

Harrison Bae Wein, PhD, received his degree in molecular and cell biology. Soon afterward, he left the lab to become a health and science writer. His work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and many other outlets. He now works at the National Institutes of Health where he founded and edits two publications. His fiction and poetry has appeared in several literary journals, most recently in *ONE ART*. You can contact him at hbw@HarrisonWein.com. □

Religion, Meaning, and Fear of Death in the Time of COVID

Donna Crowley—Ramapo College of New Jersey

Abstract: Individual differences in response to the death toll of the COVID pandemic have been significant. Some people have taken tremendous steps to avoid illness and potentially death. Others have resisted protective measures. Our understanding of these differences is enhanced by a consideration of the impact of religion on death anxiety.

Keywords: afterlife, anxiety, COVID, death, fear, meaning, philosophical-systems, religion

Across the globe, the ubiquitous presence of COVID-19 has forced people to deal not only with the loss of loved ones but with the possibility of their own deaths. People have faced mortality in ways that many had not contemplated before. Has the prospect of dying evoked fear? Solace? Curiosity? Acceptance? Regret? Numerous scholars have written about attitudes and emotional responses to death; they have demonstrated that reactions take a variety of forms, depending on circumstance and individual characteristics. In the era of COVID-19, such reactions may include acceptance that death is ultimately a part of existence, the anticipation of a rewarding afterlife, as well as the fear of the unknown, regrets, or anger at events beyond their control.

Factors Affecting Reactions to Death

One variable logically related to attitudes toward death is the nature of a person's religious beliefs and the strength of those beliefs. The concept of an afterlife—whether it be something like heaven or reincarnation—is a feature of many religious systems that provides an answer to the question of what happens after death. The idea of an afterlife can offer comfort to believers as they face

the death of a loved one or the prospect of their own end. Religious faith provides a system of meaning in life, a sense of one's place in an unknown universe, and a surrender of self to a higher power. There can be tremendous comfort in abandoning the idea of individual self-efficacy to the idea of a predetermined, divine plan.

However, belief in an afterlife does not always correspond to more accepting attitudes toward death. The afterlife in some religious traditions also carries with it severe judgment; people with rigid beliefs in a conservative and vengeful deity may have a considerable fear of death. The form and rigidity of a people's religious beliefs significantly relate to their reactions to the concept of death. The degree of religiosity and spirituality, and the place of religion in people's lives, are correlated with the nature of their death anxiety or acceptance. Thus, religiosity may well impact their reactions and behaviors during this pandemic.

Of course, religion is not the only possible conduit to constructing a sense of existential meaning. Secular philosophical systems can also provide a sense of place within the universe and perspective on being, as Viktor Frankl explored in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946). Personal philosophical systems may be highly intellectual and abstract or possibly grounded in personal experience, yet all provide for a cognitive structure within which to process concepts of life, being, and death. As such, secular belief systems may operate as religious systems do, leading to an underlying acceptance of death rather than viewing it as a threat.

I have long studied the impact of religious practices and beliefs on individual actions and reactions as part of my work on the psychology of cults. However, one of my family experiences is perhaps most relevant here to illustrate the role of religiosity in death anxiety. I had four siblings, two of which have died. One of these two was very religious. My oldest sister was a strict, devout Catholic. She had devoted a significant part of her life to her religious beliefs, which were sometimes traditional and prophetic. This sister was struck quite suddenly by metastatic cancer some years ago. She was hospitalized and subsequently died within weeks. I visited her in the hospital not long before she died, and we talked about how she was dealing with the inevitability of her death. She was utterly calm, at peace, free from fear, and seemingly without distress because, as she said, "Jesus was waiting for me." I was awed by the power of her religious beliefs in providing comfort; she was completely ready to face a joyous afterlife in heaven. As such, she was

accepting of her time in the hospital as well. All that was happening would lead her to God. The same cannot be said of my other deceased sister, who was less religious and experienced much more anxiety during the time of her illness.

My sister's reaction was reaffirmed to me by a qualitative research study I subsequently completed on reactions to death. This work was done before the COVID-19 pandemic but remains relevant. One of my students, Richard Suarez, and I systematically examined brief narratives written by 409 adults in response to a prompt. This writing prompt asked them to briefly describe what emotions or thoughts they had about their own death. Respondents also wrote about what they thought would happen as they died. The age range of these participants was from 17 to 69 with an average age of 25; 64% of them were women.

Overall, there was a wide range of emotional reactions to death, as 139 (33.99%) wrote negative reactions to death, 81 (19.80%) wrote mixed reactions, 76 (18.58%) were positive in their narratives, 69 (16.87%) were neutral, and 44 (10.76%) conveyed an accepting but not positive emotional tone. The most common recurrent themes emerging from these narratives included: a belief in or hope for some form of an afterlife such as heaven, reincarnation, or spiritual unity with the universe (43.41% of narratives); negative emotions such as sadness, upset, worry, depression (28.78%); fear (22.93%); concern for loved ones (22.68%); philosophical statements on the meaning of life and inevitability of death (21.71%); and positive emotions such as joy and peace (21.22%).

The wording and content of the narratives were fascinating, uplifting, thoughtful, and painful. Some respondents were eloquent in their descriptions and philosophical statements, and some simply put their faith in their God. Others were terrified of death and the pain that might be involved, while a few wrote almost exclusively about the loved ones in their lives. Some illustrative examples follow:

“Dying makes me feel loss, sadness, finality, and peace, in that order. We all scurry around our lives making and breaking plans but to what end? In the Big Picture we also amount to little more than 7 billion ants scurrying around a planet. Once physically dead, nothing happens. Your ‘soul’ or what have you is extinguished, no heaven or hell, just darkness” (Male, White, 24). “The emotions that come with death are directly related to how one has led his life

up to this point; if one is accepting of his/her accomplishments during one's lifetime, then death will not bring negative emotions, such as a person reaches acceptance of his death. I try to live my life without regrets, therefore hope I will not fight against the inevitable death" (Male, White, 21).

"I have always felt that my death would come on the battlefield, so the fact that I survived 2 combat tours shocks me. Once I am dead I believe I will reach the gates of heaven and find eternal peace in God" (Male, White, 27). "I am ok with it because I know I am going to Heaven because I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ" (Female, White, 19). "I believe my enlightened self will try to quell my anxious scared self. I believe this will be the defining conflict as I pass. I feel the conflict will slowly resolve as my enlightened self wins and I pass on" (Male, Asian, 32). "I feel a sense of calmness. I feel a slight worriedness about how my death will affect my child. I wonder about the afterlife" (Female, Black, 33).

"I am appalled by the unfairness of having to die. It is the iconic tragedy of our self-aware state and I often think we screwed ourselves by evolving to this point. From an evidence-based world view, it seems that no life after death must be the default position. I expect to be wild with protest and dread if I am conscious as I approach death. I expect the world to end effectively for me, and I expect my body to turn to foul sludge unless it is cremated" (Female, White, 59). "When I die I will miss my family greatly. My family will miss me I know that. Yes, I am scared to die!" (Female, White, 69). [Editor's Note: This concludes the author's source materials.]

Belief in an Afterlife and COVID-19

In this study, respondents who believed in or at least hoped for some type of afterlife were significantly more positive about death than those who did not. Similarly, of those who did not indicate a belief in an afterlife, people who had a philosophical stance on life and death were much more likely to be positive about death than those with no philosophical or religious elements in their narratives. The responses clearly showed that belief in an afterlife seemed to have an impact on how people approached the task of thinking and writing about death. For those participants for whom the possibility of an afterlife was salient enough to include in their narratives, death appeared to hold some positive possibilities.

I believe that this pattern helps us to understand a portion of

the behavioral variability in how people have approached COVID-19. Certainly, behavioral differences regarding the pandemic have been grounded in political views, information sources, and power perspectives. However, I believe that religious belief may also play a significant role by altering attitudes toward death. I would expect people with high levels of religious devotion (within religious systems that posit an afterlife with an all-powerful and all-knowing deity) to show less fear of death and greater willingness to go with whatever they perceive the deity has planned for them and their loved ones. Therefore, we might expect such highly religious people to be less likely to take protective steps into their own hands—slower to get vaccinated and less likely to engage in other protective behaviors—than people with more secular life views because their death anxiety is lower. Their trust is with their deity and there are rewards after death for them.

With some exceptions, this is the pattern of reactions to COVID-19 that we have seen when comparing the behaviors of highly religious populations geographically within the United States to less religious populations. Just as I understood that my sister's lack of death anxiety was due to her lifelong religiosity, perhaps individual differences in COVID-19 reactions can be understood as due not only to politics and the influences of internet sources of information and misinformation but also to religiously driven personal beliefs about death.

Donna Crawley, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Ramapo College of New Jersey. Her research has focused on such topics as the detection of deception, factors affecting criminal case outcomes, and the relationship between empathy and mortality salience. Her areas of expertise also include the psychology of cults, which she has studied for 40 years. She may be contacted at dcrawley@ramapo.edu. □

November Memoriam

Claude Barbre—Chicago School of Professional Psych.

Countries of the body count become our home.
Alluvial death undresses in its lair.
Mouse shadows bed against the early moon
and winters past that felled the elder elms
now fall again in mind with every leaf.