



It's Not What You Believe, but How: Intrinsic Religiosity and Fear of a Human Jesus

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Abstract

Prior work has found that religious individuals experience greater concerns about mortality when thinking about Jesus taking human form (Arrowood & Cox, 2018). Building on this, the present research examined how intrinsic religiosity (i.e., a more “mature” form of religion with a development for a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God) would moderate these effects. Christian individuals were asked to complete the Religious Orientation Scale, followed by reading an essay that either described Jesus as being fully human or a description of His lost years (i.e., neutral condition). The dependent variable consisted of people’s fear of mortality. The results revealed that low intrinsic individuals experienced a heightened fear of death following a creaturely Jesus prime. High intrinsic individuals, however, did not differ from neutral conditions. This study suggests that intrinsically valuing religion can serve as a buffer against existential anxieties stemming from humanistic concerns.

Introduction

Religions, worldwide and throughout history, have often placed restrictions on the more creaturely aspects of the human body. For example, much of Christianity promotes chastity, celibacy, and heterosexual marriage while at the same time denouncing pre-marital sex and homosexuality. From the perspective of terror management theory (TMT), the creaturely body is problematic because it serves as a reminder of our animal nature and inevitable death (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). This suggests that anyone or anything associated with the physicality of humans should be viewed more negatively, especially when mortality concerns are salient. Integrating work on TMT and incarnational ambivalence – that is, discomfort in imagining a fully human Jesus (Beck, 2008) – the purpose of the current research was to explore the associative link between intrinsic religiosity, mortality awareness, and thoughts of a human Christ. To the extent that intrinsic religiosity serves as a more “mature” form of faith, it is hypothesized that persons scoring high on this measure should feel less threatened (i.e., fear of mortality) when thinking about a humanistic Christ.

Method

Following prior research (Arrowood et al., 2018; Galen, 2015), non-religious individuals were removed from all analyses.

Participants:

129 workers recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Mturk)

Materials:

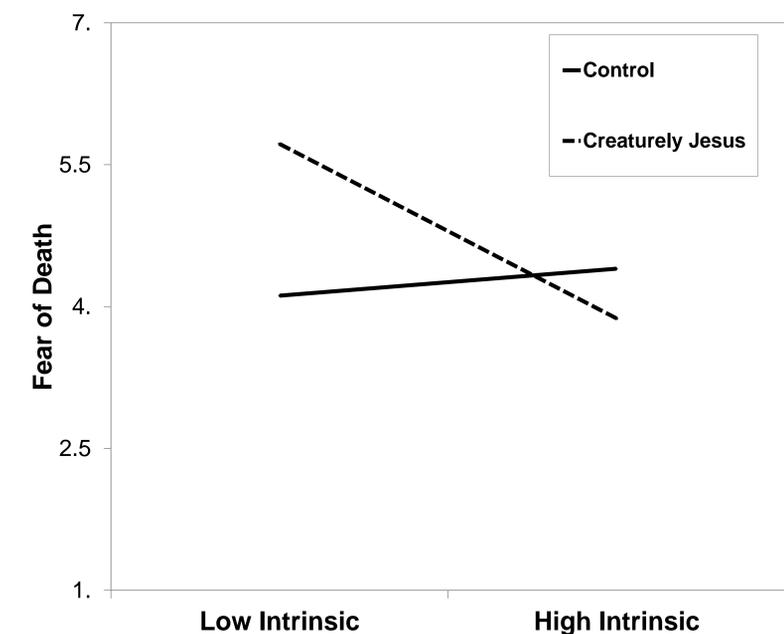
- **Religious Orientation Scale** (Allport & Ross, 1967). Measures the level of extrinsic or intrinsic belief a person holds in their religion (e.g., “A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity;” $\alpha = .95$).
- **Essays.** Participants received one of two essays: (a) an essay that spoke about the “lost years” of Jesus’ life or (b) an essay about Jesus doing human things (i.e., vomiting, sweating, etc.)
- **Fear of death** (Arrowood, Cox, & Ekas, 2017). Participants answered a single items about their fear of death that was scored on a 7-point scale (i.e., “I am very much afraid to die”).

Results

- The results showed a significant interaction between intrinsic religiosity (centered) and essay (dummy coded) on fear of death scores, $b = -.45$ ($SE = .23$), $t = 1.97$, $p = .05$, $R^2 = .04$.
- Whereas there the simple slope for the control essay was non-significant, $b = .06$ ($SE = .17$), $t = .36$, $p = .72$, $R^2 = .001$, high (vs. low) intrinsic persons experienced less death anxiety after a creaturely Jesus prime, $b = -.39$ ($SE = .16$), $t = 2.48$, $p = .02$, $R^2 = .05$.
- High intrinsic individuals (+1 SD) did not differ as a function of essay condition, $b = -.53$ ($SE = .76$), $t = .69$, $p = .50$, $R^2 = .001$. Low intrinsic individuals, however, had significantly greater fear of death when primed with a human Jesus compared to the control group, $b = 1.61$ ($SE = .77$), $t = 2.10$, $p = .04$, $R^2 = .04$.

Results (cont.)

Figure 1. Fear of death scores as a function of intrinsic religiosity and essay type



Discussion

- Although a humanistic Christ is a seemingly celebrated and important part of Christianity, the present results imply that individual differences in religious orientation moderate this belief.
- Future research should examine whether the current results extend to other religious faiths, other types of orientations (e.g., quest and/or religious fundamentalism), and natural reminders of Jesus’ humanity (e.g., actual biblical passages).
- This research has implications for larger religious activities. For instance, the crucifixion of Jesus is sometimes portrayed quite graphically during religious service or other media outlets (e.g., *The Passion*). Although this account may be comforting to some, it also has the potential to increase existential anxieties in a naturalistic setting, and perhaps, greater defense.