FEAR OF PERSONAL DEATH AS A PREDICTOR OF MOTIVATION FOR RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR

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Based on the notion that both fear of death and religious motivation are expressions of deeper basic human concerns, the relation between fear of personal death and religious motivation was examined using multidimensional measures of both constructs. Hierarchical regression analysis of the responses of 123 Israeli Jews showed that, after controlling for demographic variables and for religiosity, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal fear of death measures contributed to the prediction of corresponding interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal measures of religious motivation.

The relation between fear of death and religion has been the subject of a large number of studies beginning from the middle of the last century (e.g., Diggory and Rothman 1961; Kelish 1963; Martin and Wrightsman 1965) and continuing up to the present (e.g., Cohen et al. 2005; Harding et al. 2005; Harville et al. 2003). In particular, a number of investigations have focused on the relation between the fear of death and religious motivation (e.g., Kahoe and Dunn 1975; Maltby and Day 2000; Richardson, Berman, and Piwowarski 1983; Thorson and Powell 1989). However, the results of these studies do not form a clear picture of the relation between these constructs. Some studies have uncovered positive relations between measures of fear of death and religious motivation (e.g., Spilka, Pelligrini, and Dailey 1968), others have found a negative relation between them (e.g., Magni 1972), while a number of other studies indicate that the two constructs are not related one to the other (e.g., Minton and Spilka 1976).

Many of the studies concerning the fear of death and religion have used unidimensional measures of the fear of death, of religion, or of both constructs. A number of researchers (e.g., Feifel 1974; Florian and Kravetz 1983) have suggested that the mixed results regarding the relation between these two phenomena may be due to the use of unidimensional measures of fear of death. Although more recent studies exploring the relation between death anxiety and religious motivation have used a variety of multidimensional measures of fear of death, virtually all studies focusing on fear of death and religious motivation have been based on Allport’s popular intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy (Allport and Ross 1967) and have used associated unidimensional or two-dimensional measures of religious motivation such as the Religious Orientation Scale (ROS: Allport and Ross 1967). The present investigation attempted to shed light on the relation between the fear of death and religious motivation by using multidimensional measures of both the fear of death and of religious motivation. In addition, as is the case with most studies in the field of the psychology of religion, the research participants in almost all studies of the relation between fear of death and religious motiva-
tion were American Christians (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). The present study is unique in that it was carried out on a sample of Israeli Jews using measures of fear of death and of religious motivation developed on the basis of such samples.

Most of the research concerning the relation between fear of death and religion can be categorized into one of two themes. The first theme is based upon Freud’s (1907, 1927) approach to religion which views religion as a defense against anxiety and the encounter with death as the source of religious beliefs. In other words, fear of death motivates religious faith and activity (Kahoe and Dunn 1975). In a similar manner, Feifel (1959) hypothesized that to cope with their death fears, individuals may turn to religion. He found that religious individuals feared death more than did non-religious individuals and interpreted this finding as support for this conjecture. According to Malinowski (1965), since anxiety resulting from experience of crises leads man to religion, death, as a primary crises, may be considered to be the major motivation for religion. Similarly, Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997:15) claim that religious belief systems develop as “an anxiety-laden adjustment reaction to external and internal pressures” and single out the fear of death as one of the chief sources of life’s sufferings and anxieties. According to this perspective, an individual who has a stronger fear of death would be expected to develop a more rigorous religious orientation and therefore a positive relation between fear of death and religion would be expected.

The second theme is based on Allport’s two-dimensional conceptualization of religion. Allport did not accept Freud’s unidimensional stand that all religion is in essence a neurosis. Some people, those who are extrinsically orientated to their religion, may be considered to be religious in an immature or even neurotic manner. However, other people, those who are intrinsically orientated to their religion, are maturely religious in a psychologically sound manner (Allport 1963). On the basis of this conceptualization and on the assumption that fear of death is related to neurotic preoccupations (Lester 1967), Donahue (1985) predicted that while extrinsic religiousness should be correlated positively with fear of death, intrinsic religiousness should be negatively correlated with this construct. However, the average correlation between fear of death and religious orientation in the seven studies in his review was .30 for extrinsic religiosity but only -.06 for intrinsic religiosity thus providing only partial support for Donahue’s predictions. In more recent investigations, some researchers have uncovered a negative correlation between intrinsic religious motivation and death anxiety (e.g., Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993; Maltby and Day 2000; Powell and Thorson 1991) while others have continued to find that intrinsic religious motivation is unrelated to death anxiety (e.g., Falkenhain and Handal 2003; Swanson and Byrd 1998; Thorson and Powell 1989).

Swanson and Byrd (1998) examined the relation between religious orientation and death anxiety in young adults. They found a statistically significant positive relation between extrinsic religiousness and a unidimensional measure of death anxiety, but no significant relationship between intrinsic religiousness and fear of death. These researchers suggest that in order to improve the understanding of the relation between death anxiety and religious motivation, a multidimensional measure of death anxiety, such as the Fear of Personal Death Scale (Florian and Kravetz 1983), should be used. Although at one time fear of death was measured unidimensionally in terms of death denial and avoidance (Nelson and Cantrell 1980), more recently the literature approaches the fear of death as a multidimensional construct (e.g., Spilka et al. 1997). Based on the perspective that fear of death is a normal and significant facet of human experience (Kastenbaum and Aisenberg 1972), Florian and Kravetz
(1983) developed a multidimensional measure of fear of personal death. These dimensions reflect concerns with intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal consequences of death (Murphy 1959; Diggory and Rothman 1961; Kastenbaum and Aisenberg 1972; Minton and Spilka 1976). According to Florian and Kravetz, (1) Loss of self-fulfillment (i.e., fearing the loss to create and enjoy) and (2) Self-annihilation (i.e., fear of death related to personal and physical disintegration) are associated with intrapersonal concerns of death; (3) Loss of social identity (i.e., fearing being forgotten by survivors) and (4) Consequences to family and friends (i.e., concern for needs and sorrow of survivors) are interpersonal concerns; (5) Transcendental consequences (i.e., concern regarding the state of existence after death) and (6) Punishment in the hereafter (i.e. fear of punishment in the world-to-come) reflect transpersonal concerns with personal death consequences. Although this measure was developed on the basis of an Israeli Jewish sample, support for this structure of fear of personal death has been found among various populations (Florian and Snowden 1989).

It is suggested here that the use of a multidimensional measure, not only of fear of death but of religious motivation as well, may help to enhance our understanding of the relation between fear of death and religious motivation. In an investigation of religious motivation of adherents of the Jewish religion, Lazar, Kravetz, and Friedrich-Kedem (2002) uncovered a multidimensional model for the motivation for religious behavior. According to this model, individuals attribute their religious behavior to five different motivational themes: (1) Belief in divine order (e.g., a desire to be close to God); (2) Ethnic identity (e.g., a need to feel belonging to the Jewish people); (3) Social (e.g., in order to be esteemed by others); (4) Family (e.g., in order to strengthen and unify one's immediate family); and (5) Upbringing (e.g., in order to maintain a relation with past family experiences and education).

The Lazar et al. (2002) model and the measure associated with it, the Motivation for Religious Behavior Questionnaire (MRBQ), differ from the Allport intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy and the ROS in a number of important ways. Some researchers have concluded that the ROS is not appropriate for individuals who, although being members of a particular religion, do not see themselves as being “religious” (e.g., Maltby, McCollam, and Millar 1994). In comparison, since the MRBQ focuses on the motivation for religious behavior rather than on the motivation for religiousness or for religious belief, this measure is appropriate for individuals who may not identify themselves as being “religious” but still perform a significant amount of religious behavior and ritual, as has been found to be the case among many Israeli Jews who identify themselves as secular Jews while reporting personal performance of numerous behaviors and rituals associated with the Jewish tradition (Levy, Levinson, and Katz 1993). However, the more important difference concerns the dimensionality of the religious motivation conceptualization and its implications. Whereas the Allport two-dimensional conceptualization of religious motivation is, as described above, explicitly value-laden, a multidimensional conceptualization of religious motivation such as the Lazar et al. model leads to a more value-free framework of a variety of motivational themes expressing deep general human concerns.

The three-component intrapersonal, interpersonal, transpersonal framework described above in relation to the concerns related to the fear of death can also be applied to the five dimensions of religious motivation in the Lazar et al. (2002) model. Belief in heavenly order would appear to be of a transpersonal nature, Family, Upbringing, and Social could be classified as interpersonal motivations, while the Ethnic identity motivation would seem to reflect intrapersonal needs. Assuming that both the fear of death and religious motivation are relat-
ed to underlying basic concerns and that the motivational aspects of religion develop, at least in part, as a response to an individual’s fears and anxieties, it would be expected that transpersonal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal death concerns would contribute positively to the prediction of transpersonal, interpersonal and intrapersonal religious motivation accordingly. On the basis of these arguments it is predicted that:

1. The Transcendental consequences and Punishment in the hereafter measures of fear of personal death will predict the Belief in heavenly order measure of religious motivation.

2. The Loss of social identity and Consequences to family and friends measures of fear of personal death will predict the Family, Upbringing, and Social measures of religious motivation.


**METHOD**

**Research Participants**

This study's sample consisted of a total of 123 participants, 49 men and 74 women, attending one of two universities in central Israel. Fifty-seven research participants identified as “religious,” 14 as “traditional,” 51 as “secular,” and one as “other.” All of the participants affirmed that they performed at least one religious ritual from a list of 24 religious rituals, with an average of 16.3 rituals and a standard deviation of 6.6 rituals. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 30, with an average age of 23.4 years and a standard deviation of 2.2 years. Twenty-six participants were married.

**Measures**

*Fear of Personal Death Scale (FPDS).* Florian and Kravetz (1983) developed this 31-item multidimensional measure of fear of personal death. Respondents answer items worded “Death frightens me because ...” on a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree). The FPDS consists of six subscales: Loss of self-fulfillment (10 items; e.g., “of cessation of creative activities”), Loss of social identity (8 items; e.g., “I will be forgotten”), Consequences to family and friends (4 items; e.g., “my family will still need me”), Transcendental consequences (4 items; e.g., “uncertainty of existence after death”), Self-annihilation (4 items; e.g., “decomposition of the body”), and Punishment in the hereafter (1 item; e.g., “punishment in the hereafter”). The Cronbach reliability coefficients for the five multi-item scales were .90, .93, .87, .90, and .86.

*Motivation for Religious Behavior Questionnaire (MRBQ).* Lazar et al. (2002) developed this 58-item measure of motives for religious behavior. Each of this scale’s items refers to a reason for performing religious rituals. Before filling out this measure, respondents select those religious rituals that they perform from a list of 24 popular religious rituals. They then indicate their motives for performing these rituals by choosing one of five response categories for each of the 58 items. These response categories range from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The MRBQ consists of the following five scales of religious motives: Belief in divine order (29 items; e.g., “fear of transgression,” “contact with God”), Ethnic identity (9 items; e.g., “It gives me a feeling of belonging to the Jewish people”), Social (9 items; e.g., “in order to be esteemed by others”), Family (7 items; e.g., “because it
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<td>-.16</td>
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<td>12. Transcendental consequences</td>
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<td>13. Self-annihilation</td>
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<td>14. Punishment in the hereafter</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
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*p < 0.05  ** p < 0.01
Religiosity. Research participant rated their level of religiosity on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all religious) to 5 (Very religious).

Demographics. The research participants responded to questions regarding their age, gender, ethnic background and religious identity.

Procedure
Research assistants approached individuals on the two university campuses and requested their participation in a study dealing with how people feel about death. It was stressed that anonymity was guaranteed and that participation was voluntary. After consenting to participate, all research participants filled out the research instruments in the order presented above and upon completion immediately returned them to the research assistants.

RESULTS
Death anxiety scores and religious motivation scores were calculated by averaging relevant scale items resulting in measure scores ranging from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating a higher level of religious motivation or fear of death. Pearson bivariate correlations between the study measures were calculated and are presented in Table 1. All intercorrelations between the measures of religious motivation were positive and statistically significant, and ranged from .23 to .75. In a similar manner, the intercorrelations between the measures of fear of personal death were all positive, ranging from .15 to .78. With the exception of two correlations, all were statistically significant. Regarding the relation between fear of personal death and religious motivation, the correlations in Table 1 indicate that a positive relation exists between the two constructs. All of the 30 correlations, ranging from .08 to .49, were positive and 22 correlations were statistically significant. Two fear of personal death measures—self-annihilation and punishment in the hereafter—are related to specific measures of religious motivation whereas the remaining four measures of fear of death are related to most or all measures of religious motivation.

The correlations in Table 1 were compatible with this study’s predictions. All correlations between the two interpersonal fear of death measures—Consequences to family and friends and Loss of social identity—and the three measures of religious motivation assumed to be of interpersonal nature—Family, Social, and Upbringing—were positive and statistically significantly. In addition the two transpersonal fear of death measures—Transcendental consequences and Punishment in the hereafter—were positively and significantly correlated with the transpersonal measure religious motivation—Belief in divine order. Finally, Loss of self-fulfillment, one of the intrapersonal fear of death measures, was, as predicted, correlated with the intrapersonal Ethnic identity motivation. Only the intrapersonal Self-annihilation measure did not correlate with the expected measure of religious motivation. Of course, although the pattern of correlations presented in Table 1 is consistent with the study’s predictions, many of the correlations that were not specifically predicted were also statistically significant.

In order to further examine the relations between fear of personal death and religious motivation and to ascertain the unique contribution of the fear of personal death measures to the prediction of measures of religious motivation, a series of hierarchical regressions was
Fear of Personal Death as a Predictor of Motivation for Religious Behavior

preformed. For each of the five measures of religious motivation, the six fear of personal death measures were entered as predictors on the second step of the regression after controlling for age, sex and level of religiosity which were entered on the first step. All final regression equations were statistically significant. In addition, for all analysis, the $R^2$ change for the second step was statistically significant indicating that fear of personal death had a unique contribution to the prediction of religious motivation over and above both the demographic measures and the level of religiosity. A summary of the results of these analyses is presented in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 indicate that the measures of fear of personal death had differential contributions to the measures of religious motivation. The Belief in divine order measure of religious motivation, considered to be transpersonal in nature, was predicted by Punishment in the hereafter, one of the two transpersonal fear of death measures. In a similar fashion, the three interpersonal religious motivation measures were each predicted by one of the two interpersonal fear of death measures. The Family and Upbringing motivations were predicted by the interpersonal fear of death measure Consequences to family and friends, while the Social motivation was predicted by Loss of social identity, also interpersonal in nature. Finally, the Ethnic identity motivation for religious behavior, although assumed to be intrapersonal, was predicted by the two interpersonal fear of death measures—Loss of social identity and Consequences to family and friends. All of the significant beta coefficients in these equations were positive. Three fear of death measures—Loss of self-fulfillment, Transcendental consequences, and Self-annihilation—were not found to have statistically significant contribution to the prediction of religious motivation.

In summary, a tendency for positive contributions of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal dimensions of personal death to the prediction of corresponding dimensions of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal dimensions of religious motivation was uncovered here. Thus, the results provided partial support for the predicted relations between fear of personal death and religious motivation.

**DISCUSSION**

The variety of findings reported in the research literature concerning the relation between fear of death and religious motivation apparently indicate the complexity of this relation. In the past, unidimensional measures of both the fear of death and of religion were used. Later studies used multidimensional measures of fear of death in order to better understand the relation with religion, but still used unsophisticated measures of religion. More recently, many investigations have used the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy to uncover the complexities of the relation with fear of death. The present study furthered the research in this area by using a relatively new five-dimensional measure of religious motivation, together with a six-dimensional measure of fear of death. In addition, whereas almost all studies in the past have used samples of Christian individuals, the present study was based on a sample of Jewish individuals and the measures used were themselves developed on similar samples.

Based on the assumption that both the fear of death as well as the motivation for religious behavior reflect basic human concerns, it was predicted that interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal measures of fear of death would predict corresponding measures of religious motivation. The results presented here provide support for this notion regarding the interpersonal facet. For the three religious motives assumed to be interpersonal in nature, the regression analysis indicated that only the measures of interpersonal fear of death had sig-
Table 2: Hierarchical Regression of Religious Motivation on Fear of Personal Death Measures

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<tr>
<th>Measures of Religious Motivation</th>
<th>Belief in divine order</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Ethnic identity</th>
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<td>.59**</td>
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<td>$R^2$ fear of death</td>
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<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\beta$ religiosity</td>
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<td>$\beta$ Loss of self-fulfillment</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
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<td>$\beta$ Loss of social identity</td>
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<td>$\beta$ Consequences to family and friends</td>
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<td>$\beta$ Punishment in the hereafter</td>
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Notes: df=9,121; all beta coefficients are for the final step.
*p<0.05  ** p<0.01
significant contributions in predicting these measures. Indeed, the match was quite specific. For the two family-oriented religious motivations, only the family-oriented fear of death measure had a significant contribution, but not the social-identity fear of death measure. In a similar manner, only the social-identity oriented measure of fear of death measure contributed to the prediction of the social religious motivation, while the family-oriented fear of death measure did not.

The two transpersonal fear of death components were hypothesized to predict the Belief in divine order motivation. Although both of these measures correlated positively with this motivation, the regression analysis revealed only a minor contribution for the fear associated with heavenly retribution in the world-to-come. However, this may be due to the fact that the measure of religiosity was highly correlated with this motivation ($r=.76$) and the additional contribution of fear of death to the prediction of this motivation was the smallest in comparison with the prediction of the other measures of religious motivation.

The results presented here can also help to clarify the meaning of the religious motivation dimensions. Lazar and Kravetz (2005) have pointed out a number of conceptual ambiguities regarding these dimensions. In particular, the nature of the Belief in divine order motive would seem to be classified as an intrinsic motive according to the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy. On the other hand, this dimension includes such themes as reward in this world as well as reward in the world-to-come, themes which are extrinsic in nature according to the Allport conceptualization. The results presented here, in particular the similarity of the pattern of correlations between all five dimensions of motivation with the measures of fear of personal death, would seem to indicate that the demarcation between the Belief in divine order motive and the other dimensions of motivation is not clear cut, providing further support for the claim that the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy is not viable for the motivation for religious behavior, at least in Jewish populations (Lazar 1999).

This investigation has a number of important limitations. The most apparent limitation, as is common to most research in this area, is the correlative nature of the methodology. Although the framework adopted here was that fear of death predicts religious motivation, religion may be a causative factor for fear of death. This would seem to be most likely concerning the Punishment in the hereafter fear of death. Most major religions refer to future rewards and/or punishments after death. It makes sense to assume that after an individual develops a belief in future retribution and a desire to avoid future heavenly punishment after his death, a resulting fear of such punishment will develop. The relation may not be one of cause and effect but of part and whole.

An additional limitation of this investigation concerns the sample. For the purposes of this investigation, any individual who affirmed that she or he performed at least one religious behavior was included in the sample, regardless of her or his religious identity or level of religious belief. Although the various facets of religion in the Glock and Stark (1965) typology—ritualistic, ideological, consequential, intellectual, and experiential—are to some extent independent, it may be important to examine the relation between religious motivation and fear of death separately for individuals with different religious identities. For example, in Israeli society, it is common to divide the population into four groups of religious identity—haradi or ultra-orthodox, religious or orthodox, traditional, and secular. Florian and Mikulincer (1993) found that Israeli soldiers who identified themselves as “secular” had different levels on fear of death measures than did those who identified themselves as “religious.” It may be that individuals of different religious identity differ not only on absolute levels of
fear of death, but in the dynamics of the relation between fear of death and religious motivation as well. Future research should examine possible interactions between religious identity and fear of death in the prediction of religious motivation.

The notion that at least part of the relation between fear of death and religious motivation is not due to an anxiety defense mechanism, but rather to underlying basic human concerns expressed in both constructs, was presented here. Future research should explore this notion in a more direct manner. For example, on the basis of this assumption it would be expected to find positive relations with other areas of concern which can be categorized using the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal framework. Such research could help to determine if the relation between fear of death and religious motivation is one particular expression of such concerns or if a unique relation between these two constructs is the case.

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Fear of Personal Death as a Predictor of Motivation for Religious Behavior


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