolerance still implied that people who were different were also “less than” those within the tolerant person’s group. Rather, he suggested that we needed to teach the value of love. We agree with Mr. Abu-Shamsieh and believe that he described Christian theology more accurately than we did. Therefore, in this paper, we changed our recommendation from emphasizing the value of tolerance to recommending that the church intentionally stress the value of love as taught by Jesus who said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Of course, love is a central value in Christian theology but in light of our experiences, we would suggest that frequently, perhaps in an effort to be relevant, other values are stressed, leaving the value of love and particularly the love of enemies as a tacit assumption that under the force of mortality salience becomes meaningless.

In contrast, Jesus said that love would be the way that people would know we were His followers (John 13:34-35). We recommend that this value be moved to the forefront. The structure of our world after 9/11 demands no less. Some church leaders are already suggesting that the Christian value of loving

your enemy is an effective response to the aggressive behaviors associated with worldview defense. For example, one article in *Presbyterian Outlook* discussed the conflicts within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and quoted one leader saying,

How do we conquer fear? The Cowardly Lion would say we need courage. It is not courage, but perfect love that casts out fear. Jesus Christ has commissioned us to love one another. ... When we relax into the love embodied by our Lord, we discover that this roller coaster ride of faith is the most exhilarating ride. Let's get on board. (Quoted in *Hope of the Church: Conference looks ahead*, 2006)

So how might we accomplish this task effectively? Quoting from Proverbs, St. Paul provided an excellent example of this type of preaching in Romans 12:9-21. In this ethical statement growing out of his theological position (Toews, 2004), St. Paul mixes concrete with general statements to demonstrate how the value of love should permeate his readers's lives. Speaking to a community that had already experienced discrimination and would soon face direct persecution, conditions that would certainly create mortality salience, Paul wrote

Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly, do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with

all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, no, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:9-21)

This is not a paper on preaching, but we would like to recognize that Paul is consistent with terror management theory in that, by quoting the Hebrew Scriptures and by basing his ethic of love in his theological position, he frames loving enemies as consistent with worldview defense. That is, he works to remind his readers that love of enemies is part of their worldview. Therefore, tolerance, and even more, love, is the appropriate response to threats to that worldview.

Increase Intrinsic and Existential Religion

The recent research on how types of religiousness affect responses to mortality salience increases the importance of developing intrinsic and existential religion. As the world becomes increasingly violent (or at least as it is perceived as increasingly violent) this research would indicate that people will increasingly need the stability provided by intrinsic faith. We are not aware of research regarding ways to aid the development of intrinsic faith but we would suggest that much of what is presented in the church works against it. Ministries that use marketing techniques, selling faith as a product that “meets felt needs” would be particularly likely to develop extrinsic religion at the expense of intrinsic religion. Worse still is the “health and wealth gospel” proclaimed by many evangelists. Telling people that if they follow Jesus by tithing, repenting, etc. they will become prosperous and successful, clearly encourages people to develop an extrinsic religion that uses God in an almost magical way to reach our goals (M. Baker, personal communication, November 15, 2006). This religion would be inadequate to cope with the stresses resulting from mortality salience found in disaster.

Instead of selling religion for its benefits, we would suggest that churches increase their emphasis on teaching and participating in the classic spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, service, meditation, study, and worship (see for example, Foster, 1988; Willard, 1988; and Tan & Gregg, 1997). We are unaware of empirical studies that examine the effects of these disciplines on faith, but we would expect that they would increase intrinsic religion because, consistent with Jesus' command to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33a), they are God focused and not self focused.

Increase Existential Religion

We would also encourage church leaders to create openness for existential faith as described by Beck (2006). His research, consistent with earlier work by James (1902/1958), would indicate that it would be helpful for the church to make a place for doubt. Beck (2006), James (1902/1958), Fowler (1981), Stokes (1989), along with many others, make it clear that doubt and faith can coexist. In fact, it would appear that, at least at times, doubt is a healthy and appropriate expression of faith. Further, existential faith is faith "held in *the face of death* rather than *as a denial of death*" (Beck, 2006, p. 143). Therefore, existential faith provides a place to make our fear of death conscious and address it.

In fostering existential faith, church leaders could help protect their congregations from the negative effects of mortality salience in a manner consistent with Christian theology. Christian theology presents two themes regarding fear. On one hand there are frequent messages to "fear not." On the other hand, Christians are told that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 1:7a). It would appear that Christianity teaches that it is appropriate to be afraid, but it matters a great deal what is feared. Christianity teaches that when we fear what should be feared, our fears are transformed into something healthy and positive.

The Bible repeatedly tells believers not to be afraid. For example, in Luke 12, Jesus says,

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:22b, 31-32)

Here, as elsewhere, people are told not to be afraid because God will provide for them. This does not imply a naive form of positive thinking as can be seen later the text where Jesus states, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke 12:51-52). Christians frequently use the metaphor that to follow Jesus means to follow him to the cross, implying that faithfulness involves sharing suffering. However, they are also reminded that physical suffering cannot harm their core being and may even be used by God in positive ways (See, for example, Romans 8).

Instead of allowing our fear of death to unconsciously lead us to aggressively defend our worldview, Jesus appears to encourage us to become conscious of our fear, and then place that fear where it belongs. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but not the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body.” Jesus did not tell his followers not to be afraid. Rather he told them to be afraid of what he saw as the real threat. He argued that, while death may be frightening, the loss of one’s soul is more frightening. We would predict that people who are more afraid of losing their soul, of losing their “self,” would behave differently in instances of mortality salience than those who have defended against the fear of death and so made it an unconscious force in their lives.

This fear of this fear of losing one’s soul (psyche) seems to be linked to the Fear of the LORD (Proverbs 1:7). Rudolph Otto (1950) in an attempt to describe the psychology of this fear called it the *mysterium tremendum*. In this

phrase, Otto attempted to describe some of the psychological responses to the experience of “the holy” or “the sacred.” As one experiences the sacred, Otto suggests, one experiences what he called “creature feeling.” Creature feeling is defined as a sense of dependency on something that is both outside oneself and beyond oneself. But there is more to the *mysterium tremendum* than a sense of dependency. There is a deeper more fundamental experience that Otto describes as irrational, that is, it is beyond the scope of language to fully describe. He notes the *mysterium tremendum* may be experienced in personal piety or in more formal rites and rituals. It may be peaceful or energetic. However, he also writes that the notion of *tremendum* includes at least three elements: a sense of awe (that leads to a feeling of unease), a sense of being in the presence of overwhelming power (that contributes to humility), and energy. He uses the term *mysterium* to describe two additional elements of the experience of the holy or sacred: the experience of something “wholly other” and a sense of fascination which can lead to a sense of being caught up in that “other.” Many theologians have identified this construct of *mysterium tremendum* with the Biblical term, “the fear of the LORD” (Martens, 2006).

Christianity and other religious traditions would argue that this fear of the LORD creates a grounding and a centeredness that enables one to place the awareness of one’s mortality in a more appropriate and less threatening place. For example, Albert Einstein wrote

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms - this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I

belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men. (Quoted in Davis, 2005, p. 49)

We would suggest that those who have experienced the holy, experience an intrinsic and existential faith. They are more afraid of losing their soul, that is, of losing the core of who they are, than they are of death. Fowler's universalizing faith describes some people in this level of faith development (Fowler, 1981) but in our own experience, we have met many people who did not show such sophisticated faith development yet faced death with a courage and kindness that did not include worldview defense. As they faced death, they showed a confidence in who they were and a belief that death could not change the core of their soul. Therefore, we would suggest that church leaders intentionally work to build rituals, symbols, and experiences that encourage people to focus more on "the fear of the LORD" than on their fear of death.

Terror management theory also suggests two ways the church could respond to specific incidents such as terrorist acts or disasters that create mortality salience. Specifically, as noted above, Jonas and Fischer (2006) found that, even with people who had intrinsic religion, it was necessary for them to affirm their beliefs before the effects of mortality salience were mitigated. Greenburg et al. (1992) found a similar effect when they asked the participants in their study to affirm their belief in tolerance. Therefore, we would recommend that church leaders find ways for their congregations to affirm (1) their intrinsic beliefs, and especially to affirm (2) their love of their enemies when responding to incidents that create mortality salience.

Affirm Intrinsic Religion

After 9/11 people came to church. Services frequently focused on the feelings of grief and loss (Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002). Terror management theory would suggest that, if one of the goals of the church is to decrease the prejudice and aggression that comes with worldview defense, helping people grieve is not sufficient. We also need to provide op-

portunities for them to affirm the intrinsic elements of their religion. Worship services, both regularly scheduled services and special services, would seem to be ideal opportunities for this. We would recommend that, in preparation for the next tragedy, worship leaders choose hymns, prayers, litanies, and other rituals that are both familiar (and so comforting) and affirming of the intrinsic elements of religion. Hymns such as “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (Johnson, 1921), or prayers such as the Prayer of St. Francis’ “Lord make us instruments of thy peace . . .” (Book of Common Prayer, 1990, p. 833), might be appropriate.

Affirm Loving Enemies

Further, the research would suggest that church leaders should find ways for people to affirm their value of tolerance and Jesus’ command to love their enemies. People need to affirm the belief they are called to love their enemies. It would be inappropriate, and likely ineffective to first introduce this value to a congregation in a time of crisis. However, if this value has already been a central part of the identity of a people before the crisis, it can become an important part of their response to the crisis.

An example of the effectiveness of affirming love of enemies is found in the response of the Amish community to the murder of five children in their schoolroom in October 2006. A spokesman for the family of the gunman told CBS News that “The Amish neighbor came that very night, around 9 o’clock in the evening, and offered forgiveness to the family” (CBS News, 2006, October 4). This act of forgiveness seems to have set a tone for the community response in their loss. Terror management theory would predict that similar acts would help mitigate some of the negative behaviors associated with mortality salience. We wonder what effect it might have had if, in addition to holding services of prayer for America, if there were also regular prayer services held for the perpetrators of the attacks in 9/11, asking God to care for them, and for others who were so mistaken as to believe that such an act of terror could be

pleasing to God. Might such services helped decrease the aggressive worldview defense we saw in the next five years?

History is certainly full of examples of the people whose faith enabled them to overcome their fear of death and so not show the negative behaviors associated with worldview defense. One powerful example is the story of Dirk Willems, told in the book *The Martyr's Mirror*, a collection of stories of Anabaptist martyrs told to Anabaptist children to help them know their culture of peace. Willems was an Anabaptist in the sixteenth century. Like many Anabaptists of that time he was threatened with imprisonment and execution by the authorities who we might describe as showing worldview defense. As he was being pursued by his persecutors, (a situation that would certainly increase mortality salience) Willems was able to successfully cross a frozen river. *The Martyr's Mirror* goes on to report that the government agent who was pursuing him broke through the ice. Willems returned to save the life of his enemy, who in turn, wanted to release Willems but the burgomaster would not allow it. After severe imprisonment and extensive trials, Willems was burned at the stake in 1569 (*Martyr's Mirror*).

Conclusion

So what are the implications of terror management theory for religious and spiritual leaders? We have suggested several important things. First, mortality salience affects our thoughts, behaviors, and, we believe, our spirits in subtle but profoundly negative ways. When reminded of our mortality, we tend to first repress our thoughts of death, but soon those thoughts present as increased world view defense. World view defense frequently presents as prejudice and aggression, which are generally seen as harmful to one's spirit.

However, research also shows that the negative effects of mortality salience are limited in people with intrinsic religion who affirm their faith and people who have existential religion and affirm tolerance or love as part of their worldview. We argued that intrinsic religion, existential religion, and love are all themes found within Christian theology. We also made specific suggestions

regarding ways church leaders could prepare their congregations to better cope with tragedies that create mortality salience and ways the church could respond to those tragedies that should decrease the negative effects of the mortality salience they create.

In light of what we have learned from terror management theory and from Jesus's comments on fear, we would like to close this paper with the Collect for Peace found in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church (1990, p. 99). This prayer seems to succinctly capture the theological themes of not fearing death, but fearing God.

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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