

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*, by T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon, and J. Greenberg, Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003.

Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg have spent over 15 years developing and testing Terror Management Theory—a scientific, social psychological rendering of the existential psychodynamics uncovered by anthropologist Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* [1, 2]. Their newly published book—*In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*—introduces readers to Terror Management Theory, summarizes supportive research by the three authors and other researchers, and integrates 9/11 itself into the ensuing discussion. Both this book and Becker's *Escape from Evil*, because they promote such profound understanding of the psychological underpinnings of 9/11, should be read by anyone who continues to wonder why Islamist terrorists “hate” America.

Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg's introductory chapters on Terror Management Theory assert that culture, especially religious culture, serves as a psychological defense against "the horrifying possibility that death entails the permanent annihilation of the self" (p. 22). And because the validity of such a defense is subconsciously or consciously threatened by religious beliefs contrary to one's own, everyone is inclined to be more or less intolerant of people who profess contrary beliefs. A person who is *more intolerant* tends to scapegoat people from a competing religion, by projecting his or her subconscious religious doubts onto them, and tends to support "holy wars" against these unbelieving scapegoats and their "evil" empires, in order to "prove that the gods favor [his or her religious culture]" [2, p. 105]. A person who is *less intolerant* tends, in contrast, to exhibit higher self-esteem, which Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg define in existential terms as "the culturally based belief that one is a valued participant in a meaningful reality" (p. 28).

These assertions of Terror Management Theory are well supported by dozens of empirical studies that are summarized in the third and fourth chapters of the book. In many of these studies, control subjects were compared with experimental subjects whose mortality was made consciously salient by having them fantasize and write about their own deaths. Whenever the experimental groups' mortality salience was pushed into "implicit awareness" or "subconsciousness" by means of delay, distraction, or subliminal presentation, the experimental subjects not only were more likely to give death-related words as implicit responses to word-completion tasks (to give *coffin* rather than *coffee* as an implicit response to *coff\_*, e.g.), but also were more likely to exhibit religious, racial, and cultural bias [3-6]. These negative effects of mortality salience were reduced, however, by high self-esteem and other mitigating factors [7].

The next three chapters show how Terror Management Theory can help us interpret and understand not only the mindset that produced Islamist terrorism and 9/11, but also the political religious, and psychopathological responses to 9/11 in the United States. The interpretations generated by Terror Management Theory, like the empirical studies supporting it, are extremely compelling. Indeed, no other theory known to this reviewer can better explain the 9/11 instructions found (a) in the suitcase of one of the terrorists who piloted a plane into the World Trade Center, (b) in the car of the terrorists who crashed a plane into the Pentagon, and (c) in the debris of the hijacked plane that crashed in Pennsylvania:

Last Night. . . This test from Almighty God is to raise your level [level of heaven] and erase your sins. And be sure that it is a matter of moments, which will then pass, God willing, so blessed are those who win the great reward of God. Almighty God said: "Did you think you could go to heaven before God knows whom amongst you have fought for Him and are patient?" . . . Say this supplication: "God is more dear than all of His creation." And say: "Oh Lord, protect me from them as You wish." And say: "Oh Lord, take your anger out on them [the enemy] and we ask You to protect us from their evils." . . . All of

their equipment and gates and technology will not prevent, nor harm, except by God's will. The believers do not fear such things. The only ones that fear it are the allies of Satan, who are the brothers of the devil. They have become their allies, God save us, for fear is a great form of worship, and the only one worthy of it is God." . . . When you ride the (T) [probably for tayyara, airplane in Arabic], before your foot steps in it, and before you enter it, you make a prayer and supplications. Remember that this is a battle for the sake of God. . . . Pray for yourself and all of your brothers that they may be victorious and hit their targets and [unclear] and ask God to grant you martyrdom facing the enemy, not running away from it, and for Him to grant you patience and the feeling that anything that happens to you is for Him. . . . When the hour of reality approaches, the zero hour, [unclear] and wholeheartedly welcome death for the sake of God. Always be remembering God. Either end your life while praying, seconds before the target, or make your last words: "There is no God but God, Muhammad is his messenger." Afterwards, we will all meet in the highest heaven, God willing [8].

This excerpt is a casebook example of Terror Management Theory applied to the real world.

In the final two chapters, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg draw politico-religious conclusions regarding the future, especially the future promotion of peaceful approaches to "cultural warfare." Their conclusions are well grounded in Terror Management Theory, but they remain politically debatable. In one such instance, the authors conclude that "Missionary activities to try to convince Muslims that their beliefs are wrong and that they would do better by converting to other faiths (whether religious or secular) are clearly counterproductive in that they communicate a fundamental incompatibility of Christianity, Judaism, and that Western world with the Islamist faith" (p. 175). In contrast, political columnist Thomas Friedman draws a very different conclusion:

Bonnie Penner, a young U.S. missionary nurse at a prenatal clinic in Sidon . . . was shot three times in the face. A Palestinian security official told The A.P. that "the killing was the result of a hostile Muslim reaction in Sidon to the preaching . . . lessons the center was giving to Muslim youths." Do you know how much proselytizing Muslim groups do in America? A lot. We have no problem with that. That's who we are. . . . We've had our civil war against intolerance. Now I'm urging you to have yours [9, p. A23].

In another instance, the authors conclude that "intolerant fundamentalist Islam has much in common with . . . intolerant fundamentalist Christianity" and that "what needs to be countered is intolerance and fundamentalism rather than any particular religion" (p. 176). However, there is, arguably, an important difference between the Bible's passages on divine retribution against the enemies of Christians:

It is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; and to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking

vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord [10, Thessalonians II-1:6-9].

and the Koran's passages on human retribution against the enemies of Muslims:

When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly. Then grant them their freedom or take a ransom from them, until War shall lay down her burdens. Thus shall you do. Had God willed, He could Himself have punished them; [but He has ordained it thus] that He may test you, the one by the other [11, p. 357].

Indeed, elements of the latter passage's justification for retribution by man, in lieu of God, are notably similar to previously quoted excerpts from the 9/11 terrorists' instructions [8].

Finally, because Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg acknowledge that their book is a scientific and theoretical extension of Becker's book *Escape from Evil*, a few words of comparison are warranted. Whereas the book under review adopts the third-person perspective of psychological science, Becker's book sucks the reader into a first-person understanding of the existential underpinnings of evil. Consider Becker's suggestion that in order to comprehend the evil of Adolf Hitler, one must recognize Hitler's ability to appeal to the latent evil within oneself:

I think it is time for social scientists to catch up with Hitler as a psychologist, and to realize that men will do anything for heroic belonging to a victorious cause if they are persuaded about the legitimacy of . . . identifying evil and moving against it [2, p. 142].

The whole meaning of a victory celebration, as Canetti argued, is that we experience the power of our lives and the visible decrease of the enemy: it is a sort of staging of the whole meaning of a war, the demonstration of the essence of it—which is why the public display, humiliation, and execution of prisoners is so important. "They are weak and die: we are strong and live." The Roman arena games were, in this sense, a continued staging of victory even in the absence of a war; each civilian experienced the same powers that he otherwise had to earn in war. If we are repulsed by the bloodthirstiness of those games, it is because we choose to banish from our consciousness what true *excitement* is. For man, maximum excitement is the confrontation of death and the skillful defiance of it by watching others fed to it as he survives transfixed with rapture, [2, pp. 110-111].

As Winston Churchill discovered in one of his first military experiences: "Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result." And as Hitler concluded—after miraculously surviving the bomb blast that was meant to take his life but instead took several others, "Providence has kept me alive to complete my great work" [2, p. 106].

Upon reading this in seminar 10 years ago, a U.Mass.Lowell undergraduate came to the psychological realization that his belief in a hellish afterlife for Jews was a genocidal fantasy in which God did the dirty work instead of Nazis. Accordingly, anyone who has not yet read Becker's *Escape from Evil* should read it along with Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg's new book—in order to appreciate both the subjective verity and the scientific validity of Terror Management Theory.

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*Grendel and His Mother: Healing the Traumas of Childhood through Dreams, Imagery and Hypnosis*, by Nicholas E. Brink, Ph.D., Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2002. 186 pp.

The writer intricately details the journeys of six clients by intertwining their journeys into the myth of Beowulf. By escorting the reader through the necessary