The Function of Religious Belief: Defensive Versus Existential Religion

Richard Beck
Abilene Christian University

The article is a theoretical and empirical review attempting to describe two modes of religious motivation: defensive versus existential religion. The article begins by seriously considering theoretical and empirical evidence that religion may function as a defense mechanism. It is argued that this description of religious belief is coherent and cannot be ignored by psychology of religion researchers. However, the article goes on to argue for the existence of a non-defensive, existentially aware religious motivation. Theoretical and empirical support for this model, defensive versus existential religion, is presented.

In The Future of an Illusion, Freud (1927/1961) offered one of his most blunt and succinct summaries of his theory concerning the source of religious belief:

Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father. (p. 43)

Freud's formulation of religion is widely known: God is the projected father-figure and religion functions as a defense mechanism, a wish-fulfillment, protecting the psyche from existential realities. For Freud, "the effect of religious consolations may be likened to that of a narcotic" (p. 49).

Since Freud, theorists have speculated about the validity of his basic argument: Is religious belief and consolation, at root, wishful thinking? This question is less concerned with ontology (i.e., Does God indeed exist?) than with psychology (i.e., How does religious belief function in the mind of the believer?). For example, does a person believe in heaven primarily because it offers existential solace?

The theoretical proposal described in this article begins with the conviction that there is some truth to the religion-as-defense-mechanism formulation, but that defensiveness does not characterize all religious motives. Specifically, it is suggested that aspects of religion do appear to function largely as defensive existential buffers. For example, none of us want to die, and a belief in an afterlife does provide existential comfort. However, it is also argued that there also exists a religious type who is less invested in solace and who displays greater existential awareness (what exactly is meant by this characterization will need to be slowly unpacked throughout this article). Admittedly, the use of defensiveness is only one method by which religious motives might be categorized and described. However, the defensive versus non-defensive distinction is a fruitful line of inquiry that allows us to ask some specific questions: How might a defensive orientation manifest itself in belief, practice, and religious experience? And, alternatively, how might a less defensive believer differ in belief, practice, and religious experience?

To provide some working terminology used throughout the article, religious beliefs that are motivated primarily by the goal of providing existential comfort and solace will be described as "defensive religion." Alternatively, "existential religion" will be used to characterize a type of orientation where the believer has greater awareness of the existential functioning of her beliefs (again, this description will be unpacked in the following pages). This article will provide theoretical descriptions of each orientation as well as reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature in support of such a distinction.

Although the role of defensiveness and existential awareness has been noted by scholars for years, this article will take the extra step of describing, very specifically, the phenomenology of these religious orientations. This specificity will allow researchers to move past vague theoretical descriptions to operational definitions that will support laboratory tests aimed at assessing the role of defensiveness in religious belief and practice.
Religion as a defense mechanism

Moving from Freudian to existential formulations. Although Freud first clearly described the thesis that religious belief might function as a defensive response to the realities of the external world, the Oedipal thrust of his argument has been largely rejected. More recent formulations of defense mechanisms (of which religion has been included) have tended to focus on existential considerations. The existential formulation of defensiveness has been worked out by a number of influential thinkers. Erich Fromm, Rollo May, Victor Frankl, Irvin Yalom, and Ernest Becker, to name only a few, have all used existential insights to significantly illuminate psychodynamic processes. A common theme among these thinkers is that, contrary to what Freud's early work suggested, defense mechanisms are not preoccupied with handling id impulses. Rather, defense mechanisms protect us from existential realizations and their accompanying terrors. Primary among these realizations is the recognition of our finiteness, a consciousness of one's eventual death and dissolution. Religion, in this light, might function as a defense mechanism by allowing humanity to maintain a daily equanimity by repressing awareness of our horrifying existential situation. Further, religion can also provide the believer ways of achieving symbolic immortality which imbue life with meaning and purpose. As Becker (1973) points out:

The knowledge of death is reflective and conceptual, and animals are spared it ... But to live a whole lifetime with the fate of death haunting one's dreams and even the most sun-filled days—that's something else ... everything a man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. (p. 27)

Given that a person must live a lifetime with death looking him/her squarely in the face, it seems reasonable that a person might adopt beliefs that “resolve” this dilemma by positing an afterlife governed by a loving caregiver. If so, then the deep motive for the adoption and maintenance of the religious belief would be existential defensiveness. Again, as worked out by the existential theorists, this motive need not, and probably is not, conscious. Further, as with many defense mechanisms, the role of existential defensiveness is denied by believers when they are confronted with the suggestion that defensiveness might be playing a role in maintaining their faith. Because religion may provide death-denying modes of living as well as offering the promise of an eternal existence, to undermine religious belief—beliefs that serve as deep and vital defense mechanisms—is to potentially unleash from the believer all manner of responses ranging from anxiety to anger to violence. As Freud (1927/1961) observed, “The believer will not let his belief be torn from him, either by arguments or by prohibitions. And even if this did succeed with some it would be cruelty” (p. 49).

Perspectives from Terror Management Theory. Theory aside, is the existential formulation of defense mechanisms accurate? If accurate, how large a role does existential defensiveness play in our psychological lives? Recently, many of these existential formulations, which regard culture (of which religion is a large part) as an existential buffer, have actually been tested in the laboratory. Building upon the work of Ernest Becker and others, Terror Management Theory (TMT; see Greenburg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997, for a comprehensive theoretical and empirical review of TMT) suggests that culture indeed does function as an existential defense mechanism. Following Becker, TMT suggests that our cultural worldviews (religion obviously playing a part) provide us with death-denying modes of achieving significance and symbolic immortality. That is, culture and religion help us define what a “significant” and “meaningful” life should look like. A culturally “significant” life (e.g., accomplishments, families, legacies) is a way of achieving a sort of “permanence” or “immortality” in the face of our finiteness. Thus, TMT contends that the very fabric of our lives is fundamentally defensive in nature and function. Clearly, TMT is an ambitious and challenging theory of psychological functioning, but it has been garnering impressive laboratory support (e.g., Greenburg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). For example, TMT predicts that when our mortality is brought to mind we feel existentially vulnerable and respond by reinvesting in, defending, and shoring up our cultural worldviews (the source of our meaning in life). These defensive responses, collectively called “worldview defense,” have been measured in a number of ways, from denigrating outgroup members to harshly punishing those who violate our cultural norms. In one particular experiment (Greenburg et al., 1990), and very relevant to the topic of this article, Christian
subjects who were made to reflect upon their future death (the mortality salient condition) were more likely to denigrate a Jewish target than those who were not made to reflect upon their death (the mortality nonsalient condition). This finding is challenging. Why would Christians, normally reluctant to respond harshly to others, denigrate a Jewish person when their death was brought to mind? Overall, findings such as these suggest that the existential theorists have identified an important dynamic in both culture and religion. Perhaps religion may indeed function as an existential defense mechanism.

Is there a non-defensive religious motivation?

Given the theoretical and empirical evidence noted above, it seems clear that existential defensiveness may play a role in religious belief. But does it motivate all religious belief? Freud clearly thought it did, but many other thinkers have suggested that religious motivations that are non-defensive in nature do exist; these are faith stances that fully recognize our existential situation but which actively refuse to believe as a means to repress existential terror. Earlier, this motivation was labeled "existential religion." Although many theorists have discussed this kind of religious orientation, the major thinkers in this area have been Soren Kierkegaard, William James, and, more recently, Ernest Becker. Their formulations are discussed in turn.

Kierkegaard: The nominal Christian versus The Individual. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is widely considered to be a founding father of existential philosophy. This is somewhat ironic in that Kierkegaard was largely concerned with religious issues, whereas later influential existential thinkers followed Freud and largely ignored religion. Kierkegaard was a fecund thinker, but for present purposes the focus will be placed on only two of his ideas, the Christian as The Individual and the role of dread in religion. The three works that primarily elucidate these themes are his Fear and Trembling, the Attack upon Christendom, and The Sickness unto Death.

Observing the corruptions of state-endorsed religion and the lack of authenticity in nominal Christians, Kierkegaard wrote extensively about the Christian as The Individual. According to Kierkegaard, true Christianity involves standing apart from the mass of humanity, to become a "solitary one" before God. Too often the temptation is to remain a simple face in the crowd: By seeing the multitude of people around it, by being busied with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such a person forgets himself, in a divine sense forgets his own name, dares not to believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd ... Yes, what we call worldliness simply consists of such people who, if one may so express it, pawn themselves to the world. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989, pp. 63-65)

This giving-into-the-crowd extends into the religious sphere as well:

He learns to imitate other people, how they conduct their lives, and proceeds to live as they do. In Christendom he is also a Christian, goes to church every Sunday, listens to and understands the priest ...; he dies; for ten dollars the priest ushers him in to eternity—but a self he neither was nor became. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989, p. 83)

Clearly, these descriptions parallel Freud's observations. But contrary to Freud, Kierkegaard suggested that becoming a true Self, a "solitary one" before God, was possible. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard calls this person the "knight of faith" who "is obligated to rely upon himself alone" by separating from the mass of humanity. The true believer refuses to become a "cultural man" and a nominal Christian. Obviously, to accomplish such a thorough separation involves a great "leap of faith" conducted with much psychic anguish and "fear and trembling." Thus, it requires great courage and effort on the part of the true believer to push through the anguish to ultimately arrive as an Individual before God. In this quest, the believer actively pursues the angst, moving through deeper and deeper stages of self-realization and, hence, despair. As Kierkegaard describes it, the more existentially self-aware we become, the greater our despair. However, this deepening of despair accomplishes a great work within us, it strips us of all pretense and ultimately allows for a connection with the Ultimate:

Finally, what we have here is...a further step forward [along the path of
despair]. For just because [the despair] is more intense, this despair is in a certain sense closer to salvation. A despair of this kind is hard to forget—it goes too deep; but any moment the despair is held open, there is also a possibility of salvation. (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989, p. 93)

Thus, according to Kierkegaard, the act of faith, rather than repressing existential awareness, actively peels away the defensive layers until the bare existential truth is exposed. Only then is true salvation possible.

William James: The Healthy Minded versus the Sick Soul. In his seminal work in the psychology of religion literature, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1958), William James sets up a dichotomy between what he calls the “healthy minded” Christian and the “sick soul.” Although James’ description of the healthy minded believer was developed in response to religious movements popular at the turn of the last century, the healthy minded description remains very relevant today. According to James, the healthy minded believer is consistently optimistic and happy, he “looks on all things and sees that they are good” (p. 90) and he “succeeds in ignoring evil’s very existence” (p. 135). Clearly, the healthy minded believer actively ignores or represses existential realities with the accompanying terrors. Consequently, James comments on the “blindness” this orientation manifests. In contrast to the healthy minded believer, James sets out the sick soul. According to James, the sick soul is much more open to existential reality. The sick souled are convinced that “the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence” (p. 125) and ruminate on the existential condition of man’s finiteness and vulnerability: “The fact that we can die, that we can be ill at all, is what perplexes us; the fact that we now for a moment live and are well is irrelevant to that perplexity” (James, 1902/1958, p. 132, italics in original).

These realizations create within the sick soul a “sadness of heart” and a “melancholy” mood. James offers his clearest contrast between the healthy minded and the sick soul with these famous words: “Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet” (James, 1902/1958, p. 132). The sick soul is constantly aware of the skull grinning in at the banquet and pays an emotional price for refusing to repress this awareness. So, which is best? Healthy mindedness with this upbeat optimism? Or the sick soul’s melancholy? James comes down on the side of the sick soul due to the fact that the sick soul is not rooted in fantasy but is in touch with existential reality:

The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work ... But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes. [T]here is no doubt that healthy mindedness is inadequate ... because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. (James, 1902/1958, pp.149-150)

Thus, like Kierkegaard’s Individual, James’ sick soul envisions an honest existential religious motivation. And, like Kierkegaard, James suggests that these persons reap the emotional consequences of an existentially aware faith stance. These individuals are believers, but, by refusing to use their beliefs to repress existential terror, they suffer.

Ernest Becker: The overlooked positive conclusion. In Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize winning work, *The Denial of Death* (1973), he presents a magisterial overview and integration of psychodynamic theory and existential philosophy. Becker, as has been articulated repeatedly above, contends that our culture and the fabric of our personality allow us to keep our daily equanimity in the face of our existential condition by providing us with a symbolic “heroism.” By “heroism” Becker means an avenue of achieving significance and meaningfulness. However, most of our personal and cultural heroics are death-denying, and, thus, fantasy-based and doomed to failure. This point is illustrated by a story recounted by the existential psychiatrist Irvin Yalom (as cited in Greenburg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997, p. 63):

Not too long ago I was taking a brief vacation alone at a Caribbean beach resort. One evening I was reading, and from time to time I glanced to watch the bar boy who was doing nothing save staring languidly out to
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sea—much like a lizard sunning itself on a warm rock, I thought. The comparison I made between him and me made me feel very snug, very cozy. He was simply doing nothing—wasting time. I, on the other hand was doing something useful, reading, learning. I was, in short, getting ahead. All was well, until some internal imp asked the terrible question: Getting ahead of what? How? And (even worse) why?

When during life we deeply reflect on the nature of our existence we see, like Yalom, our cultural hero systems exposed for what they are, desperate attempts to deny our own death and finiteness.

As mentioned earlier, recent work in TMT has largely supported Becker's formulation that culture and self-esteem function as existential defense mechanisms. However, TMT has largely ignored the positive religious conclusion Becker offers in the latter half of *The Denial of Death*:

> Religion solves the problem of death, which no living individuals can solve, no matter how they would support us. Religion then gives the possibility of heroic victory in freedom and solves the problem of human dignity at its highest level. The two ontological motives of the human condition are both met: The need to surrender oneself in full to the rest of nature, to become a part of it by laying down one's whole existence to some higher meaning; and the need to expand oneself as an individual heroic personality. Finally, religion alone gives hope, because it holds open the dimension of the unknown and the unknowable, the fantastic mystery of creation that the human mind cannot even begin to approach .... (Becker, 1973, p. 203-204)

This outcome is possible, according to Becker, by rejecting “cultural heroism” for what he calls “cosmic heroism,” a heroism that strips itself of defensive, fantasy-based cultural props to connect with the Ultimate. Becker explicitly follows Kierkegaard here. Like Kierkegaard, he suggests that stripping off our cultural defenses involves great courage and mental anguish. “Cosmic heroism” for Becker does not repress but demands existential honesty. “I think that taking life seriously means something such as this: that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneith everything. Otherwise it is false” (Becker, 1973, p. 203-204).

**Summary: The reality of "existential religion."** I have discussed the ideas of Kierkegaard, James, and Becker in some detail because each is widely recognized as a profound theorist and phenomenologist of the human condition. What we find in summarizing their work is a remarkable convergence upon a phenomena that Freud appears to have overlooked: the reality of a non-defensive existential religious motivation. There are many other points of convergence as well. First, they agree that much of humanity uses religion as a defensive existential shield. Second, this defensive orientation is in some sense “blind” in that it chooses to avoid confrontation with existential predicaments. That is, the existential problems are either repressed or distorted. Third, there does, however, appear to exist an existentially aware religious motivation. Also, this motivation appears to be relatively rare and exceptional. And, finally, this existential orientation is characterized by angst, melancholy, and “fear and trembling.” Belief persists, but the existential honesty exacts a significant emotional toll.

**Theoretical descriptions of the defensive versus existential orientations**

Psychology of religion researchers have consistently sought after methods of describing and assessing “mature” versus “immature” religious strivings. To date, there is little consensus on the best way to approach this problem. And yet, most feel that there is a phenomena here worth noting and studying. Some religious individuals appear naive, simplistic, fanatical, childlike, or rigid in their faith. Others appear more honest, flexible, tolerant, curious, and complex. These differences seem worthy of understanding. This article agrees with many theorists who consider the distinction between defensive versus existential religion to be a powerful tool in describing religious motives. However, we should leave behind labels such as “immature” and “mature,” which imply value judgments which obfuscate the empirical issues. Rather, this article focuses on the consequences of religious motives. There are consequences associated with defensiveness and consequences associated with existential
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defensive Orientation</th>
<th>Existential Orientation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conviction, perhaps dogmatic</td>
<td>Doubting, tentative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral outrage in response to threat</td>
<td>Contemplative in response to threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect predominates</td>
<td>Negative affect and angst predominate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicious, perhaps intolerant of outgroup members</td>
<td>More accepting and curious about outgroup members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplistic faith schema, dislikes</td>
<td>Complex faith schema, tends to wrestle with existential problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>confronting existential problems</td>
<td>Suspicious of specialness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialness (protection, insight, destiny)</td>
<td>Non-reactive when mortality salient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive when mortality salient</td>
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awareness. That is, people displaying these orientations thrive and suffer in distinct ways. Which orientation is "best" is a question that probably cannot be answered definitively.

Having reviewed the theoretical evidence, it is also important to review the existing empirical evidence in support of the defensive versus existential distinction. Again, more than simply noting that such a distinction exists, the goal is to precisely describe the phenomenology of the defensive and existential faith experiences. Consequently, before turning to the empirical evidence, it is necessary to be more precise in our descriptions of the defensive and existential orientations. A good way to do this is by making a series of contrasts between the two orientations. As a beginning point, a concise list is offered in Table 1. These contrasts are largely borrowed from three sources: The phenomenological work of Kierkegaard, James, and Becker; the psychodynamic insights regarding the nature and functioning of defense mechanisms; and the theoretical and empirical framework of Terror Management Theory.

Defensive religion. Religion, in this view, is characterized by religious beliefs whose main function is to repress existential realizations and terror. Consequently, the believer reaps the rewards of peaceful conviction and sanguine optimism. However, as noted above, there are costs involved with this orientation. First, the defensive worldview must be believed absolutely and protected from threat. However, an orientation characterized by certainty and conviction may lead to, in extreme cases, dogmatism and fanaticism. Further, intense moral outrage and righteous indignation could be elicited if the worldview is threatened. Consequently, dialogue about fundamental issues of the faith could become difficult due to the negative emotion generated by the defensive posture. In addition, outgroup members, however they are identified, might be distrusted, castigated, or, in very extreme cases, attacked. Mostly they are targets of evangelism. All of this is motivated by the fact that outgroup members, who hold alternative worldviews, raise the suspicion that worldview adoption may be arbitrary. That is, the mere existence of people who hold to alternative worldviews threatens the believer's conviction that he is in sole possession of the Truth.

Continuing with Table 1, defensive beliefs might tend to be simplistic and less interested in the philosophical issues raised by religious doctrines. This may be due to a hesitation to wrestle with certain existential problems. For example, rather than wrestling with the feelings aroused by the fact that the universe appears, at times, random, painful, and inexplicable, the defensive stance might quickly latch onto simplistic signs of Providence. Further continuing with Table 1, the defensive believer may also assume a personal sense of cosmic "specialness." For example, the believer might imagine that he will have a better lot in life due to the protective hand of God. He might believe that he will be more likely to succeed, find a loving mate, live to old age, be healed regularly of his infirmities, and even be spared from death. God might be seen as having a very detailed plan and destiny for the believer and might endow the believer, at times, with special knowledge and insight. Further, God is
viewed as extraordinarily responsive and solicitous of the believer's most trivial needs and requests. And, finally, the defensive religious orientation is predicted to be reactive when threats to mortality are made conscious. Because death, the ultimate existential terror, is largely, if not totally, repressed, when mortality is made salient (as it is in TMT experiments) the defensive believer is predicted to respond by protecting his/her worldview (which can happen in a variety of ways as TMT experiments have documented).

Existential religion. To start, existential religion must be seen as distinct from mere agnosticism or atheism. Existential religion involves faith and may be generally orthodox, although doubt is a constant struggle. Thus, the defining feature of existential religion is faith, even devout orthodoxy, in the face of the existential condition. That is, the believer may consciously and willfully refuse to allow her beliefs to give existential solace, or, at the very least, faith doesn't easily resolve the existential predicament. For example, believing that God is "in control" doesn't ease the existential believer's deep angst in the face of human suffering and death or attenuate doubts that God has, perhaps, "lost control."

Consequently, the phenomenological experience of existential believers is not one of peaceful bliss. This, in contrast to the defensive believer, is their unique burden. The source of this discontent comes from a variety of places. Mainly it stems from the fact that the existential believer realizes that she is taking a "leap of faith." She admits that there are no guarantees that her faith will be proven justified. Thus, the terror of death remains present and unrepressed. In a sense, existential believers "hope" rather than "believe."

In either case, they either refuse or fail to experience the comfort that comes so easily to other people of faith.

Further, existential believers claim no protective buffer (i.e., they expect the proverbial rain—or lighting—to fall equally on the just and unjust), special insight (i.e., they find the future opaque), or cosmic destiny (i.e., they accept that they must make choices without clear information, guidance, or guarantee of success/blessing). All this contributes to their religious angst.

As noted, the price for this existential honesty is doubt and existential anxiety. On the positive side, however, existential believers should be less dogmatic and more tolerant of outgroup members. Since they are less certain, they should be more contemplative, rather than defensive, in the face of new information or challenging dialogue. Finally, because mortality is on average more salient for existential believers, they should be less reactive in the face of TMT-like experimental manipulations.

Empirical evidence for the defensive and existential orientations

Up to this point, the argument has been largely theoretical in nature. In a different vein, is there any evidence that such a dichotomy, defensive versus existential religion, exists? Are the characterizations described above actually observed in religious populations? It is the hope of this article, by making these descriptions specific, that empirical evidence could begin to be collected in a more focused fashion. However, some pre-existing evidence, collected for different purposes, is supportive of the model offered here.1

Evidence for the characterization of the defensive mode of religion. Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993) review much of the evidence concerning the consequences of religious belief. Their review suggests that devout religious beliefs do appear to shield the average believer from existential concerns (Osarchuk & Tatz, 1973; Schoenrade, 1989). Further, religious beliefs are often cognitively binding. That is, believers generally are not free to critically evaluate their own beliefs (Batson, 1975; Feather, 1964; McFarland & Warren, 1992). Finally, Batson et al. (1993), in a review of 47 studies, found a positive association between religious belief and intolerance and conclude "We seem to be presented with a clear, if unsettling, conclusion: At least among white, middle-class Christians in the United States, religion is not associated with increased love and acceptance but with increased intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry" (p. 302, italics in original). However, work done by Donahue (1985), Gorsuch (1988), and others suggests that this association is largely driven by a significant portion of the religious population who use religion for utilitarian and self-serving purposes (often labeled "extrinsic religiosity"). However, the correlation between internalized religious motives ("intrinsic religiosity") and intolerance is zero. Thus, the most committed members of a religious group are not more prejudiced, but neither are they less prejudiced. Either way, neither religious affiliation nor religious motivation (extrinsic versus intrinsic) predict less intolerance generally. Yet, Batson et al.
(1993) call even this conclusion into question by suggesting that this lack of association may be due to self-presentational effects. That is, religious persons tend to shy away from openly endorsing racist attitudes. Consequently, in a few studies (e.g., Batson, Flink, Schoenrade, Fultz, & Pynch, 1986; Batson, Naifeh, & Pate, 1978) that examine actual behavior, rather than self-report attitudes, the evidence appears to suggest that even intrinsically motivated religious persons behave in a racist manner (whether they admit that fact or not is another matter entirely). Although much of the work and conclusions cited above involves Batson's work, his conclusions are generally acknowledged by leading psychology of religion researchers (e.g., see the discussion in Hood, Spilka, Hunsburger, & Gorsuch's, 1996, widely used textbook on the psychology of religion), yet the issue remains contentious (see Gorsuch, 1993, and Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1993, for an exchange between prominent psychology of religion researchers on this topic).

To summarize, although many of the findings and conclusions reported above remain controversial, for the present purposes of this article, the empirical evidence suggests that the characterizations made of the defensive religious mode (Table 1) are plausible. However, what might be said about the existential mode of religion?

Evidence for the characterization of the existential mode of religion. Perhaps the best attempt to assess a more existential mode of religious life again traces back to Batson and his conception of religion as quest. In Batson's words, Quest captures a religious orientation that "involves honestly facing existential questions in all their complexity, while at the same time resisting clear-cut, pat answers" (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993, p. 166). Further, Batson considers Quest to be a "religious" motivation in that Quest involves a willingness to struggle with existential questions. However, these questions may or may not involve belief in a Transcendent Other (i.e., God): "There may or may not be a belief in a transcendent reality, but there is a transcendent, religious aspect to the individual's life. We shall call this open-ended, questioning approach religion as quest" (Batson et al., 1993, p. 166). Overall, Quest is described as a religious orientation that views the experience of doubt as positive, displays a readiness to face existential questions, and is willing to change and grow over time.

Quest is close to what is described here as "existential religion." The empirical research (again see Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993 for an empirical review) regarding Quest suggests that people high on the Quest dimension are less dogmatic, more tolerant, and even more altruistic. Recent evidence from Beck and Jessup (in press) also suggests that Quest is positively associated with measures of existential angst, complexity of belief, religious exploration, experience of doubt (tentativeness), ecumenism, universality (acceptance of all world religions), and a willingness to change one's religious beliefs. Beck and Jessup (in press) also found negative correlations between Quest and existential well-being, religious well-being, and Christian orthodoxy.

Thus, on the surface, it seems like many features of Quest capture the idea of "existential religion." However, the Quest construct remains controversial. For example, Donahue (1985) suggested that Quest might be measuring agnosticism or religious conflict. Batson has responded to these concerns (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991), but the issue continues to be debated. Much of this debate stems from differences in working definitions among researchers regarding the nature of religion. Most researchers tend to adopt the position that religious belief must involve some ontological recognition of a spiritual or transcendent plane of existence. Batson, however, suggests that existential concerns are the hallmark of religious strivings. According to this view, as Batson readily acknowledges, even atheists can be defined as "religious" if the individual struggles with existential questions (e.g., What gives life significance?). The point here however is not to debate the proper definition of religion, but to note that Batson's conceptualization of Quest is broader than the definition offered above for "existential religion." The distinction is one of belief. The existential believer is just that—a believer, even an orthodox believer. The issue is how they use, or refuse to use, their beliefs to handle existential realizations. Thus, although the literature surrounding the Quest construct supports the characterizations of existential religion made in Table 1, more research is needed. Specifically, few researchers have clearly defined and studied the exact formulation offered here of "existential religion."

Implications and future directions

Empirical starting points. Obviously, the initial place to begin to test this theory is to determine
if the characterizations of the defensive and existential orientations, as summarized in Table 1, hold up under empirical scrutiny. As a starting point, assessment instruments aimed at quantifying aspects of this typology might be developed and lab tests of the TMT sort could be conducted. Specifically, an assessment instrument aimed at quantifying the characterizations in Table 1 might be constructed. After developing such an instrument, correlational and experimental studies could follow. Simple correlational studies might determine if those scoring higher on the defensive profile are less fearful of death, more dogmatic, or less tolerant. TMT-like experiments might also be conducted. For example, after identifying "existential" and "defensive" participants, these participants could be made to move through a TMT-like manipulation where some members of each group are made to reflect upon their eventual death (the morality salient condition) and the other half made to reflect on an innocuous subject (the morality nonsalient condition). The participants might then be asked to rate various essays, some supportive and some less supportive, of Christianity. (This is a dependent measure strategy commonly employed in TMT research. Often, TMT researchers use pro-American and anti-American essays to assess worldview defense among American college students.) If the theory outlined in this article is correct, the experimental predictions for such a design are straightforward. First, all participants should be more favorable of the pro-Christian essays and viewpoints (the participants are Christians of course). However, when morality is made salient, only the "defensive" participants (in contrast to the "existential" participants) are predicted to dramatically engage in worldview defense (e.g., denigrate the authors of the anti-Christianity essays). Simple correlational and experimental tests such as these should be able to test the validity of the theory presented in this article.

**Theoretical starting points.** Beyond the direct tests of the theory just mentioned, a great deal of theoretical work remains to be done. For example, how might the Quest construct be made to fit the definition of existential religious belief? Recall that, for Batson, the originator of the Quest construct, a religious quest need not involve theism. Consequently, the Quest construct remains controversial and some wonder if Quest should even be regarded as a religious variable (e.g., Donahue, 1985). In short, it is an open empirical question if the distinction between the existential atheist or existential theist is useful. This is an idea that seems well worth exploring. As a starting point, two orthogonal dimensions might be proposed. The first dimension would describe a continuum ranging from disbelief to belief in a supernatural realm (e.g., belief in God), with atheists at one extreme and religious believers at the other. A second dimension would describe the degree of existential awareness displayed by the person ranging from existentially aware to existentially repressed. When the dimensions are superimposed upon each other a fourfold typology emerges. According to the current theory, both the defensive and existentially religious would score high on religious belief. However, they would differ in their degree of existential awareness. Those who do not believe and who are also not existentially aware might be classified as Kierkegaard's "cultural man," a person who does not believe in a spiritual existence but who employs death-denying cultural heroics to repress existential awareness. Finally, those who do not believe but are existentially aware may embody the agnostic or atheistic search for existential meaning Batson has described (although Batson would not restrict Quest so narrowly). Whether or not this typology has any descriptive utility is an open question.

Most of the characterizations made about religion in this article have been explicitly or implicitly about the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is interesting to speculate about how the defensive versus existential distinction might manifest itself, if at all, in other world religions. The expectation would be, according to Freud, that all religions are inherently defensive. However, if the analogy with Christianity holds, there should be believers of all world religions who manifest the existential honesty of the existential religious type. For example, Buddhism appears, on its face, to be a brutally honest existential religion (after all, the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths is the recognition that life—all of life—is suffering). This might indicate that some religious groups are more existentially honest than others. However, many of the motives seen in pop-Buddhism and New Age thinking appear existentially defensive in nature. For example, why so many reincarnated lives are reported to have been either exotic or important is likely due to existential defensiveness (i.e., a striving for significance by indulging in a fantasy-based
and ego-centric belief). In short, the typology offered here should easily extend to all world religions. Whether or not it does so remains to be seen.

Finally, the definition of existential religion offered earlier stated that the existential believer fails to consistently experience existential solace from religious belief. Clearly, most people gain deep comfort from their faith. Does this mark a person as defensive? Not necessarily. It is doubtful that living in full existential awareness is possible or even healthy. Clearly, human suffering beyond imagination exists worldwide at this very moment, but we couldn't function if we hourly dwelt upon this fact. What is more realistic for the existential believer, rather than constant existential brooding, is a resistance to quick theological fixes for existential problems. And further, existential problems keep breaking into the believer's consciousness, disrupting the peaceful flow of conviction and certainty. This surge of existential awareness doesn't happen every minute of every hour, but the existential predicament does break into consciousness more often than for the defensive believer. Perhaps solace can come to the existential believer, but only temporarily. In the end, is this existential experience a display of faith or faithlessness? Some might view the existential orientation as immature and a display of faithlessness. Others might find the defensive orientation lacking in faith. These are difficult issues which may not have a clear resolution. Who is the true person of faith, the "existentially oriented" or the "defensive"? Perhaps there are rewards and costs to both.

Note

1. There is one assumption that is made in this review of literature that should be made explicit. Namely, if Freud, Kierkegaard, James, and Becker are correct, the majority of the religious persons are characterized by the defensive orientation. This will be assumed to be accurate. It may be an assumption that will turn out to be wrong. However, given this assumption, whenever we see correlations about religion or religiosity generally it will be assumed that this reflects upon most common, the defensive, orientation.

References


**Author**

Dr. Richard Beck is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Abilene Christian University with degrees from Southern Methodist University (Ph.D., Experimental Psychology) and Abilene Christian University (M.S., Clinical Psychology; B.S., Christian Ministry). His research specializations are the assessment and treatment of emotional disorders and psychology of religion.