

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS? TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY AND THE ROLE OF THE ONTOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH IN CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CRISIS

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According to the Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), the psychological conflict resulting from humans' having a desire to live, but realizing that death is inevitable, gives rise to potentially debilitating existential terror that is managed by embracing cultural belief systems and adhering to the standards of value associated with them. The present article considers one psychosocial effect of this dissonance: the contemporary discord between Western and Middle-Eastern cultures. The role of religion and secularism in contemporary intercultural hostilities, which characterizes the contemporary global crisis, is investigated, starting from a consideration of the role of ontological representations of death in the construction of cultural worldviews that provide a sense of meaning and value and afford opportunities to obtain literal and symbolic immortality.

Key words: Terror Management Theory; Ontological representations of death; Literal versus symbolic immortality; Religion versus secularism; Fear of death.

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People die and murder, nurture and protect, go to any extreme, in behalf of their conception of the real. More to the point, perhaps, they live out the details of their daily lives in terms of what they conceive to be real: not just rocks and mountains and storms at sea, but friendship, love, respect are known as false or real This is the domain of meaning making, without which human beings in every culture fall into terror. The product of meaning making is Reality. So how human beings construct their meanings needs necessarily to be at the center of the study of the human condition.
(Bruner, 1996, p. XV)

Antipathy toward Islam is increasing in many Western countries, particularly in the aftermath of the devastating terrorist attacks in the United States (2001, 2015, 2016), the bombing in Turkey (2003, 2015, 2016), Spain (2004), England (2005), France (2015, 2016), Belgium (2016), and Germany (2015, 2016), and the vehicle-ramming attacks in Ohio, France, England, Germany, Austria, and Israel (2016, 2017). Many citizens are convinced that Islam is a “fanatical” and “violent” religion antithetical to modernity and democracy, that Muslims should be banned from running for any public office, and are opposed to mosques being built in their neighborhoods. Furthermore, as Islamic terroristic attacks on Western soil become more frequent,

pejorative views of Middle-Eastern culture have become more common in Western political and public discourse. This in turn has amplified the polarization between Western and Islamic cultural worldviews (Wodak, KhosraviNik, & Mral, 2013).

Indeed, throughout the world and especially in the Middle-East, Muslims' negative views of the United States and Western Europe increased dramatically, and have remained extremely disparaging, since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. By 2003, favorable ratings of the USA tumbled from 71% to 38% in Nigeria, and from 61% to 15% in Indonesia. Majorities in seven of eight Muslim countries polled perceived the United States as a direct military threat to them. Muslim children yearn to become martyrs ("shahid") in the service of repelling the Crusading Western infidels. At the Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza, an 8-year-old boy showed a reporter "a portrait his family had taken of him clutching an AK-47 rifle and said that his older brother was a shahid — then he hung his head and admitted that no, his brother is alive and never did anything so grand." At the Jenin camp, a 13-year-old girl said that although her father wanted her to become a doctor, "she would prefer to study nuclear physics so she could blow up America" (Kristoff, 2002; Rubin, 2002; Views of a Changing World, 2003).

One way to view this state of affairs is in terms of political scientist Huntington's (1996) notion of the Clash Of Civilizations (COC). Huntington proposed that people's divergent social identities will be the primary source of war in the future and that the crucial axis of conflict will be along cultural and religious lines; specifically, between secularly humanistic capitalist democratic nation-states in the West and religious Islamic countries (primarily) in the Middle East. More generally, intergroup conflicts can be analyzed in terms of Social Identity Theory (SIT; Capozza & Brown, 2000; Pedrazza & Berlanda, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). According to SIT, social identity is derived from group membership, which provides individuals with a sense of belonging and self-esteem. People maintain or enhance self-esteem by pride in their group, as well as by disparaging others who belong to different groups, resulting in prejudice and discrimination against other groups that may culminate in racism, xenophobia, and genocide.

While both COC and SIT offer descriptive accounts of intergroup conflict, they do not elucidate the social psychological processes that underlie the need for self-esteem or humankind's longstanding inability to peacefully co-exist with people who embrace different cultural worldviews. In *The denial of death*, cultural anthropologist Becker (1973) proposed that human activity is driven largely by unconscious efforts to deny and transcend death; and the same idea has been widely developed by one of the most important contemporary Italian philosophers: Severino (1988, 2016). Indeed, both authors underscore how the terror of death is one of the primary driving forces of human action; and that, over the course of history, it has, latently or manifestly, guided the development of art, religion, language, economics, science, and all aspects of popular culture. Additionally, many current social and political conflicts and controversies result from, or are affected by, the forms in which the relation between death and after-death (i.e., religion) are represented (Anson, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2009; Castano et al., 2011; Cohen & Solomon, 2011; Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008; Testoni, Simioni, & Sposito, 2013; Testoni, Sposito, De Cataldo, & Ronconi, 2014).

Nevertheless, in the realm of scientific psychology, the role of death in life has not, until recently, garnered much theoretical or empirical attention, although it is central to some discourses focused on end-of-life, loss, and grief (Bowlby, 1973; Doka & Davidson, 1997; Kübler-Ross,

1969; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Parkes, 2001; Rando, 1991). Even today, the theme of death has been remarkably suppressed in contemporary social science publications, as well as in public discourse. Evidently, the *pornography* of death effect — “In the 20th century . . . whereas copulation has become more and more ‘mentionable’ . . . death has become more and more ‘unmentionable’ as a natural process” (Gorer, 1955, p. 50) — prevails in popular culture and academic psychology as well.

One exception to this trend is Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), a social psychological formulation of Becker’s (1975) ideas in order to subject them to empirical scrutiny in the service of delineating the psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews and to understand the psychological basis of prejudice and intergroup conflicts. In this article, we present a TMT account of the COC, in order to illuminate the unconscious existential dynamics of the contemporary crisis between Western and Middle-Eastern cultures.

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY: CULTURAL WORLDVIEWS AND SELF-ESTEEM BUFFER EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY

Terror Management Theory is based on the Darwinian assumption that humans, like all forms of life, are biologically predisposed toward self-preservation in the service of survival and (ultimately) reproduction. We are, however, unique in terms of two particularly important and generally highly adaptive intellectual capacities: a high degree of self-awareness and the capacity to think in terms of past, present, and future (mental time travel). While these attributes give people a high degree of behavioral flexibility that helps them to stay alive and successfully reproduce, they also produce the extraordinarily unsettling realization that death is inevitable and that it is generally unpredictable and uncontrollable. The awareness that death is inevitable and we are perpetually vulnerable and transient creatures in a universe that is indifferent to our fate, in turn produces potentially paralyzing existential terror and despair. Humans banish death from consciousness and shield themselves from existential terror by embracing cultural worldviews: humanly constructed beliefs about reality, shared by individuals in a group, that provide a sense that one is a valuable member of a meaningful, stable, and orderly universe, and thereby eligible for literal and/or symbolic immortality (Lifton, 1979). Literal immortality consists of the heavens, souls, afterlives, reincarnations, and transmutations common to many (if not all) of the world’s great religions; symbolic immortality consists of the belief that a remnant of one’s existence will persist over time — by having children, amassing huge fortunes, being part of a great (and enduring) tribe or nation, or producing a great work of art or science.

According to TMT, and following Becker (1975), self-esteem is the belief that one is a person of *value* in a world of *meaning*; and the primary function of self-esteem, as well as the cultural worldviews from which self-esteem is derived, is to minimize anxiety in general (Pedrazza, Berlanda, Trifiletti, & Bressan, 2016) and death anxiety in particular. Self-esteem acquires its anxiety-buffering qualities in the context of socialization, where, as anthropologist Goldschmidt (1990, pp. 104-105) put it, an immature, helpless and dependent human infant is transformed “from a genetically programmed biological entity into a socially programmed symbolic entity” in pursuit of immortality as a member of a culturally constructed universe. Accord-

ing to Bowlby (1969), a critical element of the socialization process is the infant's propensity for experiencing anxiety, especially in novel and potentially life-threatening situations. Long before babies have acquired the physical, emotional, and intellectual capabilities to survive on their own or have any awareness of death, anxiety from unmet needs or physical danger forges physical and psychological attachments to primary caretakers who nurture and protect their offspring. These attachments in turn provide a sense of profound safety and security to the infant basking in the unconditional love of their seemingly all-knowing and everlasting parents (Codato, Damian, Testoni, & Ronconi, 2013; Codato, Shaver, Testoni, & Ronconi, 2011).

Children must eventually, however, become fully incorporated into their social milieu by learning the language, beliefs, and customs of their culture. Toward this end, parental affection becomes increasingly contingent on the child's behaving in accordance with cultural dictates. When children behave appropriately they are rewarded with parental praise, which produces feelings of psychological well-being. Inappropriate behavior begets very different parental reactions, ranging from punishment to rebuke to frowning indifference, all of which entail a distinct absence of affection. This creates anxiety and insecurity that Bowlby (1969) proposed was linked to a fear of abandonment. Over time, children come to associate being "good" with being safe (good = safe = alive) and being "bad" with being helpless and vulnerable (bad = insecure = dead) and, in this fashion, self-esteem becomes an anxiety buffer.

How then, and why, do the anxiety-buffering qualities of self-esteem, initially obtained from pleasing parents during socialization, eventually come to depend on adhering to the standards of the culture at large? Throughout socialization, children learn the ways of the world by way of their culture's history, religion, and folklore. The transition begins when children become increasingly aware of the personal implications of the inevitability of death. In *Existential psychotherapy*, Yalom (1980) presents clinical and empirical evidence that this happens as early as two years of age and is surely a prominent concern of children by age nine or ten. At this time, children begin to find the promises of safety and death transcendence offered by the culture more compelling and reassuring than even the best efforts of their parents, who children realize, like all humans, are fallible and mortal. Self-esteem is now derived from adhering to the culturally prescribed standards of conduct associated with specific social roles afforded by their culture.

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

EMPIRICAL SUPPORT FOR TMT

Three independent lines of empirical inquiry provide compelling convergent support for the basic tenets of TMT. First, according to the *anxiety-buffer hypothesis*, if self-esteem functions to buffer anxiety, then increased self-esteem (or dispositionally high self-esteem) should reduce anxiety in response to subsequent threats. In the accord with this claim, Greenberg et al. (1992) gave participants positive or neutral feedback on a personality inventory to increase their self-esteem or leave it unaltered, and had them view graphic depictions of death or a neutral film. The neutral self-esteem participants showed a significant increase in self-reported anxiety in response to the death-related video; however, those who received a self-esteem boost did not. A second

study with different manipulations of self-esteem (high scores on a supposed IQ test) and threat (anticipating painful electric shocks) produced the same effect on galvanic skin response, a physiological measure of autonomic arousal associated with anxiety. Subsequent studies found that both manipulated and chronically high levels of self-esteem reduced defensive reactions to death reminders (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1993). Taken together, these studies (along with others; for a review of this literature see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004) confirm that self-esteem does indeed buffer anxiety and that this effect extends beyond self-esteem-related threats.

Second, the *mortality salience hypothesis* states that if cultural worldviews serve to manage existential terror, then asking people to ponder their own mortality (mortality salience, MS) should increase the need for the protection provided by such beliefs and result in vigorous agreement with and affection for those who share our beliefs (or are similar to us) and equally vigorous hostility and disdain for those who are opposed to our beliefs or merely different from us, as well as efforts to bolster self-esteem. To test mortality salience hypotheses, TMT researchers make mortality salient by having people write about death, view graphic depictions of death, be interviewed in front of a funeral parlor, or be subliminally exposed to the word “dead” or “death.” MS intensifies cultural worldview defense and self-esteem striving. For example, Greenberg et al. (1990) found that Christian participants had more favorable reactions to fellow Christians and less favorable reactions to Jewish targets in response to MS; Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, and Mikulincer (1999) found that, after a MS induction, Israeli soldiers who derived self-esteem from their driving skills drove faster and more recklessly in a driving simulator (see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010, for a meta-analysis of MS studies).

Third, according to the *death-thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis*, threats to cherished aspects of cultural worldviews, self-esteem, or close attachments should increase the accessibility of non-conscious death-related thoughts. DTA is typically assessed by the number of incomplete word stems completed in death-related ways (e.g., COFF __ could be COFFEE or COFFIN; GR __ VE could be GROVE or GRAVE); for example, Christian fundamentalists confronted with logical inconsistencies in the Bible (Friedman & Rholes, 2007) and Americans asked to ponder undesired aspects of themselves (Ogilvie, Cohen, & Solomon, 2008) showed increased DTA (see, Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010 for a meta-analysis of DTA research). Moreover, the same conditions that increase DTA also increase cultural worldview defense, self-esteem striving, and close attachments (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). And defending one’s worldview, bolstering one’s self-esteem, or thinking about attachment figures decreases DTA (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997).

INTERGROUP CONFLICTS, STEREOTYPES, AND TERROR OF DEATH

As reported above, cultural worldviews permit people to manage existential anxiety, providing a sense of meaning to the whole universe, and a promise of literal and/or symbolical immortality (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015). However, complications arise when individuals encounter someone with different beliefs, because alternative cultural worldviews challenge the validity of one’s own worldview. Hence, the presence of others with differing beliefs may be problematic because it can compromise the structure of meaning that people use to

manage existential terror. Thus, those who identify with their culture are motivated to defend their cultural-based anxiety-buffering structures, the cultural worldview and striving for self-esteem (based on cultural values); consequently, they are prone to reacting negatively toward those who threaten the validity of their worldview (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). Different strategies are employed to mitigate the threat posed by other cultures: derogation, assimilation, accommodation, annihilation (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2003; Solomon et al., 2015).

Derogation is aimed at diminishing the value of other worldviews by denigrating those who adhere to them. To assess alternative constructions of reality as unworthy and untrue systems of meanings, one can think that the others are ignorant or evil, they subscribe to erroneous values, or they are not even humans. TMT researchers hypothesized that derogation of other worldviews would increase after a MS manipulation, and indeed, there are many studies showing that, after a death reminder, there is an increase of prejudice, stereotyping, negative evaluations, and aggressive behavior toward other cultures and outgroup members (Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). For example, death reminders increased hostility toward Jews and denial of Allah and Buddha in Christians, and similarly, increased Muslims' denial of God/Jesus and Buddha (Greenberg et al., 1990; Vail, Arndt, & Abdollahi, 2012). Americans evaluated illegal Mexican immigrants more negatively than Canadian immigrants in response to MS, indicating that negative attitudes are directed toward groups perceived as different (Bassett & Connelly, 2011). Another recent study showed that following MS, people rated an accused murderer as more guilty when the defendant was an outgroup member (someone of another ethnicity; Leippe, Bergold, & Eisenstadt, 2017). Moreover, American students enhanced German stereotyping after death reminders; and, they liked more stereotype-consistent African-American individuals than stereotype-inconsistent ones, suggesting a preference for people behaving in a stereotypical fashion under MS (Schimmel et al., 1999).

Assimilation consists of convincing or cajoling others to accept one's own worldview. Conversion of people to a one's own construction of reality represents a proof of validity of that worldview because: (a) if someone changes their worldview, it means that he/she likes the new one more than the former one; and (b) increasing the members of a group strengthens and legitimates beliefs of worldview followed by that group. Indeed, the more the group is widespread, the more people will develop faith in worldview embraced by that group. Thus, people are motivated to urge outgroup members to change their vision of the world and become part of the ingroup. This tendency increases under MS; for example, after a death reminder, Christians were more inclined to convert atheists, and people who believe in evolution were more determined to persuade creationism supporters to embrace Darwinian theories (Kosloff, Cesario, & Martens, 2012).

Accommodation consists of incorporating attractive aspects of an outgroup worldview into one's own worldview that are not so easily dismissed or hold some merit, without undermining core beliefs and values (Hayes et al., 2015; Solomon et al., 2003, 2015). For example, many Americans demonize and denigrate Mexicans and people of color, while at the same time enthusiastically consuming tacos and enjoying music produced by African-Americans.

Finally, annihilation is a radical strategy to exterminate the outgroup and establish supremacy of the ingroup. When derogation, assimilation, and accommodation are insufficient to deal with other cultures, obliterating the "other" assures that one's anxiety-buffer structures maintain their psychological integrity (Solomon et al., 2003, 2015). In accord with this view,

death reminders increase physical aggression toward people who are perceived as a threat to one's own worldview (McGregor et al., 1998). In this study, liberal and conservative participants read an essay written by another liberal or conservative person, and then they were asked to administer a quantity of very hot salsa to the target person who wrote the essay. Participants in MS condition, but not those in control condition, administered twice the hot sauce to outgroup members (liberal vs. conservative) than to people of their ingroup. This result indicates that death reminders not only affect attitudes toward groups, but also behaviors, which can become more aggressive.

Additionally, TMT researchers discovered that mortality salience effects also occur in response to increased death-thought accessibility (DTA; Greenberg et al., 1994), and that death related-stimuli, such as war, terrorism, violent conflicts, immigration, can increase DTA. For example, after reading about Islamic terrorism, non-Muslim Europeans had increased DTA levels and reported greater prejudice toward Arabs (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009). In times of war, terrorism, and intergroup conflicts, people may be constantly confronted with stimuli (such as media reports on television related to death, destruction, threats to one's worldview, or supremacy of other cultures) that can increase death-thought accessibility and reproduce effects of MS inductions in daily life. Existential threat can lead to a circular ongoing process well described from the model of escalation of conflict proposed by Jonas and Fritzsche (2013). In this model, perception of existential threat leads to a need of psychological security provided by defenses of social ingroup and cultural worldview, then intolerance and negative attitudes toward outgroup may arise and turn to derogation of outgroup members. Finally, hostility and aggressive behaviors can turn to intergroup conflict aimed at annihilating other groups. Death-stimuli related to conflict, mixed with threats to one's own ingroup and worldview, lead to existential threat and to a restart of the cycle from the beginning, in an ongoing fueling of the conflicts.

Many studies show that MS increases support for military interventions and violent solutions of intergroup conflicts. For example, death reminders increased acceptance of nuclear or chemical weapons to fight terrorism in American politically conservative students. Moreover, Iranian students evaluated martyrs more positively and were more willing to consider martyrdom themselves, in response to a MS induction (Pyszczynski, Abdollahi, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2006). Interestingly, another study showed that death reminders increase justice-related motivations associated with violence, but not utility motivations. Thus, existential threats seem to orient people toward maintenance of conflicts (that help people in facing others' worldview and supporting their own structures of meanings), rather than the resolution of conflicts (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2015).

THREE HISTORICAL FORMS OF ONTOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH

... societies are standardized systems of death denial; they give structure to the formulas for heroic transcendence. History can then be looked at as a succession of immortality ideologies, or as a mixture at any time of several of these ideologies. We can ask about any epoch, What are the social forms of heroism available? And we can take a sweep

over history and see how these forms vary and how they animate each epoch. (Becker, 1975, pp. 153-154)

Since their origin, humans have created a myriad of culturally constructed forms of literal and symbolic immortality in the service of death transcendence. Any kind of immortality implies a specific definition of what death means. In addition, as philosopher Severino (2008) argued, from an epistemological and historical perspective, one can discern three specific forms of ontological representations of death: the narrative mythological/polytheistic; the Western rational metaphysical/monotheistic; and finally, the Western rationalistic and critical post-modern.

The Narrative, Mythological/Polytheistic Form of Death's Ontological Representation

In ancient times throughout the world, and in not-yet-westernized cultures or countries to this day, myths provided illogic-syncretic explanations of the supernatural, depicted by art in a visive form, embodying and enacting such visionary recounting. Mythological religions codified these narrative accounts, making it possible for people to concretize their supernatural conceptions of reality by means of songs, dances, sacrifices, and symbolic re-enactments helpful in making their death-denying wishes come true.

For example, the Tewa Indians of the Rio Grande Valley in the southwestern United States, believe their ancestors originally dwelled with spirits and animals in a dark and deathless world beneath Sandy Place Lake in the north. Two spirits, Blue Corn Woman Near to Summer and White Corn Maiden Near to Ice, were the first mothers of all Tewas. The spirits asked one of the men to go above ground to locate a path for the Tewas to leave the underground lake. While above ground, this man was attacked by predatory birds and animals who eventually befriended him and gave him weapons and clothing to return underground as the Hunt Chief. Back under the lake, the Hunt Chief created a Summer (Blue Corn) Chief and a Winter (White Corn) Chief, and divided the people into two clans, one for each chief. The Tewa then emerged from beneath the lake, and led by their respective chiefs, headed south along both sides of the Rio Grande River to their homeland. The epic journey had 12 stops along the way, with periodic pilgrimages back to the lake and surrounding sacred mountains. This creation myth, concretized by art and ritual, provides narrative justification for all aspects of Tewas' social behavior from cradle to grave. Indeed, after death, Tewas believe they will return to dwell with the spirits, happy in the place "of endless circada singing."

The Western Rational Metaphysical/Monotheistic Form of Death's Ontological Representation

According to Severino (1988, 2008), Western thought represents a radical departure from such mythical narratives, since it is founded on the Platonic fundamental opposition between what is true and what is false on the basis of logical reasoning. In order to manage the anguish of being mortal in a non-mythological manner, the second form of representation of death/immortality took place in ancient Greece with the inauguration of philosophical thought, which differentiated between mythological and rational worldviews. Assuming that there are two kinds of entities in the world, the seen and the unseen, the Greek philosophers wanted to demonstrate that while any-

thing visible is corruptible and changes over time, the unseen and invisible ideal that underlies the visible is unchangeable and eternal.

To make this view intelligible, it is necessary to consider the historical structure of this ontology and its relationship with logic, because from this conjunction the opposition between truth (incontrovertible knowledge) and opinion (hypothetical knowledge) took form. The ontological analysis of existence is inherent in language, which defines the distance between illogical and logical reasoning about what is being. Logical thinking, which pervades all forms of Western thought (philosophical, scientific, or vernacular), is erected on a tripartite logical model, composed by the following axis: the principle of identity ($A \equiv A$; every being is identical with itself); the principle of non-contradiction (for all propositions p , it is impossible for both p and not p to be true); the principle of excluded middle (or third) (either p or $\sim p$ must be true, there being no third or middle true proposition between them) (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Severino, 2016; Testoni, Ancona, & Ronconi, 2015).

This rational tripartite system originated after Parmenides had articulated the absolute difference between the being and the nothing, thanks to the successors Plato and Aristotle, who founded metaphysical reasoning (see, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Gamma, 3-6, trans. 1998). Starting from this point of no return, Western thought has become fundamentally different from any other forms of thought; and, consequently, any mythological worldview, which does not adhere to its regulations, has been considered both false and deceptive.

The first aim of metaphysics was the definition of the ontological difference between absolute being and contingent being: where the first is primary and final cause of the second one. The essences derive from and return to the prior cause (Absolute Being). The term essence is inherent to the attribute that makes any substance what it necessarily is, and without which it loses its identity. It is distinguished and absolutely different from the accident, which is a property that the substance may have contingently, without which it can still retain its identity. The concept has been indicated by Aristotle (*to ti ên einai* - τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, *Metaphysics*, Zeta, 1029b) literally meaning the “what it was to be.” Since the essences are universal and necessary, they are eternal and constitute a part of the absolute being. In the metaphysical perspective, the human essence, or the real identity of any individual, is the soul or spirit (*psyché* – ψυχή / *nous* – νοῦς), which is eternal and consequently immortal. Greek metaphysics rationally and logically founds the dualistic perspective, hereafter assumed by Cartesio as well, differentiating the essential human causa (soul) from the substantial one (body). The soul is the identity of the body (substance) which, on the contrary, is destined to the transformation till the final act consisting in death. In this way, metaphysics tried to demonstrate existence after death, with ontological/logical and non-mythological discourses. For the Greek metaphysics, logic was not only a rational instrument for mathematical problems, but also understanding the processes of being. From logic-logos, being is the universal reason (*epistème* – ἐπιστήμη) inherent in all things. Living according the logic-logos, they held, is to live in harmony with the divine order of the universe, in recognition of common reason, which founds the essential value of all people.

In Plato (*Phaedo*, trans. 1966), self-awareness springs from the deeper understanding deriving from the reflection on death. The philosopher thought of the practice or art of dying as the exercise of separation of the soul from the body, significant as a practice that detaches one from any object through the uprooting of the passions to reaching the state of “apatheia” (ἀπάθεια). The best translation of this term, which literally means “without passion,” is the word equanimity

rather than indifference, since it indicates the peace of mind, consisting in the resolution of any terror of death and any mundane or psychological strategy to cancel it (Seddon, 2005; Sorabji, 2002). This conceptual structure was examined in the *Phaedo*, where the soul is presented as the essence of the self-identity, able to function both as unembodied intellect reaching the non-physical (but substantial) forms (or ideas) and as animator of a body. Then, the exercise of dying is a practice in soul-saving, useful to improve the detachment from bodily experience, since soul is in principle able to refine itself to the point where it wants nothing that a body can provide, from which soul must be separated (*chōrismos* – χωρισμός). From Plato's perspective, through the dying exercise, the soul can begin the path of reliable knowledge (epistēmē), "the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a3-4). Then, living for the authentic salvation of the self-identity, or soul, meant to dedicate the everyday life to the practice of dying deriving from the epistēmē, the reliable knowledge, as the Stoics assumed by Plato.

The further ontologization of the Bible, which took place through the Greek translation of the text (the *Septuagint*, LXX, 3rd-1st centuries BC) provided a rational basis to the monotheistic religions (Hebraism, Christianity, and Islam). Assuming a metaphysical justification, the monotheistic religions lost their mythological and magical explanatory structure and assumed the rational and logic one (theoretical theology): JHWH/God/Allah is the absolute being (the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover or Prime Mover), primary cause of both necessary and contingent beings and final cause of every essence. JHWH/God/Allah indicates the immutable being, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal. The logical-logos of the epistēmē and the derived ethics reached the Christianity through Neosticism and Neoplatonism, whose fundamental solution to death consisted in the idea that soul, which is a uniquely human characteristic, reaches the Primary cause (absolute being JHWH/God/Allah) after death, while the body, similarly to animals, is the contingent existence destined to the annihilation.

In the contemporary culture, metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle is often considered mythological. This is the result of the reductionist perspectives. However, from the metaphysics, the more rigorous logic derived and its rationality was the first form of confutation of any mythological representation of the afterlife. From this original anti-mythological conception,¹ the existence after death consists of the ontological representation of death as a passage, which is the second form of the solutions offered to the thoughts of death analyzed by Severino (2016). It was considered rationally incontrovertible since the nineteenth century, and in the name of the truth, the societies were erected under religious morality and laws. The metaphysical rationalization of the religious mythological narrations of the monotheisms founded, on the name of truth, the theocratic absolutism, which has been the basis of the legitimation of terrible cruelties, genocides, pyres against dissidents and unbelievers in almost all the West.

The Western Rationalistic and Critical Post-Modern Form of Death's Ontological Representation

The logical contents along the history of Western thought have undergone a progressive transformation. Aimed at stopping the violence among different forms of absolutistic ideologies derived from the three monotheisms, in the age of Enlightenment a range of ideas centered on

human reason as the primary source of authority and legitimacy was introduced, advancing the values of liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, in a modern State separated by any religion or church. The central doctrines of les Lumières were marked by an emphasis on empiricism, which founded the scientific method, from which the reductionism derived, increasing the questions on the religious concepts of eschatology and afterlife. The fundamental issue of reductionist, materialistic, and disenchanting epistemologies is based on the conviction that existence is considered to be existing if its existence is demonstrable by empirical experimentations.

In this incarnation, the third form of the ontological representation of death began. Shortly thereafter, a new conception of death developed thanks to the contributions of Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Gesellschaft für Empirische Philosophie [The Society for Empirical Philosophy or Berlin circle], Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Wiener Kreis [Vienna circle]. Positivist evolutionism and logical positivism are important components of the monistic-materialist perspective. The new language of scientific psychology and psychoanalysis assumed such a foundation led to an important transmutation of every previous metaphysical construct into concepts indicating physical and positive dimensions. Thereby, any transcendental, immortal human essence was translated into immanent positive material.

After more than twenty centuries of Western reflections on the transcendent immortal sphere of the being, since such a revolution, the tripartite logical system has been used as tools to justify every empiricist account of knowledge, in an antithetical way with respect to metaphysics, which finally has been considered not simply false but as meaningless (Carnap, 2003). After this radical critique, the incontrovertibility of the human essence surviving the body has been destroyed and finally secluded in the area of the illusive and meaningless narration against fear of death. As Dennett (2006) argues, summarizing many other contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists following an evolutionary perspective, religion is only a natural phenomenon. In this reductionist view, no essence exists and everything is both immanent and contingent.

Ontological reductionism denies the idea of the emergence of something transcending physical dimensions, and claims that emergence is an epistemological phenomenon that only exists through the description of a system and not existing on a fundamental level (Feigl, 1958; Rorty, 1970). The eliminative materialism, which is the most radical reductionism, develops in the philosophy of mind as epistemology of neurosciences (Churchland, 1981, 2002). From an epistemological point of view, the materialistic monism states that humans are animals and necessarily only biological material: mind is brain and whatever is similar to the soul, at most, is a mere epiphenomenon (Cling, 1989; Fodor, 1987). It means that the only reason religion originated and flourished was that it fostered social cohesion and coordination, and/or the reality of religion is not God but the exigence to answer to the psychosocial instances and the individual terror of death.

Thus, the third ontological representation of death considers humans as mere biological material, and implies that death is the absolute annihilation of the person. The theoretical argument between transcendental dualism and materialistic monism (the so called “Mind/Brain Identity Theory”) has been growing (Churchland, 1981, 2002; Levin, 1979; Rosenthal, 1994; Smart, 2004; Young, 1996), however the idea that the religious contents are essentially a cultural construction that does not correspond to any ontological reality has widely pervaded Western common sense in everyday secular life. This has on the one hand fostered politics that cannot ground juridical law on any theological perspective, and on the other that the idea of an indubitable after-

life has been unequivocally declined. That is why, in the twentieth century, death became the real pornography, despite that previously it was culturally celebrated (Ariès, 1977; Morin, 1951).

In postmodernism, humans have separated themselves from anything reminding them that their body is mere biological stuff. Since the metaphysical differentiation between humans and animals, the first ones characterized by the soul or the essence of their identity, the second without any kind of immortal principle, has been declining, contemporary western culture cannot bear the thought of humans being animal flesh, since it reminds that they are physical creatures who will die. To manage such terror, contemporary cultural habits estrange them from the appearance of their biological nature. That is why they adorn and modify their bodies transforming them into cultural symbols of beauty and power, simultaneously hiding bio-physical activities or turning them into cultural rituals (Beatson & Halloran, 2007; Goldenberg et al., 2001). As TMT emphasizes, many other strategies are useful to make obscure the reality of death, including: treating the body as artwork (Goldenberg, 2005, 2012); consumerism (Ferraro, Shiv, & Bettman, 2005; Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Mandel & Heine, 1999); or socially sanctioned sexual behaviors (Birnbaum, Hirschberger, & Goldenberg, 2011; Landau et al., 2006).

All these strategies, however, conflict with the traditional religions. To the extent that, more or less explicitly, postmodern worldviews hold that the negation of an afterlife underlies any individual and social behavior, it is perhaps inevitable that people in cultures who do not share the Enlightenment tradition are dramatically estranged from, and threatened by, contemporary Western worldviews.

ONTOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH BETWEEN LITERAL AND SYMBOLIC IMMORTALITY

On the basis of this wide discussion, some studies have focused on the theme of ontological representations of death (Ronconi, Testoni, & Zamperini, 2009; Testoni et al., 2015), aimed at describing the substantial differentiation between death as passage where souls fly up to heaven or as absolute annihilation. From a TMT perspective, these representations generally correspond to the negation of death as “literal” or “symbolic” immortality. Now it is clear why there is a tremendous psychological abyss between these two forms of immortality. In fact, they are absolutely incommensurate and produce different psychological effects with respect to buffering anxiety.

In fact, there is a fundamental ontological difference between literal and symbolic immortality: in the first form of representation, the essence of individuals persists beyond the last dance and the ontological representation of death inheres to the passage of the individual essence. In this case, both irrational mythological narrations and rational metaphysics explanations of the soul, unencumbered by finite flesh, are buffers against mortality belonging to the area of literal immortality. Symbolic immortality indicates the continuation long after death in being remembered by succeeding generations, rather than the continuity of the self-identity. The destruction of the metaphysical dualistic conception, negating any concrete form of individual afterlife, has relegated literal immortality to the doubtful mythological field, destining any meaning and self-worth to the ambiguous, doubtful syncretism. The second means of achieving immortality, the symbolic one, assures that only some aspects of one’s identity, or some legacy of one’s existence, will live on after death. In this case, any individual self-awareness is possible after death and only

some concrete things offer a promise of existing beyond death. Intimate relationships and family ensure a more or less possibility that friends and offspring will remember for a period the beloved deceased persons. Similarly, fame and celebrity offer the idea to be remembered in the future history for important achievements. This kind of protection is provided by self-esteem and is experiential rather than rational (Epstein, 1994) and entirely based on early interaction with parents and primary caregivers, repeatedly reinforced across the life span by one's culture (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991).

THE ROLE OF LITERAL AND SYMBOLIC IMMORTALITY IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN WESTERN AND MIDDLE-EASTERN CULTURES

Whether strong faith in God is associated with low death anxiety or if death reminders make people more confident that God exists, it is inevitable that the more the contemporary Middle-Eastern media-strategies maintain a high level of mortality salience (civil war and terrorism) the more people are religious and follow the moral norms deriving from the Scripture. The problem is why Middle-Eastern people demolish themselves and their territories in a so horrible way, trying to destroy European and American equilibria as well.

Whether the more literal immortality is believed as indubitable the more it reduces the terror of death and the more it is considered an illusion the less it can do this, it is possible to hypothesize that any factor decreasing the certitudes of literal immortality becomes the object of hostility and causes irrational attempts to strengthen religious faith. In Western culture, the radical confutation of the existence of any essential human principle, immortal as created in God's image, has undergone a long cultural process of translation of literal immortality representations into the symbolic ones, under which the rational confutation of any immortality is barely concealed. Then, the supernatural scheme of things is considered as an instrument to manage existential terror and nevertheless ultimately a defensive distortion and obfuscation of reality to blot out the awareness of the inevitability of death. That is why the symbolic immortality representations have been erected. However, since they fundamentally imply the annihilation of any individual self-identity, they could not offer the same level of buffering against the fear of death. The most anguishing terror is inherent to the total annihilation and that is the reason why the symbolic immortality is not desirable as substitution of the literal one.

Furthermore, the difference between literal and symbolic buffers is linked to differentiated phenomenology of behavior deriving from the moral rules: the first ones quite rigid and following the monotheistic religion indications, the second ones quite dynamic and resulting from situated cultural conditions. Whether people's sense of meaning and significance cannot completely alleviate mortal terror, because all buffer remedies, despite their cultural power, are fragile, for their underlying basis of human imagination useful in transforming the sense of reality in accordance with desires, inevitably they keep the terror of death burning as well. This more or less residual death anxiety on the one hand is interpreted as caused by the enemies of morality, on the other is projected onto other groups of people designated as repositories of evil. This process more and more frequently produces a backlash by the differences between the Western and the Middle-Eastern views, resulting in a vicious cycle of violence. The Western behavior phenomenology exposes the latent nature of the symbolic immortality and causes the rise of anguish

where the literal immortality has not yet been subjected to rational criticism. From this perspective, the conflict between the contemporary Western culture, which assumes critical attitudes toward any representation of an afterlife, and the Middle-East, where it is impossible to criticize any religious content, is inevitable.

CONCLUSIONS

Terror Management Theory posits that the combination of a basic biological inclination toward self-preservation with sophisticated cognitive capacities renders humans aware of their vulnerability and inevitable mortality, which gives rise to potentially paralyzing terror. To obtain psychological equanimity despite the awareness of personal mortality, humans must maintain faith in their cultural worldviews and personal significance (self-esteem). When the psychological need to defend these convictions is heightened by mortality salience, aggression against out-groups increases, since cultural worldviews provide ways for humans to believe they are significant and enduring beings in a world of meaning rather than mere animals fated only to be annihilated upon death.

Throughout human history, different types of cultural worldviews and associated values necessary for procuring individual self-esteem have served to manage existential terror by convincing people that they are special beings with souls and identities that will persist, literally and/or symbolically. Cultures are stratified along historical time, as well as among contemporary human geographies; and, due to the Internet, there is likely to be frequent inter-group contact. Since managing existential terror requires unwavering confidence in one's cultural scheme of things and devotion to the values associated with them, such contact can produce considerable psychological distress.

Specifically, preserving faith in one's cultural worldview and maintaining self-esteem becomes challenging whenever encountering others with different beliefs. In this article, we wanted to underscore the particular anguish deriving from contact between the Middle-Eastern faith in literal immortality and the costumes, which substantiate the Western behavior linked to symbolic immortality. The post-modern perspective fosters skepticism and disillusionment with respect to faith in literal immortality, and its intrusion into Middle-Eastern culture may produce traumatic effects by eroding traditional cultural belief systems and undermining the prospect of deriving self-esteem from them.

Moreover, Western and Middle-Eastern cultures differ in the way they represent death, and these dissimilarities affect how people react to historical circumstances that are apt to render mortality salient. Indeed, taking into account death representations could be very useful to understand why Western and Middle-Eastern cultures often choose such different strategies to deal with death and other cultures.

Recall that Western cultures have historically embraced a specific rational-based idea of death, and any other conceptions of death have been consigned (ironically it has been done by Western researchers and scholars) to mythological or metaphysical conceptions of death. This process highlights an implicit form of domination by the secularized first world, which devalues other perspectives. Moreover, we should take into account that symbolic and literal ideas about immortality have a different prevalence in Western and Middle-Eastern countries (in addition to

other differences in core beliefs), thus people from these cultures may have different ways to manage existential terror.

When existential concerns are aroused, people in Western cultures likely have a wider range of compensatory strategies available to them. For example, Simon and collaborators (1997) found that mortality salience led American participants to assert either their uniqueness or their similarity to others, depending on which aspect of their personality had been threatened, thus enabling them to fortify their self-esteem by either emphasizing their uniqueness or their connection to others in their culture. Additionally, Landau, Greenberg, and Sullivan (2009) demonstrated that expressing one's individuality via self-esteem striving can take priority over cultural worldview defense in response to mortality salience when self-esteem striving is at odds with affirming dominant cultural values. However, emphasizing one's uniqueness and striving for self-esteem at the expense of adhering to dominant cultural values may only be tolerable, literally and psychologically, in Western cultures based on the veneration of the individual. The same affectations would be considered unseemly in more traditional, collective cultures such as those found in the Middle East.

On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalists likely adopt other strategies to manage existential threats. In this vein, they may be unable to assimilate or accommodate Western perspectives, because a rational-based worldview would compromise many core concepts of their metaphysical structure of reality. Of course, Islamic fundamentalists could try to devalue and derogate others, by referring, for example, to Western people as "infidels," and arguing they follow an evil path of unmoral and materialistic behaviors that is against God's prescriptions. Anyway, as we indicated above, when there are no other viable strategies to bolster the value of one's culture, a solution is destroying the other worldviews.

Thus, it may now possible to interpret a typical scenario occurring during terrorist attacks. Often we hear about Islamic terrorists asking people to recite a passage from the Quran. In this way, they are trying to force someone to embrace Islamic symbols in order to save their life. If hostages from other cultures use Islamic symbols to save their life, terrorists may have proof of the value of their own cultural belief system. However, if hostages cannot accomplish what they are asked to do, there are no intermediate solutions from a fundamentalist's perspective, and the annihilation of those of other cultures is the only way to salvage those precious principles that furnish existential protection.

From this perspective, it is also possible to interpret martyrdom attacks. In the process of westernization, many ideas about the divine sphere and the afterlife have been fundamentally invalidated. Thus, any rational foundation of literal immortality has been confuted and faith in any eternal God seems illusive. This process makes suicide meaningless from a Western point of view. However, when Islamic terrorists act, we may imagine that many thoughts of death (personal and of the others) are activated. Thus, if they are in a condition of mortality salience, we can expect that they will search for a sense of psychological protection and a sense of immortality. In a terrorist attack, the psychological protection may be furnished by the act itself, that destroys other cultures and conferring power to terrorists' worldview, and puts the individual in the condition of striving for self-esteem, based on the idea of becoming a martyr. Then, in a pre-rational perspective on death and afterlife, Islamic people maintain a strong belief in literal immortality, and dying by suicide may be a possible strategy to reach this condition in the place where God is still living.

As final note, we want to underline that another form of rational confutation of the idea of annihilation is coming along. It is growing in the area of the Eternalism's perspective, which boasts the name of great philosophers, able to confute any reductionist argument and to respect the rational tripartite logical system. Among them are John Ellis McTaggart and Emanuele Severino.

NOTE

1. Some have argued that Greek rationality is very much mythological death-denial; for example, William Barrett (1958, pp. 84-85) in *Irrational man: A study in existential philosophy*:
We have to see Plato's rationalism, not as a cool scientific project, such as a later century of the European Enlightenment might set for itself, but as a kind of passionately religious doctrine — a theory that promised man salvation from the things he had feared most from the early days, from death and time . . . Psychologically speaking, the significance of Plato's theory of Ideas is to transfer the weight of emphasis from sensory reality to a supersensible reality. Perhaps nothing short of this would have served historically, at that time: For man to enter history as the rational animal, it was necessary for him to be convinced that the objects of his reasoning, the Ideas, were more real than his own individual person or the particular objects that made up his world. The great step forward into rationalism required its own mythology . . .

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