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## THE FEAR OF DEATH AND RELIGIOUSNESS\*

Since the very emergence of thanatopsychology (i.e. a branch of psychology that deals with human dying and death) one of its leading trends was the research into the fear of death and dying. Nowadays the fear of death is understood as a complex emotional experience and a special psychic experience that is connected with human death and dying.

Recognized philosophers, theologians and cultural anthropologists (eg. Malinowski) stressed that the fundamental function of religion is to reappraise death so as to minimize or even eliminate the fear of it. Both in the area of sociology and social psychology a theory is propounded that the anxiety about death is basically a result of the influence of the society. The lay society, by the affirmation of juvenescence (the bias in favour of youthfulness), generates the fear of death even in those people to whom religious beliefs are alien. Thus they are almost always frightened, sometimes very badly, of the destructive effects of death in social life. A specific concretization of this opinion is the conviction that the meaning of death has its roots in interpersonal relationship, whereas death itself does not arouse any fear. Some religion psychologists approach the problem of the fear of death through the perspective of the human experience of one's own circumscription.

Most thanatopsychologist publications point out that the more cohesive the beliefs in everlasting life and the stronger the faith in general, the smaller the fear of death. Ochsmann (1993, p. 89) reached the conclusion that in half of the surveys a significant correlation was noticed between the fear of death and religiousness. Attention is paid also to religious practices which, according for instance to the research of the Gallup Institute, renew the faith in eternal life (Gallup 1982). Some thanatopsychologists observed that the more pious a man is, the more ready he seems to accept death and dying and the less frightened of death he is (Kalish and Reynolds 1976, p. 90). Contemporary American religion psychologists have arrived at the judgement that the substantial majority

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of empirical studies confirm the hypothesis that a man's attitude towards death depends on his religious beliefs and, specifically, that more zealous religious practices which restore the faith in life beyond death diminish the fear of death (Spilka, Hood, Gorsuch 1985, p. 132). Moreover, religious beliefs and practices play virtually an inestimable role in preparing someone for the death of a close person. They also help to go through the period of mourning. Religiousness, for example, allows to cope with the feeling of guilt that follows the death of a close person. By helping to overcome the feeling of guilt, religiousness restores the emotional stability of a man. Religion makes it possible to systematize tragic experiences, to get over grief, to name difficult border situations. Frequently it provides the only comfort.

Humanities relatively strongly stress the opinion that religion exists exclusively to solve the problem of death and fear. The extreme stance is that it was the anxiety about death that engendered religion. This kind of standpoint was expressed, for instance, by Freud. The extremely important question of reductionism must be raised here. It should be obvious that the psychological motivation to behave in accordance with some model is not to be identified with the primary cause of a given phenomenon. To be more specific, the statement that the fear of death is a psychological source of religiousness indicates not the original cause of religiousness, but the situation, so to say, or the „place” where it becomes manifest. The case is similar as with describing a spring of water: the place where water is found, that is a spring, is neither its origin nor element. Water had existed before it appeared in the spring. Water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, not of the spring. We can put it in other words. The borderline experience of death enhances the attractiveness of some religious solutions, just as the experience of darkness releases the longing for light.

A number of studies show the same level of the general fear of death in people who differ in the religious aspect (Feifel, Branscomb 1973; Makselon 1978). A curvilinear dependence is also pointed out between these two variables (i.e. the persons that can be placed in the middle part of the continuum of religiousness are most frightened of death). So, if the hypothesis of Freud's (and many others) about the religiogenic function of the fear of death was true, then all the surveyed people should be either religious or nonreligious as they fear death in a similar degree. The Pan-American researches which examined the effects of the experience of death (eg. of one's close persons) proved that only a weak connection does exist between the encounter with death in one's environment and the religious orientation (Peterson, Greil 1990). For a long time sociologists have been writing on the alleviating impact of religion on

individuals as to the reduction of fear that is caused by the encounter with death, though on the other hand they surmise that religious beliefs increase the fear of death, while religious practices lower it (Faunce, Fulton 1958; Homans 1965).

The relations between religiousness and the fear of death seem to be far more complex than many researchers expect. Subject to the examined aspect of religiousness, the statistical and psychological dependence between the two components will look different. In regard to one's own death, religiousness can either intensify the fear of death or diminish it, depending on which content elements of religion are emphasized. The lower fear of death is remarkably correlated with the awareness of the promise of grace, life after death and Paradise (Witkowski 1978). A higher degree of anxiety about death is observed when faith is associated with such psychologically negative elements of the religious doctrine as the Last Judgement, Hell or damnation.

On the basis of the studies of the relation between personal religiousness and the eight aspects of the fear of death (fear of dying, fear of the dead person, fear of the decay of the body, fear for the living, fear of the unknown, fear of the apparent death, fear of the appearance of the body, fear of premature death), it has been stated that in all these aspects those surveyed of non-personal religiousness were characterized by the higher level of fear. Statistically significant differences were noticed in the categories of the fear of dying, the fear of the appearance of the body, the fear of premature death and the fear of the unknown. Only in the last type of fear there exists a qualitative difference between the people of personal and nonpersonal religiousness, whereas in the other kinds of the fear of death a difference in intensity, but not in degree, is noticed. This means that the people of personal religiousness, while being not worried about everlasting life, do not fear the meeting with their Creator. Of course, this is connected with the concept of God as a Father. The level of the fear of the unknown varies also according to the functions which are fulfilled by religion in the individual's personality. In the case of the so-called emotional religiousness (i.e. the one that is to assuage the fear of death) all the indexes of the fear of death are always slightly higher than those of the persons who choose religion also to satisfy their cognitive needs. Here again the sharpest divergence appears in the category of the fear of the unknown (Makselon 1988, pp. 92—102). It seems understandable since this kind of fear belongs to the cognitive aspect of the fear of death and consequently is not very visible in the case of those who seek in religion the sense of life, the guidelines of conduct and the knowledge of truth. Besides, their religiousness is more intense and constitutes the central value (cf. Prężyna 1981, pp. 139—140). In contrast,

it is observed that the persons who are more anxious about death treat religiousness as a primarily emotional experience or as a defence mechanism (cf. Hasenfuss 1978).

A question is raised among the specialists whether the belief in life after death represses the fear of death or dispels it. The relevant conducted studies did not answer the question posed in such a way unequivocally. It may be surmised that everything pivots on the interiorization of religious truths since, as Erikson remarked (1963, pp. 250—251), for people with firm faith the death is rid of its thorn, and the man attains enough integrity so as not to fear death. A specific example of such a process is the declaration of a surveyed woman of personal religiousness: *For some time the reality of death ceased to be a horrible, cruel reality for me. It happened after an event in my life when I suddenly realized that He is a PERSON, that He loves me and that I can direct my love towards HIM, WHO IS very close to me, closer than I can comprehend. Slowly I began to understand that death is a gift because thanks to it I can come into a more intimate contact with God. I stopped praying for the removal of death from me and my relatives, now I only ask for the strength to live such a life which is worth BEING with HIM.*

Taking into account the classic Gethsemane scene which shows the relation between religiousness and the fear of death, I propose to consider the fear of death from a somewhat different perspective. Christ uttered there these words: *My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death* (Mk 14,34). This was accompanied by the sweat of blood and an expression of religious devotion: *nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done* (Lk 22, 42). It allows to suggest the existence of particular aspects of the fear of death. They are: a) biological (physiological) aspect, whose correlate is eg. the sweat of blood; b) psychic aspect (the feeling of abandonment, anguish and depression); and c) spiritual (noetic) aspect, where significance is assigned to death. In the biological aspect there are no differences in the fear of death between believers and nonbelievers. On the psychic level of the fear of death the impact of some features of personality, like emotional stability or psychological integrity, can be observed. The widest dissimilarity is to be found in the ethical/spiritual (noetic) aspect of the fear of death and dying. It appears that the perception of the fear of death as a multi-dimensional reality provides for a better perspicuity of its possible, model links with religiousness. Therefore it is possible to interpret more precisely various results of the empirical experiments which have been conducted so far. Besides, the multi-dimensional concepts of the fear of death are more compatible with the holistic truth about man and his religiousness. Mature religiousness is not a result of the influence of some kind of fear, but a free decision of a person. Generally,

man ascends to religiousness not because he is determined to by the prospect of his own death, but in spite of it (in spite of this fact which usually arouses fear). Religious entirety is formed through the discovery of transcendental values and the development of one's personal relationship with God. In this context the statement of the Italian psychologist, which based on his wide clinical experience, is important: *Religion has one bitter, extremely powerful enemy, which is neither egoism nor aggressiveness, but fear* (Ionata 1993, p. 149).

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## LĘK PRZED ŚMIERCIĄ A RELIGIJNOŚĆ

### Streszczenie

Lęk wobec śmierci jest najczęściej opisywanym przejawem zachowania się człowieka w sytuacji umierania. Stanowi on złożone zjawisko psychologiczne. Wyróżnia się różne jego poziomy i korelaty. Wiąże się go także z postawami religijnymi. Zdaniem niektórych zaniepokojenie śmiercią jest głównym czynnikiem religio-gennym. Aby poprawnie ustosunkować się do tej tezy, należy: (1) precyzyjnie odróżniać właściwą psychologiczną przyczynę religijności od jej źródeł czy okoliczności pojawiania się; (2) wyodrębnić odmienne aspekty lęku przed śmiercią (fizjologiczny, psychiczny i duchowy); (3) uwzględnić strukturalno-funkcjonalną wielowymiarowość religijności.

Badania własne autora wskazują, że nie ma różnic w poziomie lęku przed śmiercią ze względu na intensywność postawy religijnej, co sugeruje, że nie można mówić o deterministycznym wpływie lęku przed śmiercią na religijność. Ponadto ustalono, że typ religijności modyfikuje obraz lęku przed śmiercią, np. tzw. religijność poznawcza przyczynia się do obniżenia lęku przed nieznanym, który stanowi ważny wymiar zaniepokojenia śmiercią.