The Cognitive Science of Religion: Confronting and Discerning Death

Elaina Taylor

Religious Studies

Faculty: Advisor: Dr. Clayton Crockett

I first encountered the cognitive science of religion (CSR) movement when reading an excerpt of the work *Why Would Anyone Believe in God* by Justin Barrett in my "Theories and Methods of Religious Studies" course two years ago. As a Psychology and Religious Studies double-major, the scientific study of human minds and mental processes quickly intrigued me. The correlation of these with cognitive science is fascinating. My undergraduate studies have exposed me to basic philosophical inquiries about death, leading to an investigation into the implications of dying and a desire to further connect the interdisciplinary study of CSR with our understanding of death. Spring 2020 yielded an opportunity of a life-time, getting to explore a combination of these topics for credit towards my degree; my thesis is as follows. CSR understands death through theories, such as Terror Management, and explains the formation of religious concepts through inference systems; while a valid means of understanding how religion

emerges, this field of knowledge should not be used to assert the overall validity or debunk the authenticity of the value of religious beliefs.

Introduction

As a religious studies major, I have come to understand that this field is often approached with preconceptions and biases, which leads to misunderstanding the academic goals of secular religious study. With this in mind, I have diligently researched the cognitive science of religion (CSR) movement and how it applies to the history of psychology. I have two goals to appropriately represent and discuss religion from this perspective, the first being promotion of scientific understanding. This facet can lead to a cultivation of empathy and respect for religious ideals. My second goal is to present a impartial explanation on what I have found. This will allow my audience to realize that, "The enemy of science is not religion…The true enemy is the substitution of thought, reflection, and curiosity with dogma" (De Waal, 2013, p. 109). In order to begin, some foundational definitions must be examined.

Religion, as defined by Paul Tillich (2004), is described as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life." This particular definition is not chosen randomly, as Tillich's understanding of religion leans into the concept of strategic moral information, which closely relates to both Pascal Boyer's comprehension of the mind and argument for explaining religion. For Boyer, the traditional approaches to explaining religion are faulty. Examples given are religion providing comfort, social order, or being entirely dismissed as an illusion. When approaching the secular study of religion, it is important that "We…not read Western religion and then go on to assume every religion ever has that mindset" (Boyer, 2001, p. 10).

This definition of religion also fits well into the information processing mindset of the cognitive psychology of religion, which is the, "scientific approach to the study of religion that combines methods and theory from cognitive, developmental and evolutionary psychology with the sorts of questions that animate anthropologists and historians of religion" (Barrett & Burdett, 2011, p. 252). The initial assumption of CSR is that "people all over the world have similar minds" (Barrett, 2004, p.13). Upon understanding this hypothesis, CSR combines scientific findings with questions about religion, such as, "'How does ordinary human psychology inform and constrain religious expression?' (Barrett & Burdett, 2011, p. 252). Furthermore, CSR is an "attempt to understand the reasons for initial acquisition, recurrence, and continued transmission of religious concepts and behavior" (Barrett & Burdett, 2011, p. 252). For James W. Jones (2015), CSR is all-encompassed by the question: *Does Science Explain Religion?*

Origins, Methods, and Goals of Cognitive Psychology and CSR

Cognitive psychology began in the 1950s, as many psychologists were discontented with behaviorism and the salience being placed on "external behavior rather than internal processes" (McLeod, 2015). Cognitive psychology simultaneously emerged as a critique to Functionalism. Functionalism was a school of thought in psychology that considered philosophical thinking and discovery to be more efficient than experimental psychology. Further, as experimental psychology leaned away from Functionalism by growing in momentum, so did the need for a scientific comparative psychology. This new psychology would give more attention to mental processes, rather than simple end results. Finally, the mechanistic approach to psychology, which originates with George Miller, led to the need for a cognitive approach. Subsequently, Tolman explicitly described the relationship between stimuli and the response, and called them mental

maps. Through experimentation, "…Tolman convincingly demonstrated that you need some notion of mental representation to explain rat behavior" (Lombrozo, 2013). Cognitive psychology continued to flourish with time, which led to new developments in the secular study of religion. The two later merged with work of Justin Barrett and Pascal Boyer, leading to a evolved version of CSR.

Cognitive science is "The hypothesis that thinking can best be understood in terms of representational structures in the mind and computational procedures that operate on those structures" ("Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy", 2018). Adding religion into the mix allows an exciting and comprehensive approach that includes many scholars who would formerly have been excluded from the conversation. CSR maintains numerous goals, one being the effort to intertwine other areas of specialty to help acquire knowledge and broader understandings of religion. Examples given by Barrett (2011) include evolutionary, psychology, sociology and archeological examinations of various world religions (p. 229). The main effort is to "science up" our understanding of modern religion, rather than hold mere philosophical discourse about the matter (Barrett, 2011, p. 230). CSR takes scientific understanding and uses it "to explain how pan-cultural features of human minds…inform and constrain religious thought and action" (Barrett, 2011, p. 230). CSR led to a new level of scientific thinking, processing, and understanding that expanded the capabilities of dialogue about religion. Additionally, CSR gives a more adequate understanding for why new religious movements emerge during modern times. A final goal achieved through CSR methodology is the demonstration of adaptations from older and traditional religions ritualistically and socially. CSR provides an interdisciplinary study of religion that broadens the scope of understanding and focus, allowing for fresh theories and discourse; improving our explanations and respect for the world religions we encounter on a daily basis.

Finally, pondering CSR methodology allows us receive a comprehensive view of this merge between psychology and religion. According to Jones (2015), there are "…three different groups (using CSR and all are utilized in)… radically different ways" (p. 6). The first group is "the debunkers", who attempt to show why religion holds no relevance in the modern world and should be extinguished as a result (Jones, 2015, p. 6). Lim (2012) explains this group as believing that "We (humans), including all our cognitive capacities and religious beliefs, are part of a seamless causal web of natural events" (p. 920). This group of skeptics has no tolerance for the ignorance they see as religion and act accordingly, with the goal of eradication. This leads into Eyghen's (2016) description of the mindset of this group. The debunkers argue that religious beliefs are incongruous with facts about the world, as "CSR shows that religious beliefs were produced by evolutionary mechanisms…the relevant cognitive adaptations are not truth-tracking" (p. 967). This leads to an additional argument for this group, which states that "supernatural entities are rendered superfluous", as a result of modern science and knowledge about the world (Eyghen, 2016, p. 270).

Jones' second group of CSR members is a group comprised of "the scientists" (Jones, 2015, p. 7). These are objective scholars of both religion and science who are attempting to use scientific principles to better understand the phenomenon of religion. The final group Jones (2015) depicts are "the apologists", which attempt to use cognitive science to show why the findings best align with their religious beliefs (p. 7). Jones's argument is simple, yet sufficiently powerful, in stating: there should only be one like-minded group with a goal of using CSR findings to explain religion. This is because "cognitive science research…is religiously neutral " and those who argue otherwise are clouding their study of religion with agenda and biases (Jones, 2015, p. 7). Although Jones attempts to show why nonalignment is best, for

Barrett (2004), "Once (religion is) introduced into a population, belief in the existence of a supreme god with properties such as being super knowing, super-powerful, and immortal is highly contagious and a hard habit to break. The way our minds develop and are structured make these beliefs very attractive" (p.14). While there is tension amidst the two understandings, as a result of Jones' assertion, many are attempting to form a more scientific, non-religiously aligned approach in their own reading and writing of CSR.

CSR has basic assumptions used by all three of Jones' groups. The most basic of which is, "Humans in all cultures have conceptual tendencies…and these ideas inform and constrain religious expression" (Barrett 2000; Boyer 2003; Barrett, 2004, p. 229). CSR explains why humans are religious and uses "information processing mechanisms that were adaptive in our ancestral environment" to do so (Barrett, 2010, p. 583). It is assumed in this form of conversation that all fields utilized are equal and that theories and findings within the field must be used to better understand and explain religion. In a broad conclusion of CSR, Konrad Szocik (2016) stated, "Cognitive approach towards the study of religion is a good and promising way" (p. 64). Similar to Boyer beginning his book with a discussion of the structure and processes the mind performs, it is now necessary for us to continue philosophizing and further theorizing about the most beneficial direction for this discipline to move towards.

How Human Minds Are Structured

Pascal Boyer makes it increasingly clear that "We cannot hope to explain religion if we just fantasize about the way human minds work…acquisition and dialogue lead to several mental dispositions being involved in why people believe/practice a given religion…" (Boyer, 2001, p. 31-33). Although CSR literature is sometimes written with the intention of reducing religion to a figment of the imagination,

those are not Boyer's intentions, though he disagrees with the idea that religion contains fundamental truth. Boyer's book is an attempt to add a unique spin to traditional CSR dialogue: religion allows us to understand the human interpretation and processing of death. In order for Boyer to accomplish this, he begins with an explanation of how the human mind works. The following conversation entails an explanation of cognitive processes achieved through our minds. The first question is what causes us to come up with supernatural concepts in the first place (Boyer, 2001, p. 33). This sets up a necessary discussion for how the human mind is constructed, outside of religion.

CSR utilizes a particular vernacular unknown to the common person. This deluge of jargon is best understood through Inference Systems (IS). Inferences allow people "to build concepts out of fragmentary information, but… are not random…They are governed by special principles in the mind, so that their result is in fact predictable" (Boyer, 2001, p. 42). Inferences are a conclusion reached through input and previous stimuli. There is a second type of inference, which is default. This is when the mind hears or sees something, or even imagines it, and the person believes it to be true, until evidence is presented of the contrary. An example is computers functioning based on how they are programmed by manufacturers, change is only possible if the owner of the device modifies the default settings. Next are expectations, which allow inferences of the mind to produce explanations to categorize, process, and find new ways to think of that information.

Another important cognitive science concept is the ontological categories called templates, which are similar to a recipe of the mind (Boyer, 2001, p. 42). Templates make cultural transmission of ideas cheap, and insert an interpretation for when our expectations are violated (Boyer, 2001, p. 78). Templates allow supernatural concepts to violate certain expectations, but the most popular religions do not have

too many violations, "so as to seem absurd" (Boyer, 2001, p. 64). Inference systems follow closely behind templates, which help categorize the inferences and recipes they interpret. There are two types: the animation template and the person template. The animation template allows files of animals and intimate objects. They create expectations for how these objects are to act, but specifically, with death, we do not expect these to last forever. When an animal we are close to dies, we are sad and grieve, but it is not as severe as when a fellow member of our species passes on. This is because the person template is not set in time. The files our mind has on people is eternal, even though our earthly hosts are not. This is why the death of a person, even just an acquaintance, is so trying. When someone we know and love dies, we have all the information on their personality, including memories and feelings, but nowhere for the feelings to be expressed. This leads to a more consuming grieving process, one which is difficult to overcome. Cognitive science explains broken heart syndrome and why death is such a confusing process, to which every person responds differently.

Something to keep in mind is that this explanation of the mind and cognitive science terminology is very elementary. While it sounds simple and easy to comprehend, there are facets of each concept that are much too complex to deeply discuss here. In order to understand this on even a surface level, we must realize that each part of the brain only handles a limited aspect of the available information we encounter on a daily basis, each inference system handles a different aspect. Now that we have examined how the mind works, we must inquire, what makes supernatural inferences seem likely to be true?

Supernatural concepts all fit different needs of the mind. Religious agents have a series of qualifications that make them more believable, the first being that they are practical and need to matter to people. The most important aspect of such is that God acts like a person to our templates, making him believable, although he does possess

extraordinary abilities. This allows us to see God as something to be feared, but not terrifying and vicious. God is as familiar as people, yet simultaneously mysterious. Religion is simply an expression of beliefs about how the world works. God, to many, seems more likely than ancestors and spirits who lived seemingly mortal lives. Religion helps us not only understand the world, but explain miniscule occurrences as well. Next, an investigation on how any supernatural concept forms is in order.

According to Justin Barrett (2004), "belief in gods arises because of the natural functioning of completely normal mental tools working in common natural and social contexts" (p. 25). While belief to those who do not seems rather confusing, for Barrett (2004), "believing in God may be as natural as believing that other people have beliefs, desires, thoughts, and ideas" (p. 17). Reflective Beliefs are more likely to form and spread supernatural concepts.

Finally, supernatural concepts "function to fit the need for a moral code or standard" (Boyer, 2001, p. 190). God can be compared to the idea of Santa Claus for children around the world. Saint Nic sees you and everything you ever have or will do. If you act according to the standards of "good children", you will receive an ample reward at the end of the year, on Christmas. On the opposite end, as a result of poor behavior, children will be placed in the "naughty" category and receive coal. God is similar, in the rewards and punishment. While unbelievers may find this omniscient and omnipresent side of God as unsettling or unbelievable, to many it is a great comfort to know rewards and punishments will be dealt out at the end of time (Boyer, 2001, p. 190). Upon understanding the biological and mechanistic processes initiated by the mind, philosophers and religious studies scholars can begin to use these findings to theorize about both death and religion. Once again, a basic knowledge of the interrelatedness of death and religion is in order to discuss these arguments.

The Interrelatedness of Religion and Death

Justin Barrett (2004) infamously remarked "Not all religions are created equal" (p. 263). An excellent illustration of the inequality of religions is the tension between Christian and some Native American religious views of death. In Vine Deloria's book, *God Is Red*, he depicts the unsettling holes in Christianity and provides a contrast by using his own practice and interpretation of the Native American approach to religion. Deloria's analysis of Western religion and ideology led to his vivid descriptions of Christianity as a "narrow interpretation of history" and, later, "restricted" (p. 165; 169). A prime example of how fear is promoted by religion, for Deloria, is the Christian view of death. Christianity, generally, sees the purpose of the world as singular: one should act with enough integrity and morality to secure a pleasurable afterlife. This positive life after death, often described as heaven, is a blissful paradise that makes all the sufferings of this life meaningful. In discussing why history is so important to Christians, Deloria (1973) accurately asserts, "What concerns individual believers most is the promise of eternal life that is the denouement of the historical process-- the whole reason that we take history seriously" (p. 165). Deloria (1973) states, "Perhaps it was (the Christian) judgmental aspect of the religion that helped to create the fear of death" (p. 168). Christianity interprets death as a "Cessation of identity" (Deloria, 1973, p. 180). Christians see an absolute break between life and death; you are either living or dying.

Deloria's perception of Native American religion, on the other hand, presents a unified religion that is based on demographics and ancestors. Nature religions are passed down from generation to generation and not often shared amidst other cultures. This approach rids the world of proselytization and the concept of absolute truth. Deloria (1973) also describes the Native American attitude to death as "a natural cosmic process to which all things are bound" (p. 170). This

methodology does not see death as a negative consequence of life, nor a harsh reality that must be feared but rather, "a change of worlds" (Deloria, 1973, p. 174).

Many non-religious people in the world today claim that the motives behind religious belief and practices are rather simple: religion is a means of coping with the unknown. Above all, religion is a healthy strategy to deal with both the fear and uncertainty of death. If religion was actually this easy to describe, as some attempt, then what would the point of the philosophical and scientific approach to religious studies be? Religion is multi-faceted and much more complex. According to Pascal Boyer, if it were the case that religion is a means of coping with death anxiety, then it would not be thriving in the world today. Many do not find comfort from religion, as seen by the Christian view of death; followers of some religions actually find death more fearful than those who are not religious. Death and religion are clearly interwoven. Religion influences the death processes, such as how those who have loved and lost grieve and dispose of the deceased. Furthermore, death helps to create key aspects of any religion, especially relating to meaning of life issues and prospects for the afterlife.

The Evolving Understanding of Death and Society

Boyer further hypothesizes that religion is not directly evolutionary, but a by-product of such. Explaining the evolution of our concept of death leads to a better understanding of both religion and death. To begin, let's examine one of the earliest periods of human history: pastoral times**.** According to the sociologist Allan Kellehear, "The Pastoral Age is the story of the rise of early farmers and peasants and their intimate ties with grain and stock, a relationship that unleashed a gradual dying because of one single paradox – rising survival and life-expectancy amid epidemics." This historical time

period did not allow for people to grapple with their own death, as dying happened suddenly. The conceptualization of death, for the pastoral age, is really just people dealing with the effects after the fact, because there was no way to prepare for their own. As agriculture and sedentarism increased, life span lengthened from childhood to adulthood. Gradually, people began to survive epidemics, which lead to a predictability in death. This was a result of having more time to think about life and death, and the consequences of one's one death. Predictability of death leads to preparation and the notion of what Kellehear (2007) calls a "good death" (p. 90). This form of thinking emerged in the time period where society largely migrated to living in cities.

Once people had more opportunities to live in cities, "the good death of the pastoral world (was) transformed by this class and their culture of anxiety" (Kellehear, 2007, p. 136). People not only had more time to think, but to live. This age yielded new territory for the human race, as people became more social, something our biology drives us to do. Rites of passage were more clearly formulated, with the three major ones being birth, marriage, and death. During this age, people often had time to process death before the fact, even knowing they were dying before they actually did. This led to the shift from processing others' death, to an addition and focus on one's own death and significance of such. This alteration in focus "created an opportunity to ritualize and therefore integrate this new form of social life" (Kellehear, 2007, p. 83). The Notion of the Good Death was similar to dying with the belief that one would go to another world, but was also distinct in the awareness of the person's own finality. Dying a good death meant "dying in noble or 'moral perfection'…(the good death) often refers to deaths that are well prepared by the dying person… Good death in this sense is a dying that conforms to the wider community expectation of making death as positive and meaningful as possible to as many people as possible" (Kellehear, 2007, p. 90). This notion allows the dying person to

depict what a good death means to them, while still having certain cultural expectations (Kellehear, 2007, p. 90). This is an important and stark contrast to the historical ideal of a good death, which in the city age, would be a bad death (Kellehear, 2007, p. 94). The age in which cities began eventually produced the modern understanding of death.

The perception of a good death that sourced from city life, leads to differing religious and supernatural ideals to cope with the harsh reality of final moments. According to Barrett (2004) "These agents with counterintuitive physical properties may be easily integrated into thought in three particular areas that are commonly associated with religions around the world: 1) social interactions, including those with moral overtones; 2) incidences of fortune or misfortune; and 3) human death" (p. 166). After reading and analyzing many works about death and the human response, I have concluded that our conceptualization of death is a by-product of evolution, what we are taught, and what we experience as a result of the above. After conducting a cross-cultural study to further investigate death's repercussions, the researchers concluded, "individuals use both natural and supernatural explanations to interpret the same events" (Watson-Jones, Busch, Harris, Legare, 2016, p. 455). These various interpretations of supernatural events lead to serious implications for the modern ideology about death.

These beliefs that grapple with death can be unsafe, if taken to the extreme. Potential consequences can be an increased death anxiety, superstitious behaviors, and obsessive/compulsive tendencies that might even be detrimental. However, on the flip-side, design beliefs can be comforting. Many believe moderation is the key to a healthy diet, similarly, moderate religious views might even prove beneficial. Hans Eyghen (2019) also studied cultural variations in the formation of design beliefs, which resulted in his conclusion that "science strongly suggests that people easily form false beliefs… design beliefs can only constitute knowledge if subjects have additional reasons or evidence for design"

(Eyghen, 2019, p. 75). The ever-evolving cultural ideologies about death yielded a common problem for humans everyone, both religious and non-religious: what constitutes appropriate disposal for the deceased?

What Do We Do With the Deceased?

Because death is unpleasant and seen as something to be feared, we do not often envisage anything other than the painful repercussions of losing a loved one or the future loss of one's own life and the subsequent effects on others. However, it is important to note that there is more to death than the actual loss itself. O'Gorman (1998) elaborates, "In many cultures, death is not just seen as a single event but as a process that is marked by rituals of preparations and mourning" (p. 1127). In response to this process, another fascinating part about death is the question every culture has been asking themselves for the last 10,000 years of human history, what do we do with the corpse? As Kellehear (2007) depicted in his book, the means of processing death changed over history, including our perceptions about death. However, one thing remains constant: handling death means finding a way to properly discard the body. This leads to religious rituals in order to do so in a way that is beneficial for the deceased, along with giving the friends and family the ability to connect with the divine during grieving. People "often rely upon rituals to help them cope with grief and loss" (Collins & Doolittle, 2006, p. 957).

Rituals, according to the scientific findings of CSR, tap into cognitive dissonance, leading to moral guidelines that coincide with our beliefs to formulate what constitutes a proper disposal. Cognitive dissonance is an important CSR tenet and "refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. This produces a feeling of mental discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance" (McLeod, 2018). Cognitive dissonance "occurs …Whether or

not the incompatibility is 'logical'" (Montell, 2001, p. 124). Ritual processes and customs surrounding the embalming, cremation, celebratory ceremonies, and burial are all a result of cognitive dissonance and the disconnect between inference systems. This means that the mechanism for disposal is two-fold: removal of the deceased allows us to deal with the grief of loss, along with providing a safe living environment for those left behind.

There are numerous other reasons why ritualistic handling of the body came about, a major factor being pollution and germs. Historically, many religions and peoples processed death by holding onto the body for days after death, prior to disposal. This dates all the way back to the Egyptians and mummification, which historians estimate as haven taken seventy days to complete (Smithsonian, n.d.). Later on, we realized that pollution and germs were becoming an issue; some customs even required eating pieces of the corpse. An example of such is the Aghor people of India, who "under…the new moon…chant mantras, make offerings to Shiva (god of destruction), and consume it (human remains)" (Merino & Lam, 2017). Not only is overcrowding of cemeteries becoming a modern issue, but the resources, expenses, and environmental toll is also a problem. "American funerals are responsible each year for the felling of 30 million board feet of casket wood…90,000 tons of steel, 1.6 million tons of concrete… and 800,000 gallons of embalming fluid. Even cremation is an environmental horror story, with the incineration process emitting many a noxious substance…" ("Scientific American", 2008). According to the estimates from the Cremation Association of North America, "Just a few decades ago, in 1960, statistics…showed that less than 4 percent of people opted for cremation amid social stigmas often involving religion" (Cella, 2018). New research continues to shed light on other potential harms to our contemporary embalming and burial trends, evidenced by the statistics above. Further, embalming fluid has

been found to be a potential carcinogen, leading to unnecessary exposure on behalf of funeral workers.

New-founded options for disposal have been formulated to oppose burial include: aquamation, forensic body farms, green burial, sky burial, turning human bodies into trees, and many others. "The ritual of burying a dead body is so deeply ingrained in religious and cultural history that few of us take a moment to question it. But when you dig into the statistics, the process of preserving and sealing corpses into caskets and then plunging them into the ground is extremely environmentally unfriendly" (Calderone, 2015). Modern society must evolve the way we handle the deceased, just as our conception of death has altered.

Rituals and disposal mechanisms of humans also evolved due to, especially in the pastoral age, people feeling as if they were prey. Death happened suddenly, often as a result of other animal attacks and hunting gone wrong. Humans, seeing ourselves as the dying prey, became fearful of death. Making a uniform disposal ritual allowed a more healthy processing and even imagining of one's own inevitable death. Studying death and death rituals leads to a more clear picture of religion and the function it serves for our inference systems. We have now discussed and inspected the validity of several body disposal mechanisms and their correlation to religion, which necessitates a comprehensive compilation of religion's influence on understanding death.

Combining CSR and Religion to Better Comprehend Death

The structure of the human mind yields more knowledge than we could have predicted even twenty years ago. Our minds are multi-faceted and very complex, mysterious about such are yet to be adequately explained. Understanding the most common explanation for religion, where it is simplified as a comfort utilized to cope with death,

leads to a better understanding of the interconnection amidst death and religion. Further, this section will analyze Terror Management Theory (TMT), which stands in direct opposition to my argument. This will allow me to clearly articulate why I disagree with proponents of TMT. Finally, I will discuss the three wounds to human narcissism and explain why they clearly refute this explanation of religion. We will begin with the critique of Thanatocentric explanations for religion, which began with Jong and Halberstadt.

Two modern religious study scholars, Jonathan Jong and Jamin Halberstadt, geared the discourse of CSR towards death in *Death Anxiety and Religious Belief: An Existential Psychology of Religion*. Their thesis is simplistic, "thanatocentric (i.e., death-centered) theories of religion, take issue with people's adherence to a faith in which the depiction of a deity or an afterlife is far from a comforting experience" (Cox & Arrowood, 2017, p. 2). According to religious scholar Dr. Thomas Ellis, who wrote a review of their book, "thanatocentric theorizing…is, that humans in fact do experience death anxiety" (Ellis, 2017). Jong and Halberstadt (2016) criticize thanatocentric theorists, as they often merely claim that humans experience a fear of death, whether it be their own or death of a loved one (Ellis, 2017). Their theory on death anxiety and religion is best summated by Dr. Ellis as follows, "in our most productive reproductive years, we experience death anxiety, that natural complement to the will to survive, that is, to reproduce. Once our reproductive years have come and gone, death anxiety is apparently no longer so pressing" (Ellis, 2017). The authors support this in claiming that death is inevitable and once the opportunity to produce offspring to carry on the person's legacy is gone, the anxiety surrounding death diminishes. Jong and Halberstadt (2016) further denounce the thanatocentric account for religion by casting doubt on the idea that religion can be an "anxiety buffering function…then how might fire and brimstone preaching, maintaining faith in a punitive and

vengeful God, and/or receiving harsh abominations against sinful behavior provide meaning and value to persons' lives?... these...are far from being psychologically reassuring" (p. 1). Jong and Halberstadt book continues on to detail the importance of Terror Management Theory (TMT) in explaining a more adequate alternative to thanatocentric theories of religion and death.

TMT proposes that humans "suffer *chronic* death anxiety… that eventuates in behavioral paralysis if left unchecked" (Ellis, 2017). This psychological theory claims "death anxiety drives people to adopt worldviews that protect their sense of self-esteem, worthiness, and sustainability and allow them to believe that they play an important role in a meaningful world…the need to reinforce cultural significance in the face of death, often result…the belief that the group with which one identifies is superior to other groups" ("Psychology Today", n.d.). This is the TMT explanation as for why religion is "an effective strategy for diminishing such anxiety" (Ellis, 2017). Jong and Halberstadt (2016) use the TMT approach to religious explanations in order to criticize the conclusion that religion is a result of anxiety and denial about the finality of death, as "mortality-related concerns are associated with a heightened fear response" (p. 4). As made clear in their book, death anxiety begins with awareness of consciousness and the inescapability of own's own death. The three narcissistic wounds demonstrate why building up our own self-esteem so as to trick ourselves into believing we are valuable and beneficial to our planet.

The Three Narcissistic Wounds

I concur with Jong and Halberstadt's criticisms of the thanatocentric evaluation of religion and TMT as a brilliant means of explaining why religion merely worsens death anxiety. Dr. Harvey's *Meaning of Life* course had a lecture entitled "the three narcissistic wounds" where he illustrates this point. Religion is commonly

advocated as being a comfort and thus helps alleviate some death anxiety people experience, however the following three reasons completely debunk this argument. In order to explain the name given to these contentions, we must examine the origins of narcissism in Greek mythology. According to the tail, Narcissus was a hunter who was incredibly handsome. As a result, many women were completely smitten by him. Narcissus did not pay attention to a woman who yielded great influence over Nemesis, "the goddess of retribution and revenge" ("Greek Mythology", n.d.). In order to pay forward the pain and suffering Narcissus inflicted, Nemesis brought him to a pool of water that allowed him to see his own reflection. Narcissus immediately fell in love with his own appearance, thus leading to the term narcissist, which is defined in modern terms as a "personality disorder…characterized by a long-standing pattern of grandiosity (either in fantasy or actual behavior), an overwhelming need for admiration, and usually a complete lack of empathy toward others" (Grohol, 2020). Narcissism causes great distress for those involved and the person themselves (Grohol, 2020). While these arguments are not new, Dr. Harvey, along with other great philosophers, have formulated the argument that religion is itself a form of narcissism; especially the Christian worldview. Christianity believes that God created the world for the sole purpose of people and for them to have an intimate relationship with their creator.

The three narcissistic wounds utterly prove the falsehood of the ideology that religion is a form of terror management. The first blow to the human narcissistic mindset, also known as religion, is Copernicus. Prior to Copernicus, the geocentric model of the universe remained intact. This doctrine was adopted and spread by the Catholic Church for numerous reasons, however the main takeaway is that the earth was the center of the universe and all other planets orbited around us, humans. Copernicus' notion of heliocentrism challenged this notion in claiming

that the sun was actually the center of the universe and the earth and all other planets orbited around it. While not accepted until after his death, Galileo found proof to demonstrate the truth behind this claim. Once heliocentrism was accepted, the first narcissistic wound to the human race was complete. We were no longer the literal center of the universe, but just another planet orbiting around the actual center: the sun. Secondly, Charles Darwin, Alfred Wallace, and others concluded the theory of evolution as being the reason for human and all other creatures' existence. The second narcissistic wound is best explained by Sigmund Freud in his book *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Freud wrote "biological research robbed man of his peculiar privilege of having been specially created, and relegated him to a descent from the animal world, implying an ineradicable animal nature in him" (Freud, 1917, p. 251). Freud's analysis of the unconscious is the final blow to human narcissism. "According to Freud (1915), the unconscious mind is the primary source of human behavior. Like an iceberg, the most important part of the mind is the part you cannot see. Our feelings, motives and decisions are actually powerfully influenced by our past experiences, and stored in the unconscious" (McLeod, 2015). While the theory of the unconscious was not founded by Freud, he articulated and popularized this idea. This theory, which soon became accepted as factual, led to humans feeling as if they could not have been created to be special. If we were supposed to make our own choices and choose to freely love and serve our creator, then our unconscious mind would not be such a prevalent concept. The three narcissistic wounds utterly debunk the naïve human-mindset that we are special creations of a loving creator. What does this mean for CSR? Humans will have to continue to search for ways to process death and its accompanying anxiety, in order to survive. Whether religion is a viable option for dealing with this predicament is not within the scope of CSR.

Conclusion

CSR is a diverse, ever-expanding field that utilizes the scientific and mechanistic principles of the mind that were discovered and disseminated by psychologists. CSR combines these tenets with the philosophical approach of understanding and desire to fathom the broad range of religious beliefs in the world today. This is further combined with the desire to explain how evolutionary adaptations influenced these ideals. The origins of CSR date back to George Miller and Edward Tolman, along with others who disagreed with the limited behaviorist and functionalist perspectives. The goals and methodology seem elementary, yet produce both a compelling and beneficial way of exploring religion. Modern CSR scholars, such as James W. Jones, Justin Barrett, and Pascal Boyer emphasize the need for religious nonalignment in doing so. A major takeaway of this project is that humans are "Unlike other animals…We have evolved with structures that give us the ability to imagine something beyond the sensed environment and beyond the constraints of cause and effect. This ability has its disadvantages…in allowing humans to feel secure…(and) can sometimes be physically harmful and counter to survival" (Montell, 2001, p. 120). CSR leads to an insightfully detailed explanation that incorporates empathy and comprehension with modern scientific findings and scientific discourse. While the findings of my study have yielded the knowledge that religion can be dangerous in how we treat the environment and the deceased; religion can impose order on an uncontrollable and inevitable event. CSR is not a field that should be used to promote or debunk religion, but rather to evaluate the merits of both arguments. This exciting and relatively new field will continue to evolve and adapt to science in the years to come, in response to many of the sources I have noted in this paper. I am eager to see the scientific advancements that will further our understanding of the way our minds

are structured due to evolutionary processes and how we utilize this to our advantage in thinking about death, dying, and religion.

Works Cited

Airenti, G. (2019). The place of development in the history of psychology and cognitive science.
Frontiers in Psychology, 10. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00895

Barrett, J., Burdett, E. (2011). The cognitive science of religion, experience and belief. *The Psychologist,* 24, 252-255.

Barrett, J.L. (2011). Cognitive science of religion: looking back, looking forward. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 50(2), 229-239.

Barrett, N.F. (2010). Toward an alternative evolutionary theory of religion: looking past computational evolutionary psychology to a wider field of possibilities. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 78(3), 583-621. https://doi.org.ucark.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfq019

Barrett, J. L. (2004). *Why would anyone believe in God?* Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Boyer, P. (2007). *Religion explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought*. Cambridge: International Society for Science and Religion.

Calderone, J. (2015, November 4). Burying dead bodies takes a surprising toll on the environment. Retrieved from

https://www.businessinsider.com/burying-dead-bodies-environment-funeral-conservation-2015-10#eco-friendly-alternatives-do-exist-6

Cella, M. (2018, October 31). Rethinking Death in America. Retrieved from https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2018-10-31/rethinking-death-in-america

Collins, W. L., & Doolittle, A. (2006). Personal reflections of funeral rituals and spirituality in a Kentucky African American family. *Death Studies*, 30(10), 957-969.

Cox, C. R., & Arrowood, R. B. (2018). Religion as a defense against the awareness of death: comment on Jong and Halberstadt (2016). *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, *9*(2), 179–185. doi: 10.1080/2153599x.2017.1414706

Cyr, T. W. (2016). A puzzle about death's badness: Can death be bad for the paradise-bound? *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *80*(2), 145–162. doi: 10.1007/s11153-016-9574-1

Deloria, V. (1973). *God is red*. New York: Laurel.

Eco-Afterlife: Green Burial Options. (2008, September 5). Retrieved from https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/eco-afterlife-green-buria/

Ellis, T. B. (2017). Death anxiety and religious belief: an existential psychology of religion review. *Reading Religion, A Publication of the American Academy of Religion*.

Eyghen, H. V. (2019). Are Design Beliefs Safe? *Studia Humana*, *8*(1), 75–83. doi: 10.2478/sh-2019-0005

Eyghen, H. V. (2016). Religious Belief is Not Natural. Why Cognitive Science of Religion Does Not Show That Religious Belief is Trustworthy. *Studia Humana*, *5*(4), 34–44. doi: 10.1515/sh-2016-0022

Egyptian Mummies. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.si.edu/spotlight/ancient-egypt/mummies

Freud, S. (1917). *A general introduction to psycho-analysis*.

Grohol, J. M. (2020, January 14). Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Symptoms & Treatments. Retrieved from https://psychcentral.com/disorders/narcissistic-personality-disorder/

Horgan, J. (2015, September 1). Copernicus, Darwin and Freud: A Tale of Science and Narcissism. Retrieved from https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/copernicus-darwin-and-freud-a-tale-of-science-and-narcissism/

Jones, J. W. (2016). *Can science explain religion? The Cognitive Science Debate*. Oxford University Press.

Jong, J., & Halberstadt, J. (2016). *Death, anxiety, and religious belief: an existential psychology of religion*. London ; Oxford ; New York ; New Delhi ; Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic.

Kellehear, A. (2008). *A social history of dying*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lim, D., & Eyghen, H. V. (2016). Cognitive science of religion: explaining religion away? *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science, 51(4), 966-982).* https://doi.org/ucark.idm.oclc.org/10.1111zygo.12304

Mcleod, S. (2015, January 1). Unconscious Mind. Retrieved from
https://www.simplypsychology.org/unconscious-mind.html

Mcleod, S. (2015, February 5). Cognitive psychology. Retrieved from
https://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive.html

Mcleod, S. (2018, February 5). Cognitive Dissonance. Retrieved from
https://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html

Merino, T., & Lam, M.-Y. (2017, June 16). Perspective | What the notorious
flesh-eating Aghor religion of India is really like. Retrieved from
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-sight/wp/2017/06/16/what-
the-notorious-flesh-eating-aghor-religion-of-india-is-really-like/

Montell, C. (2001). Speculations on a Privileged State of Cognitive
Dissonance. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *31*(2), 119–137. doi:
10.1111/1468-5914.00151

Narcissus. (2017). Retrieved from
https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Mortals/Narcissus/narcissus.
html

Nikkel, D. H. (2015). The Dualistic, Discarnate Picture That Haunts The
Cognitive Science Of Religion. *Zygon®*, *50*(3), 621–646. doi:
10.1111/zygo.12194

O'Gorman, S.M. (1998). Death and dying in contemporary society: an
evaluation of current attitudes and the rituals with death and dying and
their relevance to recent understandings of health and healing. *Journal of
Advanced Nursing (Wiley-Blackwell), 27(6),* 1127-1135.
https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1998.00659.x

Roberson, K., Smith, T., & Davidson, W. (n.d.). Understanding death
    rituals. *In Practice*.

Szocik, K. (2016). Reliability and Adaptability of Religious Beliefs in the
    Light of Cognitive Science of Religion. *Studia Humana*, *5*(4), 64–73. doi:
    10.1515/sh-2016-0025

Terror Management Theory. (n.d.). Retrieved from
    https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/terror-management-
    theory

Thagard, P. (2018, September 24). Cognitive Science. Retrieved from
    https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cognitive-science/

The definitions of religion. (n.d.) Retrieved from
    https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/phil_of_religion_te
    xt/chapter_10_definition/the-definition-of-religion.htm

Thurow, J. C. (2011). Does cognitive science show belief in god to be
    irrational? The epistemic consequences of the cognitive science of
    religion. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *74*(1), 77–98. doi:
    10.1007/s11153-011-9300-y

Tongeren, D. R. V., Pennington, A. R., Mcintosh, D. N., Newton, T., Green, J.
    D., Davis, D. E., & Hook, J. N. (2017). Where, O death, is thy sting? The
    meaning-providing function of beliefs in literal immortality. *Mental
    Health, Religion & Culture*, *20*(5), 413–427. doi:
    10.1080/13674676.2017.1355358

Watson-Jones, R. E., Busch, J. T. A., Harris, P. L., & Legare, C. H. (2016). Does the Body Survive Death? Cultural Variation in Beliefs About Life Everlasting. *Cognitive Science*, *41*, 455–476. doi: 10.1111/cogs.12430