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Implicit Religion and the Curvilinear Relationship between Religion and Death Anxiety: a Review Study

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Debate over the relationship of religion to death anxiety has included the opposing views of Malinowski, who held that religion lessened death anxiety, and Radcliffe-Brown, who argued that religion increased death anxiety. Homans' theoretical synthesis of these viewpoints was tested by Leming, who concluded that the empirical relationship was curvilinear, meaning that both low and high religious involvements resulted in low death anxiety while middle-range attachments did not. Reconsideration of this result argues that the presence of death anxiety is not dependent upon social learning, and that either high or low levels of theism leads to the resolution of anxiety problems. This outcome forces a contrast between religion generally and theism specifically, refuting their conventional equation. Experimental curvilinearity suggests that non-theistic or implicit religions both exist and are theoretically productive for the mainstream concerns in the study of religion. This outcome counters contrary claims from conventionalists who deem implicit religion as mere analogy or as a peripheral subclass of little importance.

Introduction

The concept of 'implicit religion' has not received universal applause. This essay challenges the detractors, characterized as either analogists or peripheralists, on their own intellectual territory. It contends that implicit religion cannot be dismissed either as having interest only to students of other topics (the analogists) or as lacking relevance to the core problems of religion studies (the peripheralists). Substantiation for this argument is found in a review of the inconsistent relationship between death anxiety and religion, which reveals that this problem can be accounted for only by allowing for implicit religion. This result demonstrates that implicit religion is important not only to other subject matter, but also to the central concerns of the study of religion.

Methodological assumptions

Heretofore subject specialists have tended to equate religion with the conventional institutionalized forms of theism (hereinafter 'conventionalists')¹. This

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fact is evidenced by the kinds of methodologies they deem appropriate for their research on religion. For one, conventionalists expend much energy honing church attendance figures (e.g. Marcum, 1999) largely because they presume that these data yield meaningful conclusions about religiousness.

Consider the assumptions warranting the following sentence: 'The United States is apparently an exception to the 'decreasing religiousness' rule, since rates of regular church attendance have been relatively stable, with 30–40% of high school seniors attending weekly' (Hood et al., 1996, p. 104). Conclusions about religiousness are here directly extracted from data about regular church attendance, with no intermediate theoretical links. While self-reported attendance data spark debates among religion researchers regarding their accuracy or limits (Walsh, 1998), their pertinence remains unchallenged. Hood et al. (1998, p. 330, 368) themselves agree that 'belief and attendance are far from perfectly correlated, and one can be a very poor predictor of the other', and concede that attendance is a 'rather unsophisticated operationalisation of religion'. Yet they never evaluate the underlying claim that attendance is an operationalization of 'religion' at all. Despite this justificatory lacuna, attendance questions are probably the most frequent research operationalizations of the religion variable, second only to denomination checklists².

A second methodological example of the tendency for conventionalists to equate religion and theism is the way in which they sort subjects into 'religious' and 'nonreligious' categories as with the Religious Orientation Scale [ROS], a twenty-item questionnaire designed to quantify extrinsic and intrinsic religious orientations. The theoretical distinction being measured is between 'the extrinsically involved person [who] *uses* his religion, [and] the intrinsically motivated [who] *lives* his religion' (Allport and Ross, 1967, p. 434). This scale is claimed to be one of the most frequently used measures of religiousness (Donahue, 1985a, p. 400).

Respondents are categorized as possessing an intrinsic orientation if they score above the median split on the intrinsic subscale, and below the split on the extrinsic sub-scale. Conversely, extrinsic individuals are those with scores above the median split on the extrinsic subscale and below the split on the intrinsic sub-scale. Those who score above the split on both subscales are 'indiscriminately pro-religious', meaning that they affirm any scale item that they believe reflects positively on religion. Our primary interest, however, lies with the interpretation of those scoring below the split on both sub-scales. These persons are labelled 'non-religious'.

Is the ROS actually capable of identifying the non-religious? Certainly not without difficulty. The ROS has been characterized as embodying a 'Southern Baptist' theology (Donahue, 1985b), in keeping with the assessment by Hood et al. (1996, p. 275) that 'much of the contemporary psychology of religion is really a study of Christianity, particularly Protestantism'. Over half the items on each of the intrinsic and extrinsic sub-scales require affirmation either of church attendance or of theistic beliefs (commonly questions about 'prayers'). A non-church-going disbeliever in supernatural entities will *necessarily* be categorized as nonreligious by the ROS, a result conventionalists consider unproblematic.

These problems are not limited to the ROS. Perrin (2000, p. 534) begins with the assumption that a religious person 'might be one who attends church, reads the Bible, prays, feels the presence of God, or lives a "Christian" life', and methodologically requires the presence of seven elements to categorize the respondent as religious: high church attendance, high involvement in collective religious activities, frequent prayer, a belief in a Jesus-mediated life after death, a conviction that one has been 'born again' and that one is a 'strong Christian', and repeated religious experiences of a mystical/ecstatic type. Jacobson (1999) treats those who affiliate with no institutional religion and self-proclaimed atheists as belonging to a single category.

The point is that conventionalists have long assumed an uncontroversial equation between religion and theistic forms, and many of their theories, methods and conclusions have been framed in those terms. Were the field to shift from a belief that religion and theism are coterminous categories, to a more nuanced understanding that theisms are but a subclass (albeit a very special subclass) of a broader category 'religion', much of that earlier work will not weather well the intellectual transition. What is true of institutional theistic religious forms may not be true of religion generally. For these reasons vested conventionalists can prove unreceptive to the introduction of the 'implicit religion' concept.

Two reactions to implicit religion

While conventionalists do not accept the concept of implicit religion, they may feel pressured to allow for it in some small way. For many implicit religion is merely a loose analogy that illuminates the analogized phenomena but which does nothing for the study of religion itself. The claim that nationalism, for example, displays many features that are religion-like might be instructive for students of nationalism, but of little consequence to the study of religion. The relationship, in other words, is nonreciprocal. In this light, students of religion can safely ignore the entire category of the implicit religion, even if it is useful and productive for students of *other* topics.

Alternatively, the conventionalist can concede that implicit religions are a true subclass of religion and not merely an analogized extension. But, they would maintain, this subclass is of peripheral interest to the central concerns of the study of religion. Here, the serious student can ignore implicit religions not because they are not real, but because they are not significant. The meaty insights reside at the conventional theistic core of the category; academic technicians can fill in the interesting but unrevolutionary details from the conceptual backwaters. Conventionalists of this type accept the insight of the implicit religion without conceding that this admission need impact any routine researches.

This essay argues that both of these intellectual postures are mistaken. The substantive context for this demonstration is a well-established problem within established religion studies, the relationship of religion to death anxiety. Our reconsideration of this problem will show that the concept of the implicit religion is central to its resolution. If successful, this result would mean, on the one hand, that the analogists are wrong: implicit religion is not a parasitic concept

useful only in guiding thought on the analogized category, with nothing to offer reciprocally to religion proper. On the other hand, the peripheralists are also wrong: the implicit religions are not a marginal subclass of 'religion' which can be safely ignored by the conventional scholar restricting his or her focus to more central issues. Rather, many of those central issues resist resolution because they lack this crystallizing idea.

Religion and Death Anxiety: Theoretical Overview

When reviewing the changes that had transpired in a small Catholic parish in France, Yves Lambert counted off the usual signs of secularization. The near-unanimous attendance at services fifty years before had severely tapered off, so that on a typical Sunday only one-third of the parishioners attended. But even within this environment of growing apathy, there was one, and within this village *only* one theme which could still pack them into the pews: 'Death remains the strongest link between the villagers and religion: All Saints is the only occasion on which the church is full' (Lambert, 1989, p. 58).

The interconnections between death and religion have not gone unobserved. An influential voice in scientific discussions relating religion and death anxiety belongs to Bronislaw Malinowski. His classic essay *Magic, Science and Religion* states plainly that, 'Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life — death — is of the greatest importance' (Malinowski, 1948, p. 47).

The savage is intensely afraid of death ... He does not want to realize it as an end, he cannot face the idea of complete cessation, of annihilation ... [Into] this play of emotional forces, into this supreme dilemma of life and final death, religion steps in, selecting the positive creed, the comforting view, the culturally valuable belief in immortality, in the spirit independent of the body, and in the continuance of life after death.... [Religion] gives body and form to the saving beliefs (Malinowski, 1948, pp. 50–51).

If death anxiety is an existential problem, by Malinowski's reckoning religion is the answer. Religion 'saves man from a surrender to death and destruction' so that he may endure as a viable biological organism.

Malinowski's formulation has failed to win a consensus. Rather than being the solution to death anxiety, Radcliffe-Brown counters that religion is the *cause* of death anxiety:

While one anthropological theory is that magic and religion give men confidence, comfort and a sense of security, it could equally well be argued that they give men fears and anxieties from which they would otherwise be free — the fear of black magic or of spirits, fear of God, of the Devil, of Hell (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 149; see also Feifel, 1969; Hoelter and Epley, 1979).

Contrary to Malinowski who depicts death anxiety as an irreducible psychological reality, Radcliffe-Brown sees our reaction to death as wholly constructed, leading some to conclude that 'as we *all* know: even "death" is nothing if it is not cultural!' (Marton, 1999, p. 53; Lynch, 1996, p. 108).

Philippe Ariès (1981) details many factors, both religious and more broadly sociocultural, which he believes determine the presence and degree of death anxiety. Historian Lawrence Stone (1979, p. 124) concluded that 'one of the most effective methods used to socialise children in the seventeenth century was to teach them, at a very early age, to be afraid of death and of the possibility of eternal damnation'.

Granting the psychological torment that such ideologies can inflict, some larger benefit must surely be rendered to make them both tolerable and persistent. And just so, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1952, p. 149): 'It is largely by the sharing of hopes and fears, by what I have called common concern in events or eventualities, that human beings are linked together in temporary or permanent associations'.

Religion functions 'to create a sense of anxiety which will maintain the social structure of society' (Leming, 1975, p. 10). It works at the societal level as hazing does within the college fraternity, to bind a cohort into a mutually supportive whole through shared adversity.

The conflict between Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown was dispelled, at least theoretically, when George Homans synthesized the two perspectives into a single model:

Malinowski is looking at the individual, Radcliffe-Brown at society. Malinowski is saying that the individual tends to feel anxiety on certain occasions; Radcliffe-Brown is saying that society expects the individual to feel anxiety on certain occasions. But there is every reason to believe that both statements are true (Homans, 1941, p. 168).

Instead of the piecemeal approach of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, Homans examines the full ritual complex.

He begins with the *primary anxiety* that arises when a person's desires exceed her techniques. *Primary rituals* are those which, as noted by Malinowski, the person performs to alleviate the primary anxiety. 'But he is not simply an individual. He is a member of a society with definite traditions, and among other things society determines the form of the ritual and expects him to perform the ritual on the appropriate occasions' (Homans, 1941, p. 171). Consequently, with the primary anxiety latent, the individual 'will feel anxiety only when the rites themselves are not properly performed. In fact this attitude becomes generalized, and anxiety is felt whenever any one of the traditions of society is not observed'. Once a person has started to rely on rituals to allay the primary anxiety, he 'then starts to require his magic to keep up his confidence. Magic can create anxiety as well as resolve it' (Bowen, 1998, p. 70), which condition Homans terms *secondary anxiety*. Analogically one may think of drugs which effectively kill pain, but which create new pains of withdrawal should they be stopped. These secondary anxieties are themselves expiated by *secondary rituals* of purification.

Leming's (1975, p. 19) synopsis of Homans' synthesis can serve as a guide:

Religion functions to relieve anxiety associated crisis situations. Death Anxiety calls forth religious activity which serves to make anxiety latent.

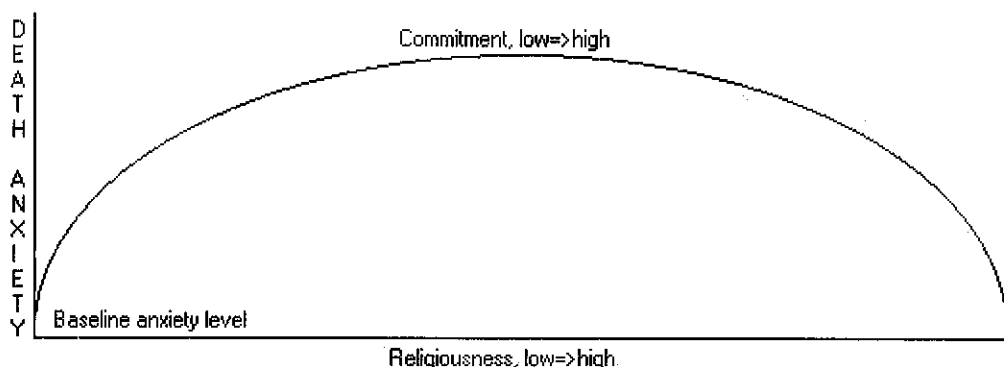


Figure 1 Homans/Leming curvilinear relationship between death anxiety and religiousness.

However, in order to maintain the external system of religious activity (which eventually becomes institutionalised), the group must continually reaffirm the potential threat of anxiety to unite individuals through a 'common concern'. This secondary anxiety may be effectively relieved through the group rituals or purification and expiation.

Society must maintain a reservoir, in other words, of just enough anxiety of the right sort to encourage the maintenance of religion, which keeps at bay even greater levels of even worse anxiety. Without these prods, people would 'forget' what lies dammed behind the edifice of religious institutions, and allow it to fall into disrepair to catastrophic result. Religion thus dispels *and* creates anxiety.

The Homans/Leming model of curvilinearity

Michael Leming tested Homans' model. Because Malinowski predicts an inverse relationship between death anxiety and religion, while Radcliffe-Brown posits a positive correlation, Leming (1975, p. 14) concludes that the correct empirical observation should be curvilinear (see also Nelson and Cantrell, 1980).

In Leming's interpretation, religiousness is conceived as a lesser to greater variable. Death anxiety increases with religiousness, as Radcliffe-Brown argues, until finally religiousness begins to yield the healthful influence Malinowski described by decreasing death anxiety. The inflection point of this curve is determined by a third dimension, commitment to those religious beliefs (Figure 1). Those with no religion, or lots of it (which they take seriously) have no death anxiety problem (which is not to say that they have no death anxiety), while those in-between are more afflicted.

Analysing data from a random sample of 403 Utah residents, Leming found empirical support for Homans' model. Correlations between his religiosity scale and Boyar's (1964) Fear of Death Scale revealed the predicted curvilinear relationship.

A review of the literature relating religion and death anxiety has, however, rendered a more equivocal conclusion. Donovan (1994, Table 4.1) collected and abstracted one hundred and thirty-seven experimental reports investigating the relationship between religion and death anxiety. Almost all of these studies

made binary contrasts looking for linear, not curvilinear relationships. If the relationship were truly curvilinear, the experimental outcomes should have been predominantly negative.

Instead, 78 reports (57%) using a variety of methodologies found a significant inverse linear relationship between religion and death anxiety. Only 9% refuted such a relationship, while 32% of the cases reported insignificant or indeterminate results. It is conceivable that at least some of the studies that failed to substantiate the linear pattern might have generated significant results had the investigators allowed for curvilinear relationships to emerge. What is problematic for the Homans/Leming curvilinear model, however, is that the majority of reports contained significant *linear* relationships.

The most common research finding therefore is that the variables of religiousness and death anxiety are negatively correlated. All in all, Malinowski seems to have been closer to the truth. If we stopped here, we would have to conclude that Radcliffe-Brown, Homans, and Leming were incorrect in their model building. But the curvilinearity found by Leming has been corroborated by other researchers (Aday, 1984–85; Dolnick, 1987; Downey, 1984; McMordie, 1981; Nelson and Cantrell, 1980), and thus some attempt to resolve the inconsistency seems warranted.

One possibility resides in a methodological critique. Perhaps all studies finding a linear relationship relied upon a population sample with a truncated range of religiousness. If all subjects fell within the 'somewhat religious' to the 'very religious' range, and omitted the nonreligious, the outcome would indeed be a negative linearity between religion and death anxiety even if the true relationship broadly viewed were curvilinear. We have no immediate cause to suspect that this is the best explanation since the experimenters believed that they were sampling the full range of religious attachments.

Still, this possibility draws our attention to the likelihood that our understanding of the non-religious category may be problematic, or even that persons who fall into it are rare. If we have misconceived this category, then it will lack the 'weight' to bend the graphed relationship from a straight line into a curve. The shortcoming then becomes as much theoretical as methodological.

Parsing 'religious' into 'theist' and 'nontheist'

We can accept Leming's documentation of empirical curvilinearity without also accepting his explanation for it. He characterizes the curve thus:

Those with a modicum commitment to religion have *added* to the general anxiety which has been socially ascribed to death from secular sources. The moderate religionist receives only the negative consequences of religion — he may believe there is a hell or a divine judgment; yet, he is unsure of his plight in the afterlife. Therefore he acquires only the anxiety, which religion is capable of producing, and none of the consolation.

On the other hand, the highly committed religionist has the least anxiety concerning death ... Religiosity, for the highly committed individual, not only promises a reward in the after life but it diminishes the fear ascribed to death ... (Leming, 1975, p. 55).

The person wholly lacking religious commitment is presumably immune to the fear-inducing teachings of religion, and hence never had the death fear in the first place.

The model requires Leming to assert that 'Death is neither inherently fearful nor non-fearful. Therefore, any fear which men experience with regard to death is a consequence of fearful definitions which are socially ascribed to death' (Leming, 1975, p. 22; Drolet, 1986, p. 11). According to Radcliffe-Brown, the principle teacher of this death fear is religion. But contrary to this characterization we find that all religions do *not* teach this fear, and many in fact emphasize the opposite.

For example, Brazilian Candomblé is a spirit possession trance cult with African roots. Like most of the spiritist cults which are ubiquitous to the Brazilian social milieu (including Umbanda and Kardecism), death and the dead are matters of great import for the living. Spirits are able to possess their medium and communicate directly with the members of their cult house. Such entities are alleged to possess superior knowledge by virtue of their vantage point from the spirit world. While some spirits are primal entities akin to raw natural forces or the concept of 'gods', others are clearly disembodied personalities of former human beings. Interaction between these spirits and the living is a matter of dreadful seriousness and importance.

However, the state of being dead *for the dead* is spoken of in terms of a return to higher planes, greater powers, etc., where the spirit prepares itself for eventual reincarnation into the physical dimension to perform further work toward spiritual and moral perfection. No spirit communication experienced during my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro among these cultists, or recorded in the relevant ethnographic literature, ever threatened the believer with possible agonies in the afterlife, or described any which the spirit itself was enduring. At worst, a recalcitrant person could expect to repeat his or her current world as often as required to learn the necessary lessons it was designed to inculcate. Any hell that exists is in this world, and is experienced for the believer's own good and by his or her own (prebirth) choice. These spiritist cults lack the 'hell-fire and brimstone' threats of unfathomable tortures in the afterlife that Radcliffe-Brown and Leming try to make a necessary feature of *all* religions, having found them to be so common in their own culture's Christianity.

No cultural context has been identified which fails to include death anxiety among its members. Yet not all religions depict death as a fearful state (cf. Firth, 1996, p. 73). Because death anxiety and death-fearing religion are not co-occurring traits cross-culturally we may conclude that religion is not the immediate cause of death anxiety, and perhaps even that the fear of death (since it is the more universal of the two) is something much more fundamental than the purely social ascription presumed by Radcliffe-Brown and Leming (cf. Becker, 1973). An explanation of curvilinearity that does not require this dubious cultural origin of death anxiety should thus be preferred.

As an alternative, recall Malinowski's characterization of death anxiety as a *problem*. Institutionalized religion would be *one* solution to that problem. As practiced socially and operationalized scientifically, 'religion' is predominantly

theistic, asserting the existence of some kind of otherly, supernatural realm, typically populated by spirits, gods, and the like. Such constructs invite the belief in a spiritual survival after physical death, and hence functions well as a death anxiety antagonist.

Yet all that really matters for the mitigation of death anxiety is that the individual have a firm commitment to some solution to the existential problems raised. *Any* convincing solution, even one deemed awful or unattractive, is preferable to unresolvable incertitude: 'With the unknown, one is confronted with danger, discomfort, and care; the first instinct is to abolish these painful states. First principle: any explanation is better than none' (Nietzsche, 1982, p. 497).

Bowen provides a vivid example of this principle. The Puritans believed that the elect of God were preordained, but also that no one knew if he or she were included in that number. 'Even the most highly placed church member could not easily escape gnawing doubts as to the reliability of his or her own certainty. One story has it that a woman in a Boston congregation, tormented by her uncertainty, threw her child into a well to seek relief of certain damnation' (Bowen, 1998, p. 95). The certainty of hell is often better endured than doubts about heaven.

For those who accept wholeheartedly the theistic response, we would expect research to show them to have low death anxiety and high religiosity scores using conventional scales. Compared to this group, vacillating, middle-of-the-road theists should suffer significantly higher death anxiety. They are neither so convinced that theism is true as to derive the healthful benefit of conviction, nor so certain that theism is false as to spare themselves the nagging doubts and fears which spring from its teachings. Lacking a convincing solution to the existential problem of death, the death anxiety of these individuals would remain comparatively raw. This model predicts Lester's (1967) finding that inconsistency in attitudes toward death is indicative of greater death anxiety, if inconsistency marks the lack of a guiding paradigm with which to tackle the problem.

But while theisms may be the most common, and perhaps even the most elegant and effective solution to death anxieties (Stark, 1981), neither theory nor logic requires that they be the only one. Consequently, although rejecters of theisms are probably a mixed bag, at least some of them would have settled upon some other, nontheistic solution to the problem of death. Strident materialists, for example, would share with theists the benefit of low death anxiety. They, like theists, possess a firm solution to existential problems, in their case the absolute knowledge that with death the person dissipates into dust and that is the end of that. But these individuals would obviously score very low on conventional measures of religiosity (Smith et al., 1983-84, p. 229).

Contrary to Leming, who views middling vacillators as having increased death anxiety beyond the baseline represented by the low religious (and back to which the high religious fall), now these middlers more closely approximate baseline levels of death anxiety from which those with firm and convincing solutions — both low and high theists — have fallen away.

If this interpretation is correct, then it is possible to resolve the experimental conflict between curvilinearity and inversion. Due to an uncontrolled

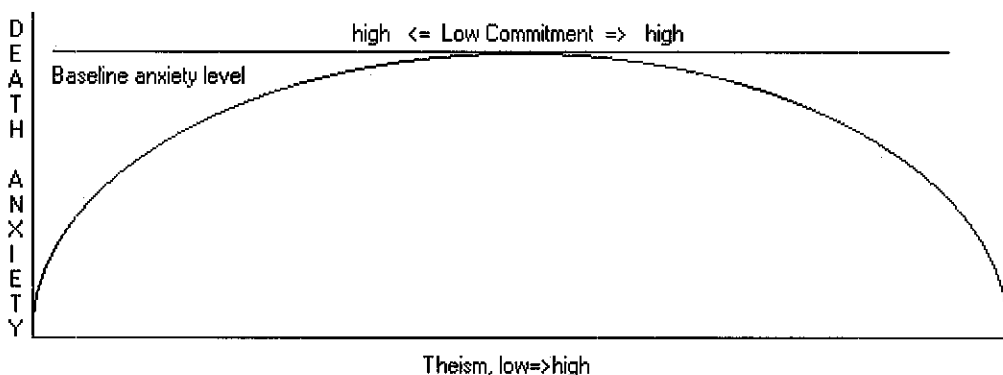


Figure 2 Reinterpreted Curvilinear Relationship Between Death Anxiety And Religiousness.

interaction between instruments used to characterize religiosity and the types of persons sampled, two distinct populations have unwittingly been conflated in study: the religious/non-religious and the theist/non-theist.

The true relationship between death anxiety and religion is linearly inverse if 'religion' encompasses *all* belief systems which are performing the religious function of alleviating death anxiety for the subject individual. High values in one relate to low values in the other. But when a content criterion for 'religion' is utilized, so that theists are compared with non-theists, a curvilinear relationship emerges. This reinterpretation of Leming's model is graphically represented in Figure 2.

The ambiguous empirical findings on the curvilinear relationship between death anxiety and religion arise because the methodological assumption in almost all published research has been to equate 'conventionally institutionalised theist' with 'religious', and more importantly for present purposes, 'nontheist' with 'nonreligious'. If theism is but a subset of the larger category of religion, then theories intending the latter may be poorly served by sampling only the former. In other words, the empirical tests of theories relating religion to death anxiety should not depend upon data drawn only from theistic believers. The distinction between 'religion' as a general concept, and 'theism' as a specific but non-exhaustive exemplar of that concept, must be respected if experimental efforts are validly to speak to an hypothesis.

Conclusion

The essential insight of this re-examination of the relationship between religion and death anxiety has been that while low religion is always bad relative to death anxiety, low theism may be either good or bad, depending upon the presence of an alternative explanatory system. Since these are non-equivalent conditions, the experimental outcomes should be, and apparently are, divergent, generating linear and curvilinear outcomes respectively. Heretofore this difference has been uncontrolled due to a traditional lack of recognition of the difference between religion generally and theism specifically.

This result has obvious relevance to the concept of implicit religion. If religious persons are demonstrably not all theists, as we have now seen, there must

exist non-theistic religious forms, which is to say, implicit religions. We have, it seems, come close to 'proving' logically the saliency of the concept of the implicit religion. Because we have arrived at this result through examination of a well-established problem within the scientific study of religion, dissenters can not claim we are staking our claim based upon odd or tangential topics. Both the analogists and the peripheralists are refuted by the same argument.

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Notes

- 1 Scholars who would strictly limit 'religion' to theistic and supernatural content include Stark (1981), Berger (1974), and Spiro (1987). Most, however, do not explicitly define how they are using this term, although their dependence on assumed theisms is usually apparent.
- 2 A tabulated review of ninety-one different studies designed to detect the correlation between religiousness and mental health demonstrates the point. The collection was conceded to be less than exhaustive, but nonetheless including 'all the major studies and [being] an accurate reflection of the existing empirical evidence as a whole' (Batson et al., 1993, p. 240). Of these, fifty-four studies operationalised their measure of religion as church attendance or religious participation, either alone or in combination with other measures. Several other studies used simple denominational affiliation, but did not specify that frequency of participation was considered.