

Chapter One

God is Sometimes Great! The Glory and Shame of Religion

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Religion opens up the depth of man's spiritual life which is usually covered by the dust of our daily life and the noise of our secular work. It gives us the experience of the Holy, of something which is untouchable, awe-inspiring, an ultimate meaning, the source of ultimate courage. This is the glory of what we call religion. But beside its glory lies its shame. It makes its myths and doctrines, its rites and laws, into ultimates and persecutes those who do not subject themselves to it.¹

Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker integrated and synthesized critical insights from the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, philosophy, theology, and popular culture in order to address the question: "What makes people act the way they do?"² Although generally devoted to the Enlightenment ideal that understanding human behavior could foster psychological well-being and social progress, Becker forcefully rejected the archetypal Enlightenment view of religion as an archaic infantile delusion destined to be abandoned in the wake of reason on humankind's inexorable road to political stability and economic prosperity. Rather, following Paul Tillich, Becker had the

¹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 9.

² Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (2nd edition). Free Press, 1971, p. vii.

highest regard for religion as a uniquely human pursuit that ideally optimizes personal fortitude and prosocial behavior. Like Tillich however, Becker recognized the ugly and dangerous downside of religion, particularly when it is co-opted by all-too-human practitioners who manipulate religious proclivities and institutions for political and economic purposes. Such exploitation stokes ferocious animosities between people of different faiths that persist over centuries, precipitating violent conflicts that could, ultimately, reduce the earth to a smoldering heap unfit for human habitation.

In this chapter we provide an overview of Becker's account of religion -- its glory and its shame -- from a psychological and an historical/anthropological perspective, fortified by empirical evidence derived from terror management theory.³ We then consider the implications of these ideas for fostering interdenominational dialogue and cooperation.

Death: The Worm at the Core

Back of everything is the great specter of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness. . . . We need a life not correlated with death . . . a good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature. . . . And so with most

³ Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory. In R. F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Public self and private self* (pp. 189–212). Springer-Verlag, 1986; Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, A Terror Management Theory of Social Behavior: The Psychological Functions of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews. In Mark Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, (24, 93-159). Academic Press, 1991.

of us: . . . a little irritable weakness will bring the worm at the core of all our usual springs of delight into full view, and turn us into melancholy metaphysicians.⁴

Becker initiated his analysis of the human condition by observing how human beings are similar to, as well as uniquely different from, all other forms of life. He noted that we share with all creatures biological inclinations toward self-preservation in the service of survival and reproduction. Humans differ from other life forms, however, by virtue of a unique form intelligence: the ability to think abstractly and symbolically, enabling us to imagine things that do not yet exist and subsequently transform our dreams into reality. Only human beings are truly creative; other creatures must adapt to the physical universe in the form in which they encounter it, while humans have the capacity and inclination to alter the physical universe to conform to their desires. Moreover, human knowledge is cumulative and transferred across generations via language and cultural practices. No wonder then that humans have been pervasively successful as a species.

Becker then embraced Kierkegaard's view that only human beings are completely self-aware: that is, self-aware and aware of our awareness (e.g., "*Here I am walking down the street, thinking that I'm walking down the street.*" "*Here I am walking down the street thinking that I'm thinking that I'm walking down the street.*"). Self-awareness, in turn, engenders two uniquely human emotions: awe and dread. Awe arises because it's great to be alive and to know it – to be, in Otto Rank's words, "the temporal representative of the cosmic primal force,"⁵

⁴ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Mentor Edition, 1958 (orig. 1902), p. 121.

⁵ Otto Rank, *Truth and reality*. Norton, 1978 (orig. 1936), p. 4.

directly descended from the first life form and thus related to everything that has ever lived, is currently living, and will ever live in the future: a conduit through which all of nature flows! But the flow of life through an individual organism lasts only so long, and that's where the dread comes in. The very self-awareness that makes life awesome also renders human beings explicitly aware that death is inevitable – that we are housed in flimsy bodies subject to becoming corpses at any time for reasons that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. Dreadful indeed it is to be a self-aware piece of breathing, defecating, copulating meat: a transient aggregation of blood, guts, and organs no better or more enduring than ferrets, fruit flies, and figs.

Becker proposed that our ancestors would have been riddled with, and perhaps even expired from, potentially debilitating existential terror if not for the construction and maintenance of culture: humanly created beliefs about reality shared by individuals in a group that serve the essential psychological function of managing the potential terror engendered by the uniquely human awareness of death.⁶

In *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1971), Becker⁷ argued that cultural worldviews reduce anxiety by providing their constituents with a sense that they are persons of *value* in a

⁶ Becker's claim that cultural worldviews serve to diminish death anxiety does not preclude them having other functions, e.g., that cultural belief systems foster social cohesion and social coordination (cf. David Sloan-Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*, University of Chicago Press, 2002) or that cultural belief systems contain highly adaptive information gleaned from generations of cumulative experience in specific environments (cf. Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*, Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁷ Becker, 1971, op. cit.

world of *meaning*. All cultures offer an account of the origin of the universe (e.g., God created the earth in six days [Judeo-Christian tradition]; God created the earth out of a giant drop of milk [Fulani in Mali]) and a conception of reality that, together, infuse the world with meaning, order, and stability. All cultural worldviews afford a blueprint for daily conduct through the creation of social roles with associated values and standards, the satisfaction of which provide *self-esteem*—the belief that one is a valuable member of meaningful universe. Moreover, cultural worldviews include heroic death transcendence for those who meet or exceed culturally constructed standards of value: literal immortality through the souls, afterlives, reincarnations, and transmutations that are a common feature of most religions (past and certainly at present)⁸; and/or, symbolic immortality through performing great deeds, amassing huge fortunes, erecting

⁸ In his book *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2013), Ara Norenzayan notes that polytheistic religions of small societies of nomadic hunter gatherers do not generally include the concept of immortality. Norenzayan posits that the concept of, and yearning for, death transcendence arose coincident with the origin of ‘big gods’ (characteristic of all monotheistic religions) that foster pro-social behavior in large groups of genetically distant-related individuals. A big god ‘sees’ and ‘knows’ everything and thus always has the ‘last move.’ This reduces cheating and free-riding through promises of heavenly afterlives and threats of eternal damnation, and is, Norenzayan argues, why cultures with ‘big gods’ prevailed in competition with smaller polytheistic cultures and ultimately became the dominant form of human cultural organization. In our view, these claims are not at odds with Ernest Becker’s account of the role of death anxiety in the formation and maintenance culture and religion. Cf. Sheldon Solomon, The Role of Death Denial in Culture and Consciousness, in Robert A. Scott, Marlis C. Buchmann and Stephen M. Kosslyn, (Eds), *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (pp. 1-16). John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017.

enduring monuments, identifying with a group or nation, and/or having children to ensure biological succession.⁹

Becoming Human

From the child of five to myself is but a step, but from the new-born baby to the child of five in an appalling distance.¹⁰

Self-esteem and cultural worldviews acquire their anxiety-buffering qualities in the context of infant and childhood socialization. According to attachment theory,¹¹ long before babies have the physical, emotional, and intellectual capabilities to survive on their own or have encompassing awareness of death, anxiety in response to unmet needs or physical dangers instigates the formation of physical and psychological attachments to primary caretakers who give nurturance and protection. Even in non-optimal circumstances (i.e., insecure attachment), these attachments provide infants with a sense of safety and security, leading to the development of lasting internal working models of the self and others. Early experiences with primary caretakers thus usher infants into the process of using symbolic social connections to mitigate anxiety.

Children must then be fully incorporated into their social milieus by learning the language, beliefs, and customs of their culture. Toward this end, children's acquisition of

⁹ Robert J. Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. Simon and Schuster, 1979.

¹⁰ Leo Tolstoy, as quoted in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, p. 25.

¹¹ John Bowlby, *Attachment*. Basic Books, 1969.

parental affection becomes increasingly contingent on behaving in accord with cultural dictates. Youngsters are showered with praise when they behave appropriately, producing the same feeling of psychological equanimity previously associated with secure attachment. Inappropriate behavior begets very different parental reactions – ranging from punishment, to rebukes, to sullen indifference – all of which involve a distinct absence of affection and consequent influx of anxiety and insecurity (perhaps linked to a fear of abandonment). Over time, children come to associate being ‘good’ with being safe (good = safe = alive) and being ‘bad’ with being helpless and vulnerable (bad = insecure = dead). In this fashion, self-esteem becomes a potent anxiety buffer.

The anxiety-buffering qualities of self-esteem, initially obtained by pleasing parents during socialization, ultimately come to depend on adhering to prevailing cultural standards. Inculcation into prevailing cultural institutions – along with relevant accounts of history, religion, and folklore – allows developing children to learn how they may participate in (and thus derive security from) the broader culture. Younglings learn what social norms must be followed, and what values that must be pursued, in order to be good (and thus feel safe). The transition is initiated as children become increasingly aware of the inevitability of death. Clinical and empirical evidence suggests this happens as early as two years of age and is often of considerable concern by age nine or ten.¹² Children eventually realize their parents are as fallible and mortal as any other life form, and so shift the basis of security from caregivers to a broader cultural landscape replete with inroads to literal and symbolic immortality. Self-esteem is now obtained by meeting or exceeding culturally prescribed standards associated with specific social roles constructed by the individual’s culture.

¹² Irvin Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, Basic Books, 1980.

People are thereafter fundamentally motivated to maintain faith in their culturally acquired belief systems, confidence in their self-worth, and close relationships with significant others as a psychological bulwark against existential terror, and will consequently respond defensively when their cherished cultural beliefs, self-esteem, or close relationships are undermined.

Empirical Verification: Is It True?

For the essence of science, I would suggest, is simply the refusal to believe on the basis of hope.¹³

Although Ernest Becker won a Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction in 1974 for *The Denial of Death*, his ideas were generally ignored or denigrated by academic psychologists at the time on the grounds that they were highly speculative assertions derived from existential philosophy and psychoanalysis for which there was no empirical evidence. Critics also claimed that such evidence would be impossible to obtain given Becker's acceptance of Freud's assumption that people are generally unaware (i.e., unconscious) of their thoughts, feelings, and motives. However, there is now a considerable body of empirical

¹³ Barrington Moore, in Robert P. Wolff, Barrington Moore and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Beacon Press, 1965, p. 55.

evidence derived from terror management theory¹⁴ for a recent overview) in accord with the Becker's central claim that self-esteem and cultural worldviews serve to mitigate existential terror.

One line of inquiry established the anxiety-buffering function of self-esteem by having participants view graphic depictions of death or a neutral film after giving them positive or neutral feedback on a personality inventory. Neutral self-esteem participants showed a significant increase in self-reported anxiety in response to the death-related video; however, those who received a self-esteem boost did not. A second study replicated this effect on a physiological measure of autonomic arousal associated with anxiety (skin conductance). Taken together, these experiments and others like them established that self-esteem buffers anxiety.¹⁵

Another line of inquiry is based on the hypothesis that if cultural worldviews buffer death anxiety, making people aware of their own mortality (*mortality salience*) should magnify the need for the protection afforded by their beliefs, resulting in efforts to bolster faith in their cultural worldviews. Mortality salience is typically induced by having people write about their own death, specifically by responding to two open-ended questions: "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you." and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to *you* as you physically die and once you are physically

¹⁴ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, Thirty Years of Terror Management Theory: From Genesis to Revelation. In J. Olson M. Zanna (Eds.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 52, pp. 1-70.

¹⁵ Reviewed by Tom Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, Jaime Arndt, and Jeff Schimel, (2004). Why Do People Need Self-Esteem? A Theoretical and Empirical Review, *Psychological Bulletin*, 130 (3), pp. 435–468. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.3.435>.

dead.” Control participants respond to parallel questions about neutral activities such as eating or watching television, or aversive but non-fatal experiences such as an upcoming exam or being in extreme pain (other mortality salience inductions include viewing graphic depictions of death, being interviewed in front of a funeral parlor, or subliminal exposure to the word ‘dead’ or ‘death’).

This research has established that religious faith does indeed assuage concerns about death.¹⁶ Strong faith in God is associated with emotional well-being and low death anxiety. Google trends throughout the globe show that, following above-average search volume for death-related words (e.g., cancer), religion-related searches (e.g., prayer, God) surge the following week. Moreover, after a reminder of their mortality, people report being more religious and having a stronger belief in God. Death reminders make people more confident that God exists, and that God answers prayers; they also make people more interested in, and accepting of, supernatural phenomena in general. And defensive responses to mortality salience are attenuated or eliminated if individuals are first presented with supposed evidence for a spiritual afterlife.

Mortality salience produces comparable effects on secular worldview beliefs.¹⁷ People become more nationalistic after pondering their own demise. They are also more likely to

¹⁶ For a recent review of the literature, cf. Spee Kosloff and Sheldon Solomon, (2020). The Paradox of Faith: How Existential Concerns Motivate Both Prosocial and Antisocial Religious Behaviors. In Clay Routledge & Kenneth Vail (Eds.), *The Science of Religion, Spirituality, and Existentialism* (pp. 435-454), Academic Press, 2020.

¹⁷ For a recent review of the literature, cf. Sheldon Solomon and Sharlynn Thompson, Secular Cultural Worldviews. In Clay Routledge & Matthew Vess (Eds.), *Handbook of Terror Management Theory* (pp. 287-302). Elsevier, 2019.

affiliate with, buy and consume products manufactured by, and donate to charities organized to assist, others in their culture. Moreover, death reminders increase punitive reactions to moral transgressions and favorable reactions to those who behave in accord with cultural dictates. American atheists, for example, respond to mortality salience with amplified negativity toward those who profess anti-U.S. views. This effect stems from atheists' underlying strivings for a securing sense of immortality; for, mortality salience does not elicit such derogation if atheists initially read evidence that medical science can be used to enable biological immortality. Reduction of atheists' worldview defense doesn't occur when supposed evidence for immortality is supernatural in nature (rather than biological). For lack of explicit faith in the supernatural, atheists instead garner security from relatively secular, scientific portrayals of immortal continuance.

A third line of inquiry is based on the hypothesis that, when cherished aspects of cultural worldviews or self-esteem are threatened, unconscious death thoughts come more readily to mind. Unconscious death thoughts are typically assessed by the number of incomplete word stems completed in death-related ways (e.g., C O F F _ _ could be COFFEE or COFFIN; G R _ V E could be GROVE or GRAVE). For example, unconscious death thoughts increased when Christian fundamentalists were confronted with logical inconsistencies in the bible; or, after Canadian participants received negative feedback about their country; or, after American participants were told their personality is incompatible with their career aspirations.¹⁸ In sum,

¹⁸ For a recent review of the literature, cf. Spee Kosloff, Gabriel Anderson, Alexandra Nottbohm, and Brandon Hoshiko, Proximal and Distal Terror Management Defenses: A Systematic Review and Analysis. In Clay Routledge and Matthew Vess (Eds.), *The Handbook of Terror Management Theory* (pp. 31-63), Elsevier, 2019.

Becker's core claims regarding the anxiety-buffering properties of self-esteem and cultural worldviews have been empirically corroborated.

God is Great!

A scheme of things is a plan for salvation....[it] may be as large as Christianity or as small as the Alameda County Bowling League. We seek the largest possible scheme of things, not in a reaching out for truth, but because the more comprehensive the scheme the greater its promise of banishing dread. If we can make our lives mean something in a cosmic scheme we will live in the certainty of immortality.¹⁹

For most of human history, and to this day, people managed existential terror primarily by adhering to religious worldviews that afforded explicit pathways to transcend death via literal immortality. Although secular worldviews, by contrast, typically have no overt religious or spiritual basis, they are nevertheless, according to Becker,²⁰ "...mythical hero-system(s) in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning." Some secular worldviews strive for literal immortality through scientific efforts to prevent people from ever dying, or if they do die, to resuscitate them literally or virtually. After Lenin's death in 1924, his body was embalmed and placed in a sarcophagus inside a

¹⁹ Allen Wheelis, *The Scheme of Things*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, p. 72.

²⁰ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, 1973, p. 5.

gleaming red granite mausoleum on Red Square abutting the Kremlin for public viewing. *The Immortalization Commission* was charged with preserving his remains until scientific efforts to render death obsolete could be discovered.²¹ Other secular worldviews offer symbolic immortality; a popular Communist party slogan in China under Mao Zedong was *May the Revolutionary Regime stay Red for ten thousand generations*. Ten-thousand generations is longer than the current age of the human race; and, ‘ten thousand’ in Chinese numerals connotes infinity.²²

Becker steadfastly regarded religious worldviews more highly than secular (including idiosyncratic personal) belief systems. Despite the fact that all such beliefs diminish mortal terror, Becker insisted that religious beliefs offer the broadest, deepest, and most durable foundation for personal and interpersonal equanimity and prosperity. Secular and idiosyncratic personal beliefs are, in contrast, ultimately fetishes or idols (or both) leading to “*the restriction of experience...by skewing perceptions and limiting action.*”²³

For a person with obsessive-compulsive disorder – washing their hands repeatedly in desperate attempts to dispatch invisible germs – life has been reduced to the persistent pursuit of soap. The narcissistic individual, a legend in his own mind, is perpetually dependent on tinted mirrors and external adulation to maintain a distorted, overinflated image of himself. Others are

²¹ John Gray, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

²² Robert J. Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Random House, 1968.

²³ Becker, 1971, op. cit. p. 43.

in what Karen Horney²⁴ described as morbidly dependent romantic relationships; they imbue their partners with god-like power, and their own self-regard is thereafter dependent of how their partner views them: an untenable state of affairs for both parties. Some develop nationalistic tendencies with passionate devotion to charismatic political leaders, marching to the beat of the martinet *de jour*. And still others mindlessly adhere to any one of the blinding array of social roles their worldviews prescribe, muting realities outside their established scheme by embracing superficial trends or simply slip-sliding away into convenient pathways to forgetting where, as Kierkegaard described, they are tranquilized by the trivial. As Becker likewise opined: “modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.”²⁵

In *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, Becker explained that such psychological and secular machinations are restrictive and unstable because they depend on concrete and historically determined factors that are unlikely to persist in perpetuity: “If you stay on the heroics of the secular, social world, many things can happen to undermine your allegiances in that world; and then you may be in for a crisis of faith and hope of major proportion.”²⁶ Sometimes there is no soap to be found for the compulsive handwasher; no distorted mirrors or fawning fans for the narcissist; no one willing to serve as god or submit to god-like oversight for the morbidly dependent. Or, for the average person perceiving their country’s evident decline, preferred political saviors may be exposed as a fallible, corrupting conmen.

²⁴ Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*. Norton, 1950.

²⁵ Becker, 1973, op. cit., p. 284.

²⁶ Becker, 1971, op. cit. p. 191.

Only religion, Becker insists, both intellectually and from his own personal experience, “includes the level of the invisible, the possible multidimensionality of reality, the problem of creation and the meaning of it.”²⁷ Through devotion to a higher power, people are free(er) to garner self-esteem from their own intrinsically generated standards rather than unreflexively responding to the demands of their immediate social surroundings. All other forms of terror management, he asserts, at best “blot out the despair of a self-conscious animal life.”²⁸

In *The Denial of Death* (1973) Becker reiterated and extended his argument on behalf of the psycho-social virtues of religion, based on an expansion of ideas from Otto Rank and Søren Kierkegaard. Following Rank, Becker asserted that fear of death is inevitable in a self-conscious creature biologically predisposed toward self-preservation. This, in turn, leads to fear of life, as well; for, to know death is simultaneously to know that life, in all its awesomeness, is indeterminate except for the inexorable limit of death, and is thus to cower in wake of the perception of life as an existentially free cavalcade of excruciatingly pointless decisions. Out of such a bind – wherein individuals are at once living life and psychologically inclined to escape its burdens – comes the motivation for what Freud termed *transference*: an ineluctable drive to give oneself over to others, to seek unfreedom and even, in a sense, become a slave, so as both to live and to not face the fearful connection between life and death. From helpless dependency upon protection from seemingly omnipotent parents in infancy, to the fetishization of charismatic figures and other cultural values and icons in adulthood, humans willfully subjugate themselves in order to gain security from the horrors of individual existence. The painful juxtaposition of life and death spawns the process of submission to higher powers portrayed in the unidimensional

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

vantage of an individual's cultural worldview: parents, partners, bowling teams, countries – and a socially prescribed vision of what God is (and isn't). "By submitting to this object," Erich Fromm contended, one "feels in touch with his own qualities; he feels strong, wise, courageous, and secure. To lose the object means the danger of losing himself."²⁹

Most transference objects, Becker argues, are too narrow and constricting, resulting in impoverished personal and interpersonal experiences. Authentic existence, however, requires more than blunting existential terror by being comfortably numb. Here Becker adopted Kierkegaard's conception of authenticity, resulting from matriculation to, and graduation from, The School of Anxiety. Anxiety (angst) is a mixture of dread, a sense of homelessness, and general dis-ease that arises (to varying degrees of explicit awareness) in reaction to the recognition of the inevitability of one's own death. Angst shatters one's worldview and culturally constructed identity; you are, at this point, 'no-one' surrounded by 'no-thing, arrived at a phenomenological 'ground zero.' Many confronted with this state – or even merely with its potential – will cling ever more tenaciously to their culture and character in what Heidegger termed a frantic 'flight from death,' becoming increasingly myopic and rigid socially constructed meat puppets who are tranquilized by the trivial. Others, by virtue of genetic predispositions, biochemical imbalances, and/or traumatic experiences, will be hurled into the psychological abyss, suffering amplification of existing disorders, nervous breakdowns, or psychotic breaks.

This psychological state of affairs is clearly vulnerable and tenuous, but also potentially the seat of substantive intrapsychic transformation. Graduating from The School of Anxiety is a multifaceted affair. On one hand, one must somehow come to terms with death, recognizing and accepting it as a concrete inevitability – not as some vaguely unspecified future occasion, but as

²⁹ As quoted in Becker, 1973, op. cit., p. 143.

an ever-present reality that is always potentially immediately impending. But graduation also requires encountering the reality that life is too much to bear alone, acknowledging that one has squandered parts of it in the process of subjecting oneself to cultural overlords and symbolic pursuits of self-expansion – of hiding the emotional burden of one’s existential freedom behind a cloak of potency, knitted from the coattails of earthly heroes. In a word, graduating from The School of Anxiety requires one to acknowledge the *guilt* of failing to fully live on one’s own two feet, just as one had failed to accept a destination six feet below them.

What, then, is the experience of living for *Homo sapiens* who has accepted death *and* accepted personal responsibility for bloating its ego by luxuriating in the constraints of culturally constructed heroism? How might one persist in the aftermath of an angst explosion and a firm, conscious encounter with Henry Miller’s avowal that, “we are all guilty of crime, the great crime of not living life to the full”?³⁰ At this juncture, to live stably both with death and a sensed triteness of cultural transference objects, one may turn to dimensions of reality beyond the reaches of one’s culturally engrained scheme of things. Having abandoned all earthy transference objects, one is poised to reform and reaffirm their character through a ‘leap of faith’ – by embracing God:

Man breaks through the bounds of merely cultural heroism; he destroys the character lie that had him perform as a hero in the everyday social scheme of things; and by doing so he opens himself up to infinity, to the possibility of cosmic heroism, to the very service of God. His life thereby acquires ultimate value in place of merely social and cultural, historical value. He links his secret

³⁰ Henry Miller, *Sexus: The Rosy Crucifixion*, Grove Press, 1949, p. 341.

inner self, his authentic talent, his deepest feelings of uniqueness, his inner yearning for absolute significance, to the very ground of creation. Out of the ruins of the broken cultural self there remains the mystery of the private, invisible, inner self which yearned for ultimate significance, for cosmic heroism. This invisible mystery at the heart of every creature now attains cosmic significance by affirming its connection with the invisible mystery at the heart of creation. This is the meaning of faith.³¹

While there is no 'diploma' to certify completion of this process, Becker contended that School of Anxiety graduates are recognizable by virtue of their humility and openness to a multidimensional reality.

The Problem of God(s)

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death...³²

Becker's portrayal of theological emergence from Dante's deepest pit of angst into a radically flexible and multidimensional encounter with varied contours of reality, enticing

³¹ Becker, 1973, op. cit., p. 91.

³² James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Dial Press, 1963, p. 91.

as it seems, rests on the assumption that – somehow – an individual conscious ape shaped by evolved cultural influences over tens-of-thousands of years can, through a radical existential reckoning, consciously cultivate a scheme of things so broad as to be unconstrained by the secularly defined psychological structures it has evolved and developed to rely upon to stay sane. Might the aforementioned leap of faith simply be a reformulation of the individual's preexisting worldview? To the extent that even School of Anxiety graduates retain seeds of influence from their grade school years, it is incumbent upon social scientists to examine the consequences of fervent faith-based living.

All cultural worldviews include core beliefs that can never be unambiguously corroborated, and are thus sustained primarily by social consensus. This is most assuredly true of religious beliefs, as they depend upon confidence in facts about invisibilities that can only be encountered through narrative retellings by elders; even theoretical School of Anxiety graduates initially learned the words 'religion' and 'God' at some point. The durability of religious beliefs surely becomes more convincing when most or all others in one's surrounding cultural environment subscribe to them. Therefore, as Becker argued in *Escape from Evil* (1975), anything that threatens the validity or integrity of one's religious worldview – or one's value in the context of that worldview – undermines the potency of that worldview to buffer existential terror. One particularly impactful threat to any cultural worldview is the existence of others who subscribe to different worldviews; alternative conceptions of reality (e.g., a religion different than one's own) will at least implicitly undermine the confidence with which one subscribes to one's own worldview. This then exposes the individual to the potential anxiety that their worldview was originally constructed to mitigate, instigating defensive reactions to restore

psychological equanimity. To true believers, those who do not share in the One True dogma are unenlightened at best, and threats to pure sanctity at worst. They must be dealt with somehow.

The first line of psychological defense in light of alternative conceptions of reality is to denigrate those in possession of them. Sure, the Borneo in the South Pacific believe that the universe was gestated from a giant coconut from the side of palm tree; but then again, these are half-naked functionally illiterate not-quite-human savages. If they had running water, cable television, designer jeans, and Twitter like we do, surely they would understand the error of their ways and see that God cannot be some giant Happy Hour beverage; everyone who knows anything knows that God created the earth in six days and created us (well, men at least!) in His image.

We simultaneously go to extraordinary lengths to convince others – often with tremendous displays of political, economic, and military power – to abandon their beliefs and adopt our own culturally constructed conception of reality. Missionary activity is the most obvious example of this phenomenon in the religious domain, and the Cold War in the political arena. Christian missionaries played a large role in the colonization of scores of indigenous cultures around the world. Similarly, the United States and Soviet Union spent enormous time and energy in the latter part of the twentieth century to convince third-world countries to adopt a capitalist or communist ideological approach to life. Although there are obviously enormous physical resources at stake here, the major payoff for wholesale religious, political, and/or economic conversions is blatantly psychological. All cultural worldviews are fragile social constructions sustained by social consensus; consequently, the more people who adhere to a particular conception of reality, the easier it is for people to be confident that their vision of reality is ‘true.’

Ultimately, in many cases, these perceivably inferior ‘others’ must be exterminated in order to demonstrate (to them and ourselves) that our vision of reality and our way of life is indeed more ‘true’ than theirs – hence the many crusades, holy wars, pogroms, and jihads throughout history. From this perspective, the ultimate cause of protracted armed conflicts is frequently psychological, stemming from humankind’s fundamental inability to tolerate those with different death-denying visions of reality: “wars and persecutions are, at bottom, expressions of rivalry between contending claims to immortality and ultimate spiritual power.”³³ The Middle East, Ireland, India/Pakistan, Rwanda, the Cold War, and the country formerly known as Yugoslavia are host to just a few of the many seemingly intractable conflicts – often going back thousands of years – where each side denies the right of the other to exist. For many years, the official policy of the Palestine Liberation Organization was to push all Israelis into the ocean; Israelis countered with the quaint slogan, “The only good Arab is a dead Arab.” Former President Ronald Reagan fueled Cold War animosity by continual reference to the Soviet Union as the ‘Evil Empire,’ while the Soviet-supported Iranian fundamentalists countered by designating the United States as the ‘Great Satan.’

Clearly, this is not the rhetoric of rational political and economic discourse. It is the histrionic and terrified defense of death-denying ideologies unable to bear the psychological brunt of alternative conceptions of reality. And human history has been replete with a succession of unspeakable horrors as a result: oceans of blood, mountains of misery, with obscene amounts of energy and resources devoted to development and deployment of increasingly lethal biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons.

³³ Lifton, 1979, op. cit., p. 315.

This portrayal is indeed bleak: cultural worldviews serve to deny death by providing people with a sense that they are valuable members of meaningful universe; consequently, the mere existence of people with different worldviews is threatening and provokes a host of unfortunate responses. Nativism, racism, religious fanaticism, militarism, violent efforts to annihilate culturally different others: all are quite awful – but it gets worse! Cultural worldviews are symbolic, yet have very physical manifestations, (e.g., flags, monuments, and other cultural icons that render the culture more tangible and convincing); while death is quite physical, no culturally constructed symbol is capable of completely eliminating human beings' terror of death. Thus, a panic constantly lingers on the threshold of consciousness, one that can at any time burst into awareness and instigate a state of unmitigated terror.

According to Becker,³⁴ this dread is repressed and then projected upon a person or group of people who become scapegoats, deemed the all-encompassing repositories of evil, the eradication of whom would make life on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, even if there weren't ethnically or ideologically different people to disparage and destroy to restore our psychological equanimity when our death-denying illusions are threatened, we would designate scapegoats based on subtle differences to berate and batter as a conduit to siphon off the residual fear of death that our cultural worldviews are incapable of completely eliminating. Constant ethnic strife and hostility toward culturally designated scapegoats is thus the sad price that human beings pay for being creatures with mortal fears and immortal aspirations:

What men have done is to shift the fear of death onto the higher level of cultural perpetuity; and this very triumph ushers in an ominous new problem. Since men

³⁴ Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*, Free Press, 1975.

must now hold for dear life onto the self-transcending meanings of the society in which they live, onto the immortality symbols which guarantee them indefinite duration of some kind, a new kind of instability and anxiety are created. And this anxiety is precisely what spills over into the affairs of men. In seeking to avoid evil, man is responsible for bringing more evil into the world than organisms could ever do merely by exercising their digestive tracts.³⁵

Again, Empirical Verification: Is It True?

“When the angel of death sounds his trumpet, the pretenses of civilization are blown from men’s heads into the mud like hats in a gust of wind.”³⁶

A considerable body of research³⁷ demonstrates that death reminders magnify hostility and disdain toward those who subscribe to alternative (religious and secular) worldviews. For example, although Christian participants in one study rated Christians and Jews equally in terms of attractiveness and intelligence, after a mortality salience induction the Christians had *more* favorable impressions of fellow Christians and *less* favorable impressions of Jews. Similarly, following mortality salience, American participants’ impressions of a pro-American author increased and their impressions of an anti-American author decreased. Moreover, Iranians reminded of their mortality were more supportive of martyrdom activities (i.e., suicide bombing)

³⁵ Ibid., p.5.

³⁶ George Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, Dover Publications, 1996 (orig. 1919), p. 12.

³⁷ Summarized in Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*, Random House, 2015.

and more interested in joining the cause of martyrdom. Somewhat similarly, conservative Americans reminded of their mortality were increasingly supportive of the pre-emptive use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons against countries who pose no direct threat to the United States.

And, in an especially ominous study devoutly Christian participants read either a non-threatening article about the Aurora Borealis, or an article entitled “Islam Poised to Swallow Jesus’ Boyhood Home,” designed to be threatening to Christians:

Tens of thousands of residents looked on while leaders of the Islamic Movement—the main Muslim political party in Nazareth—paraded down the main thoroughfare. While the march was billed as a celebration, its militant virtues were clearly visible. The event seemed more a show of force than a street party. Dressed in battle gear, Muslim celebrants beat drums and brandished their party’s green flag as a man on a loudspeaker repeatedly exclaimed in Arabic, ‘Allah is great’ and hundreds of activists strutted screaming Islamist epithets, including ‘Islam is the only truth’ and ‘Islam shall rule all!’³⁸

Half of the participants also read an additional paragraph describing a plane crash: “In related news, 117 devout Muslims passed away today en route to The Feast of the Sacrifice in Nazareth .

³⁸ Joseph Hayes, Jeff Schimel, and Todd Williams, (2008). Fighting Death with Death: The Buffering Effects of Learning That Worldview Violators Have Died. *Psychological Science*, 19(5), pp.501–507.

. . . There were no reported survivors.” Then everyone in the study completed a word stem completion task to measure how readily death thoughts came to mind.

Not surprisingly, the Christians who just read “Islam Poised to Swallow Jesus’ Boyhood Home” had much higher levels of death thoughts than those who read about the Aurora Borealis, showing that the idea of Muslims occupying sacred Christian territory raised the specter of death. However, those who also read that Muslims had died in a plane crash had the same low level of death thoughts as those who read about the Aurora Borealis. The death of ‘evil-doers’ reduced the Christians’ own mortal terror.

From Awe to Anguish

In view of religion’s association with social dominance and aggression throughout much of human history, it is tempting to assume that religious faith originated solely from dark and malicious corridors of human mentality. Should that be the case, this would likely pose insuperable barriers to the mission of interfaith communication and cooperation. Yet anthropological literatures paint quite a different picture: one in which awe, humility, giving, and symbolic communion with the cosmos preceded the crusades, jihads, pogroms, and institutionalized demagoguery that are all-too-familiar to contemporary observers. To the extent that vestiges of prosocial inclinations remain an aspect of modern humans’ need for faith, so too remains the prospect of enlivening them in the service of productive dialogue and mutually beneficial collaboration.

Becker’s delineates this tiered view in *Escape from Evil* (1975), derived largely from works by A. M. Hocart, Marcel Mauss, Paul Radin, Gerard Van der Leeuw, Otto Rank, and

Norman O. Brown. He contended that religion began as a socially advantageous psychological fortress against humans' awareness of their helpless dependence upon a natural world benignly indifferent to their fate. Consider the phenomenology of small semi-nomadic groups of hunter-gatherer *Homo sapiens*: physically impoverished apes – not large, not fast, weak jaws, small teeth – whose burgeoning intelligence laid bare both the unpredictability of the environment and each organism's irrevocable reliance, individually and collectively, upon it for sustenance. Theirs must have been an angst-ridden worldview, infused with desperate yearnings to relate to and control the vicissitudes of fire, water, sun, earth, etc. Hence, it was by personifying nature – projecting human-like qualities and intentions upon it – that primitives could manage otherwise debilitating anxiety. By projecting themselves into their surroundings, primitives created gods to whom appeals for safety and prosperity could be made.

The key to such supplication was ritualistic gift giving: supplicating the gods by proffering resources that literally or symbolically contained life-energy (e.g., animals, food, valued trinkets). Deference through such benefaction had a reciprocal psychological effect upon the giver: cosmic powers reflected back onto and into them, conferring protective heroic status:

...as the sacrificer manipulates the altar and the victim, he becomes identified with them—not with them as things, but with the essences behind them, their invisible connection to the world of the gods and spirits, to the very insides of nature. . . . [T]he act of sacrifice established a footing in the invisible dimension of reality . . . [permitting] the sacrificer to build a divine body, a mystical, essential self that had superhuman powers.³⁹

³⁹ Becker, 1975, op. cit., p. 21.

Ritualistic giving was thus an extremely serious matter. It was the primary means of channeling ‘mana power’ – the power of life – of establishing connection to and communion with the supernatural so as to incorporate some of it within oneself and one’s community and thereby feel safe. Giving afforded each member of the community a rich sense of symbolic self-expansion that was simultaneously *felt* in relation to the invisible spirit-world and *verified* in the visible cultural world.

Ritualistic giving was also extremely joyous and uplifting, producing moments of what Émile Durkheim characterized as ‘collective effervescence’:

Collective effervescence refers to moments in societal life when the group of individuals that makes up a society comes together in order to perform a religious ritual. During these moments, the group comes together and communicates in the same thought and participates in the same action, which serves to unify a group of individuals. When individuals come into close contact with one another and when they are assembled in such a fashion, a certain ‘electricity’ is created and released, leading participants to a high degree of collective emotional excitement or delirium. This impersonal, extra-individual force, which is a core element of religion, transports the individuals into a new, ideal realm, lifts them up outside of themselves, and makes them feel as if they are in contact with an extraordinary energy.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Emile Durkheim’s works are found at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/>

People monitored their levels of heroic giving, striving to give the most, with the net result of maximizing the mana power flowing to the collective. With sufficient sacrifice, the entire group could thrive – though it was never possible to give as much power as was received from the earth and the sky. Hence primitives generated excesses of food and wares and expended immense effort to acquire totems with no apparent utility beyond their role as gifts, only to set those resources ablaze, ceremonially eviscerate them, or otherwise expend them in offerings to projected deities in partial payment of an unpayable debt:

...primitive man created an economic surplus so that he would have something to give to the gods; the giving of the surplus was an offering to the gods who controlled the entire economy of nature in the first place, and so man needed to give precisely in order to keep himself immersed in the cosmology of obligation and expiation... All he wanted to do, with the technique of sacrifice, was to take possession of these invisible forces and use them for the benefit of the community.⁴¹

Primitives thus exhibited faith-based strivings through awe-inspired, ritualized, supernatural giving that served the greater social good. Contrast such *giving* with the radically selfish *taking* behavior endemic to marauders throughout history, who mercilessly seized land, wealth, and people under the aegis of religious expansionism. How did faith-based behavior transmute from a process of awe to the production of anguish? And how might we rekindle aspects of the former in contemporary society?

⁴¹ Becker 1975, op. cit. pp. 21 and 28-29.

Becker, following Norman O. Brown, argued that the shift from awe to anguish was inchoately present in the social world long before the modern state arose. Most notably, although primitive societies were relatively equalitarian, they shared moderns' psychological inclination toward meritocracy: recognizing and giving themselves over to exceptional persons. Just as we fawn over rock icons and political candidates, so too did early peoples exalt their best hunters and warriors: basking in the reflected glory of such figures, yearning to be close to them or follow them into battle, precisely because those heroes epitomized the prospect of invulnerability. It is in this respect that the individual urge to unfreedom is a hallmark of the human social experience:

...primitive man recognized differences in talent and merit and already deferred to them somewhat, granted them special privileges. . . . If you identified with these persons and followed them, then you got the same immunities they had. . . . As Rank so well taught us . . . "every human being is . . . unfree, that is, we are born in need of authority and we even create, out of a freedom, a prison. . . . [Primitive religion] starts the first class distinction."⁴²

The readiness to be dazzled by standouts precipitated a massive alteration in the landscape of religious living. Primitives had initially tethered themselves to special people for the protective cosmic powers they channeled from the spirit-realm to the community (in addition to their genuine hunting and leadership skills); but conniving leaders came to exploit the average individual's desire for subjugation in the service of terror management. A social niche emerged

⁴² Ibid., p. 43.

in which chiefs and kings – buttressed by underhanded affiliations with religious leaders – could occupy a central place of power *here on earth* by shifting their followers’ focus from invisible celestial power to visible forms of domination.

Early evidence of this corruptive strategy was documented in anthropologist Paul Radin’s account of the social evolution of shamans: medicine men whose hallucinatory episodes were construed as visits to the spirit-world.⁴³ As seers and conduits transmitting holy commands, shamans garnered tremendous adulation; yet these old men also used their power to selfish, cynical ends, imposing taboos that would ensure their preferential access to choice foods and virgins, even teaming up with chieftains in an early form of gangsterism. Chiefs themselves could then take on god-like status, controlling the redistribution of goods, regulating ritualistic practices, punishing failures to follow customs, and – most critically – receiving his people’s offerings.

Emerging god-men had tremendous allure to the average individual. Now the source of ultimate power was visibly embodied right there on the spot; to connect with an infinite wellspring of force, one needed only to embrace absolute subjection to the chief, the king, the pharaoh, the emperor, the president, etc. And with this radical shift, the model of individual heroism transformed from ‘Who can give the most to the gods?’ to ‘Who, in god-like fashion, can take it all?’

... it was evidently around the process of redistribution that gift giving gradually changed into grabbing and keeping. . . . [I]t is only natural that once the god became visible in the person of the king, his powers became those of this

⁴³ Ibid., p. 174.

world—visible, temporal powers in place of invisible, eternal ones. He would come to measure his power by the piles of things he actually possessed, by the glory of his person, and not, as before, by the efficiency of the ritual technics for the renewal of nature.⁴⁴

This transition of power had a profound trickle-down effect that resonates to the present day in an unsuspecting form: the desire for money. Once earthly leaders and their theological coconspirators took control of material redistribution, they could replace ritualistic sacrifice with a truly superfluous (i.e., having no intrinsic value) symbolic currency for trafficking power. Ritually burning material resources would be bad for the kingly business of amassing a material dominion, so instituting an artificial mode of exchange was strategic. Kings and priests cleverly collaborated to make these totems emblematic of the man-god himself, emblazing each coin with the king's visage, and dove even deeper into reservoirs of divine juju by constructing them from metals emblematic of nature's life-giving majesty: the sun (gold) and moon (silver). Every plebe in the fiefdom could aspire to possess sun-god-king power, and the more he acquired the more immortal he felt.

Money is obscure to analysis because it is still a living myth, a religion. . . . The first banks were temples and the first ones to issue money were the priests. . . . The first mints were set up in the temples of the gods, whence our word 'money'—from the mint in the temple Juno Moneta, Juno the admonisher, on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. . . . The king got his powers from the heavens and

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

radiated them in his own person to the people with the help of the priests, to benefit the patriarchal families. We might say that money coinage fit beautifully into this scheme, because now cosmic power could be the property of everyone, without even the need to visit temples: you could now traffic in immortality in the marketplace. . . . A new man emerged . . . a man who based the value of his life—and so his immortality—on a new cosmology centered on coins.⁴⁵

Curious as it may sound, modern humans' seemingly rational urge to acquire money is actually our way of striving for mana power. It is a persistent signifier of humans' long-standing exchange of cosmic connection for earthly ascension. Yet monetary acquisition cannot provide the empyreal communion and guilt expiation that primitive ritual technics afforded in spades. For modern *Homo sapiens*, the everyday experience of competitive communal giving has been supplanted by competitive individual taking. Becker's analysis reveals that coin cosmology created a fundamental – and fundamentally false – dichotomy of sacred and secular. All power is originally mana power; only through the historical hijacking of its flow were practical needs divorced from spiritual ones.

This puts modern humans in an impossible bind. By committing ourselves to the false opposition of sacred and secular, *Homo sapiens* becomes alienated from both. Yet still there remains the deep, primitive yearning for heroic expiation; and so, in a fumbling, neurotic, impotent quest to satisfy that need, we haplessly throw ourselves into bureaucratized versions of each (e.g., church and state). The imbalance inherent in this mode of living is apparent in disquietingly secular elements of institutionalized religion (e.g., megachurches), as well as the

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 76-80.

zealous faith people place in secular leaders and movements. Contemporary societies are populated by apes with a common, preternatural, and deeply religious longing for cosmic awe; yet that urge is stifled by the misdirected worship of people and money.

The result is humankind's bloody history of violent discord: an ongoing succession of genocidal atrocities juxtaposed with the brutal subjugation of designated in-house inferiors in a frenetic flight from death. Given our long-standing 'inhumanity to man,' Becker wondered if humans are a viable form of life. Perhaps self-conscious pieces of finite species-meat are ultimately an evolutionary dead-end, and we will have the ignominious distinction of being the first form of life to be responsible for its own extinction.⁴⁶

The Future of God

Mankind is always progressing, but the essential needs of man remain the same.

Life continues to be fragmentary and to be challenged by death no matter how powerful men become. The fear of death prompts men to complete life falsely and to express their frustration in lust for power, envy of one another, and a sense of false security in material comfort and power. These corruptions are rooted in the very center of personality and can therefore be uprooted only by a radical change at the heart of personality. The renewal of life through repentance is therefore a message of hope and judgment for every age. It will yet prove its relevance and

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 169-170. Cf also Robert J. Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo,*

Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism, Henry Holt, 1999.

power to an age which imagined that intellectual progress would obviate the necessity of religious renewal.⁴⁷

Reflecting on religion in his autobiography, Charles Darwin observed that people are no more likely to “throw off their belief in God, as for a monkey to throw off its instinctive fear and hatred of a snake.”⁴⁸ For Ernest Becker, this is not a cynical indictment of religion so much as an astute recognition that humans are fundamentally religious creatures in that we all yearn for an enduring sense of cosmic connection and significance. In *The Denial of Death*, echoing ideas of Otto Rank,⁴⁹ Becker concluded that a thorough interdisciplinary examination of the motivational underpinnings of human behavior leads “beyond psychology” directly to religion—to find the “courage to face the anxiety of meaninglessness.”⁵⁰ All religions, at their best, afford a deep sense of meaning and significance that infuses believers with courage and nurtures joyous communion, cooperation, and collaboration with fellow believers. This is the glory of religion.

All religions, however, at their worst, are hijacked by fanatical demagogues who exploit their followers’ death fears to denigrate, demonize, and annihilate ‘others’ designated as

⁴⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Persistence of Faith, *The Atlantic Magazine*, 1948, vol. 181 (2), pp. 57–62. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/03/religion-faith/305627/>

⁴⁸ Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, Collins Press, 1959 (orig. 1887).

⁴⁹ Otto Rank, *Beyond Psychology*, Dover Books, 1958 (orig. 1941).

⁵⁰ Becker, 1973, op. cit., p. 279.

all-encompassing repositories of evil.⁵¹ This is the shame of religion, and why Becker was pessimistic about the future of humankind in *Escape from Evil* (1975). He argued that most of the evil in the world results from death-denying efforts to rid the world of evil, and wondered if humans are a viable form of life given their seeming congenital inability to peacefully co-exist with others who do not share their religious, political, or economic worldviews.

How then can Becker's ideas stimulate interdenominational, interreligious and interfaith communication and cooperation?

Acknowledging both the glory and shame of all religions would be an auspicious starting point in this regard. Moreover, religious leaders of all faiths (and all leaders for that matter) could profit from some continuing education in The School of Anxiety. Genuine humility and openness to a multidimensional conception of reality could hopefully tilt the existential windmill from anguish to awe. To recall that religion originated not only because we fear death, but also because we love life. To recall that all religions share a common commitment to "The Golden Rule": "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."⁵² To affirm that our

⁵¹ Cf. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Knopf/HarperCollins, 2000, for an historical elaboration of this notion.

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https://cumberlink.com/news/local/neighbors/faith/faith-in-focus-the-golden-rule-in-all-faiths/article_80ab94e0-ea64-58fd-9edf-1d218affca27.html Specific examples of "The Golden Rule": **Baha'i Faith:**

"Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself. Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself."

Buddhism: "Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." **Christianity:** "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and

commonalities as human beings vastly exceed our differences, and broaden the scope of our proverbial flocks accordingly. To concede that Martin Luther King was correct in his assertion that: *“We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”*⁵³ To confess that a great religion would stand on its own merits without simultaneously demonizing and dehumanizing others as a bulwark against existential terror. Then, and only then, could one confidently proclaim that “God is Great.”

Sheldon Solomon and Spee Kosloff share equal credit for this chapter contribution.

the prophets.” (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”) **Confucianism:** “One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct ... loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.” **Hinduism:** “This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” **Islam:** “No one of you is truly a believer until he wishes for others that which he wishes for himself.” **Jainism:** “One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated.” **Judaism:** “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.” **Native American Pima Proverb:** “Do not wrong or hate your neighbor. For it is not he who you wrong, but yourself.” **Sikhism:** “As thou deemest thyself, so deem others.” **Taoism:** “Regard your neighbor’s gain as your own gain and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.” **Zoroastrianism:** “Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself.”

⁵³ Martin Luther King, as quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, from a speech given in St. Louis Missouri on March 22, 1964. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-jan-19-me-10002-story.html>.

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