


# Faith and Nature: The Effect of Death-Relevant Cognitions on the Relationship Between Religious Fundamentalism and Connectedness to Nature

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## Abstract

A common theme among many religions, particularly those with Abrahamic roots, is that humans are separate from the rest of nature. Though empirical support is lacking, such themes do suggest that religiosity may play a role in shaping the ways that people relate to the natural world. The present research used terror management theory to address this issue. It was hypothesized that death-relevant concerns would moderate the relationship between religious fundamentalism and feelings of connectedness to nature. Across three studies, religious fundamentalism negatively predicted feelings of connectedness to nature when death-relevant thoughts were activated. No such relationship emerged in the absence of death-relevant thought. The implications of these findings for better understanding the role of religion in human/nature relationships and current ecological issues are discussed.

## Keywords

terror management, religious fundamentalism, connectedness to nature

Given the scientific consensus that humans are contributing to climate change (Oreskes, 2004), much emphasis has been placed on understanding the psychological factors and processes associated with ecological behavior. Though many factors are involved, there has been increasing interest in the extent to which people feel connected to the natural world (e.g., Schultz, 2001). This experiential feeling of connectedness to nature, or the inclusion of nature into the self-concept, has indeed emerged as a fairly strong predictor of environmentalism (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Yet, despite their relationship to proenvironmental outcomes, few (if any) studies have examined the basic psychological processes that shape feelings of connectedness to nature. The present research utilized terror management theory ([TMT] for a review, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008) to elucidate the conditions under which religiosity may play a role. Because mortality-related concerns may amplify the operative influence of people's religious beliefs (Vail et al., 2010), we hypothesized that death-relevant cognitions would promote a pronounced relationship between religious fundamentalism (RF) and connectedness to the natural world.

## Religion and Nature

There are some obvious links between religion and people's relationship to nature. The Abrahamic (Christianity, Islam, and

Judaism) religions, in particular, emphasize a distinction between the physical world and a spiritual realm where souls transcend temporally limited physical bodies. Such views depart from animistic religions which view the spiritual and physical realms as interconnected. White (1967) drew heavily from these distinctions to argue that certain religions have fundamentally contributed to global ecological decline. He speculated that the victory of Christianity over paganism psychologically altered the ways that people relate themselves to the natural world. While pagan beliefs focused on a spiritual energy that flowed through nature and connected humans to it, Christianity's creation story placed humans in a sacred position above nature and disconnected them from it. Though his exclusive focus on Christianity may have been narrow, White

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highlighted the potentially important ways that Abrahamic notions of Gods, souls, and the afterlife detach people from the realm of plants, animals, and dirt.

Empirical efforts to support the tenets of White's argument have primarily examined the correlations between religiosity variables and specific measures of environmentalism (e.g., attitudes, behavior). Such studies have offered some indication that religiosity negatively predicts environmentalism, but these associations are fairly weak and occur primarily among those with fundamentalist orientations to faith (e.g., Eckberg & Blocker, 1996). Further complicating things, some studies have also reported positive associations between religion and environmentalism (e.g., Sherkat & Ellison, 2007). These inconsistencies have fueled broader debates about whether certain religions promote antienvironmentalism through dominion beliefs, or whether they promote proenvironmentalism through stewardship beliefs. Beyond this debate, however, remains an issue that has escaped previous inquiries. No study has directly assessed the basic ways that religiosity relates to people's experiential feeling that they are connected to nature. Both stewardship and dominion perspectives emphasize that humans are distinct from the rest of nature, suggesting that a negative relationship between investment in certain religious beliefs and basic feelings of connectedness to nature may exist. Elucidating this relationship may thus provide new insights into the basic factors underlying human/nature relationships and the factors that can shape ecological concern (a topic we return to in the General Discussion).

### *TMT, Nature, and Religion*

It is important to note that human/nature relationships are likely influenced by multiple competing factors (e.g., politics, economics) and, even if a negative relationship between religiosity and connectedness to nature exists, it may only emerge in contexts where religion is centrally operative. TMT offers a useful theoretical framework for addressing this issue by delineating not only how religion and connectedness to nature are related, but *when* that relationship is most likely to emerge. It should do so when death-relevant thoughts are elevated. This logic follows from TMT's view that humans invest faith in culturally derived belief systems (worldviews) to mitigate the potential anxiety associated with the awareness of mortality. Cultural worldviews help manage death concerns by providing foundations for the derivation of death-transcendent meaning and symbolic (e.g., cultural achievements) and literal (e.g., religious afterlife) immortality. As such, people's worldviews are of critical importance when death-related thoughts are heightened. For example, death-related thoughts amplify efforts to defend the legitimacy of one's worldview, elicit behaviors that meet the standards of one's worldview, and intensify hostile reactions to those who threaten one's worldview (see Greenberg et al., 2008).

TMT has also been used to examine some of the existentially problematic aspects of nature. For example, concerns about death underlie some people's discomfort with the more creaturely aspects of their physical bodies (Goldenberg,

Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000), and heightened death-relevant thoughts foster less favorable evaluations of threatening wilderness images (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005). Similarly, people are less willing to anthropomorphize trees when mortality thoughts have been made salient (Norenzayan, Hansen, & Cady, 2008). Cox, Heflick, and Goldenberg (2011) have recently explored the links between these sorts of concerns and religiosity, finding that intensely religious Christians reminded of death report less religiosity when Christ's physicality has been made salient (see also Beck, 2008). Findings such as these indicate that concerns about death can shape people's reactions to certain aspects of the natural world and reduce their willingness to view humans as similar to other things in nature.

Beyond this work, however, lies a potentially important unanswered question about the impact of death-relevant cognitions on the feeling that one is connected to the broader natural world. Though the research noted above might suggest that death thoughts would directly decrease feelings of connectedness, there is reason to believe that the effects may be more subtle than that. In at least some of the aforementioned studies, the effects of death cognition were moderated by additional variables, and it remains possible that the experiential feeling of being connected to the environment is different than evaluating its threatening aspects or attributing human characteristics to it. Indeed, TMT research investigating the effects of death thoughts on environmental concern—a construct perhaps more closely linked to the connectedness to nature (Mayer & Frantz, 2004)—have not reported direct effects (Fritsche, Jonas, Kayser, & Koranyi, 2010; Vess & Arndt, 2008). Thus, the effects of death-relevant thought on connections to nature may be more subtle than that observed on responses to the salience of human corporeality or specific evaluations of threatening wilderness images.

Rather than having a direct impact, we propose that death-relevant cognitions will activate underlying relationships between religious beliefs and feelings of connectedness to the natural world. This notion is grounded in the previously noted links between religion and human/nature relationships, as well as the TMT analysis of the importance of religion for people's ongoing efforts to manage death concerns (see Vail et al., 2010). Religion directly solves the problem of death by promising a literal afterlife, and research has shown that death-relevant thoughts lead religious individuals to lean on their faith to a greater degree. For example, religious individuals show greater belief in supernatural deities following reminders of death (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006) and show increased death-relevant cognitions when the legitimacy of their faith has been threatened (Friedman & Rholes, 2007). This heightened utilization and prioritization of religion as a terror management resource appears to be particularly characteristic of people who possess an unwavering orientation toward their faith (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). Indeed, differences in RF, an orientation characterized by rigid adherence to religious doctrine (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), become increasingly predictive of people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors under conditions

of heightened death-relevant thought. In one series of studies, Vess, Arndt, Cox, Routledge, and Goldenberg (2009) found that, when death-relevant thoughts were activated, RF positively predicted the endorsement of decisions to rely entirely on faith for medical treatment. Fundamentalism was not related to the endorsement of these potentially health-compromising decisions in the absence of death-relevant thought. Such findings suggest that death-relevant cognitions lead to the prioritization of religious beliefs and can engage their psychological influence in line with the particular tenets of that belief. In the case of Vess et al., this implicated a connection between RF and a preference for faith-based medical intervention. In the present context, we hypothesized that it would implicate a negative relationship between fundamentalism and the experiential feeling of being connected to the natural world.

## Study 1

As an initial test of this hypothesis, participants in Study 1 completed measures of RF, death-thought accessibility (DTA), and connectedness to nature. The DTA measure is common to TMT research and assesses the cognitive accessibility of death-relevant thoughts. Although more typically used as a dependent measure, it has been increasingly employed as a predictor variable capturing current levels of accessible death-related cognitions (see Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010). Using the measure here allowed us to directly examine the relationship between RF and connectedness to nature when death-relevant thought was at varying levels of state accessibility. To provide a more powerful test of our hypothesis, we tested our predictions while controlling for differences in how much participants based their self-worth on environmental behavior (Brook, 2005; Crocker, Brook, Niiya, & Villacorta, 2006). The connectedness to nature construct has been equated to the inclusion of nature into the self-concept (Schultz, 2001) and accounting for environmentally contingent self-worth allowed us to control for preexisting associations between the self and nature. In addition, we also assessed whether our predicted effects are specific to RF. Previous research suggests that RF is particularly sensitive to mortality concerns (e.g., Friedman & Rholes, 2007) and has been negatively linked to ecological outcomes when other religiosity variables have not (e.g., Eckberg & Blocker, 1996). Nevertheless, we assessed religiosity more generally to determine whether it would predict connectedness to nature under heightened death-relevant thought in ways similar to the more specific orientation captured by RF.

## Method

**Participants.** A total of 48 (32 females) introductory psychology students participated for course credit ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.67$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.48$ ). All identified themselves as Christians (28 Protestants and 20 Catholics).<sup>1</sup>

**Procedure.** Prior to the lab sessions, participants completed five items taken from Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (2004)

revised RF scale. Only 5 of the original 12 items were utilized due to survey space restrictions. Participants indicated their agreement with each item on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scales. Example items include "God has given humanity a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed" and "To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one, fundamentally true religion." Responses were averaged into composite RF scores ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = .92$ ,  $\alpha = .69$ ).

The online survey also contained 3 items taken from Brook's (2005) 10-item measure of the extent to which self-worth is based on environmentalism (environmentally contingent self-worth: ECSW). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement (e.g., "My self-esteem is influenced by how good or bad an environmentalist I am") on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scales. Responses were averaged into composite ECSW scores ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = .92$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ).

At the lab, participants completed the study on private computers. Following a few standard personality measures, they completed a "Word Completion Task" that assessed the cognitive accessibility of death-relevant thoughts (see Hayes et al., 2010). It featured 28-word fragments, 6 of which could be completed with a neutral or death-related word (e.g., COFF\_ \_ can be *COFFEE* or *COFFIN*). The possible death-related words were *buried*, *murder*, *grave*, *skull*, *stiff*, and *coffin*. The number of death-related words formed was used as the DTA index ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ).

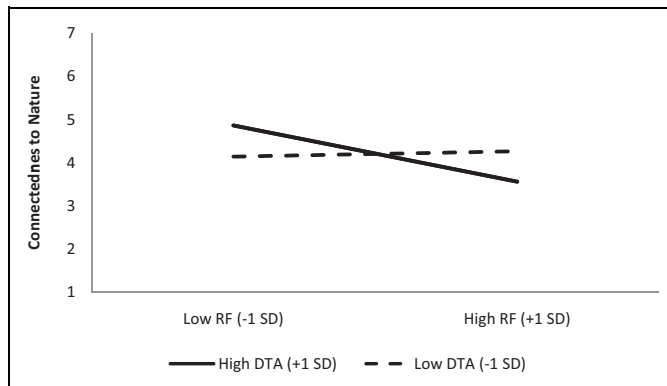
Participants then completed Mayer and Frantz's (2004) connectedness to nature scale (CNS). Example items include "Like a tree can be part of a forest, I feel embedded within the broader natural world" and "I often feel a sense of oneness with the natural world around me." Responses were made on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales and were averaged into composite CNS scores ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

Finally, participants responded to a general question about their religiosity ("How religious are you?") on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) scale ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ).

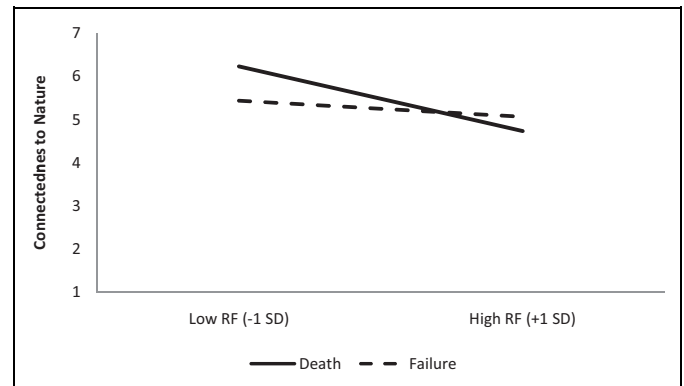
## Results and Discussion

After entering ECSW (centered) as a covariate,<sup>2</sup> CNS scores were regressed on to DTA (centered), RF (centered), and the DTA  $\times$  RF interaction. There were no effects of DTA ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .798$ ) or RF ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .136$ ), but the DTA  $\times$  RF interaction was significant,  $\beta = -.29$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t(47) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .043$ ; see Figure 1. RF negatively predicted connectedness to nature at high levels of DTA,  $\beta = -.53$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $t(47) = 2.60$ ,  $p = .013$ , but was unrelated at low levels of DTA ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = .792$ ).

A parallel regression analysis that replaced RF with general religiosity (centered) was also conducted to determine whether the relationship between general religiosity and connectedness to nature was similarly influenced by DTA. These analyses returned no significant effects ( $ps > .387$ ), suggesting that the link between religion and nature connectedness under conditions



**Figure 1.** Death-Thought Accessibility (DTA)  $\times$  Religious Fundamentalism (RF) interaction on connectedness to nature in Study 1.



**Figure 2.** Mortality Salience (MS)  $\times$  Religious Fundamentalism (RF) interaction on connectedness to nature in Study 2.

of amplified death-relevant thought may be specific to fundamentalism.

Study 1 offered initial support for our hypothesis. RF negatively predicted feelings of connectedness to nature when DTA was high but not when DTA was low. These effects did not replicate when a more general measure of religiosity was substituted for fundamentalism. Thus, similar to previous research (e.g., Vess et al., 2009), the findings of Study 1 suggest that the relationship between fundamentalism and connectedness to nature may lie under the surface until death-relevant cognitions become accessible.

## Study 2

Building from Study 1, an experiment was conducted to better isolate the influence of death-relevant cognitions on the relationship between fundamentalism and connectedness to nature. Participants were asked to reflect on death or a failure experience and subsequently reported their feelings of connectedness to nature. It was hypothesized that fundamentalism would negatively predict connectedness to nature after reflecting on death but not after reflecting on failure.

## Method

**Participants.** A total of 84 (54 females) introductory psychology students participated for course credit ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.42$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = .80$ ). All identified themselves as Christians (40 Catholics and 44 Protestants). Two participants were excluded from analyses due to suspicions and indications that they did not understand the instructions for several experimental tasks.

**Procedure.** Participants completed a randomly assigned questionnaire packet in private laboratory cubicles. Following a few innocuous measures, participants completed the ECSW items featured in Study 1 ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ ). The items were embedded within a set of self-worth contingency items (e.g., academics and appearance) taken from the original Contingencies of Self-Worth scale (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003) to reduce explicit focus on environmentalism. Participants then completed the full 12-item

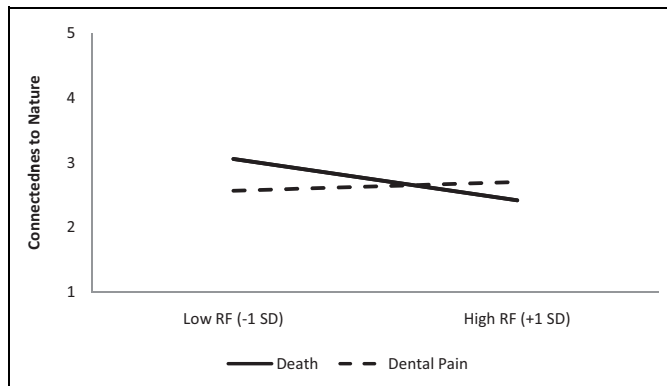
RF scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004) using a  $-4$  (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) scale. Responses were summed into composite RF scores ( $M = .18$ ,  $SD = 19.63$ ,  $\alpha = .93$ ).

Next, participants responded to two open-ended questions about death (e.g., Goldenberg et al., 2001) or the experience of failing an exam. The questions read, “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death (failing an exam) arouses in you” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you once you are physically dead (failing an important exam).” Following this *mortality salience* (MS) manipulation, all participants completed Watson, Clark, and Tellegen’s (1988) Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) and a word search puzzle included as a distraction exercise between the MS manipulation and the dependent variable (see Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

Finally, all participants completed the CNS measure (Mayer & Frantz, 2004) featured in Study 1 ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ ).

## Results and Discussion

Regression analyses were again used to test hypotheses. After entering ECSW as a covariate, the MS (dummy coded) and RF (centered) main effects were entered as predictors of CNS in Step 1, and the MS  $\times$  RF interaction was entered in Step 2. There was no main effect of MS ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .421$ ), but the RF main effect was significant,  $\beta = -.36$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t(78) = 3.57$ ,  $p = .001$ . Critically, the predicted MS  $\times$  RF interaction also emerged,  $\beta = -.34$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t(77) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .022$ ; see Figure 2. RF was negatively associated with feelings of connectedness to nature following reflections on death,  $\beta = -.62$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $t(77) = 4.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , but unrelated to CNS following reflections on failure ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $p = .245$ ). Ancillary analyses revealed no main or interactive effects of MS and RF on affect ( $ps > .084$ ) and affect did not significantly predict CNS ( $rs < .15$ ). The results of Study 2 thus offer convergent experimental evidence for the guiding hypotheses. RF was negatively associated with connectedness to nature only under conditions of heightened death-relevant thought.



**Figure 3.** Mortality Saliency (MS)  $\times$  Religious Fundamentalism (RF) interaction on connectedness to nature in Study 3.

### Study 3

A final experiment was conducted to assess an alternative possibility that has yet to be considered. Because political conservatism is often associated with fundamentalism and thought to underlie some aspects of Christian antienvironmentalism (e.g., Wright, 1995), it remains possible that fundamentalism was serving as a proxy for conservatism in the previously reported effects. Such an alternative predicts that the same results should emerge when political conservatism is substituted for RF. We examined this possibility in Study 3 using different operationalizations of death-relevant thoughts and feelings of connectedness to nature.

### Method

**Participants.** A total of 67 (50 females) psychology students participated for course credit ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.73$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.15$ ). One participant was excluded due to suspicion. In all, 61 participants identified as Christians and 5 indicated no religious affiliation.

**Procedure.** The study was conducted in a classroom setting. All materials were embedded in randomly distributed questionnaire packets. Following a filler measure, participants completed the 5-item RF measure utilized in Study 1. Responses were made on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ). Participants then completed an additional filler measure and Boyar's (1964) Fear of Death scale. This instrument presents participants with 15 true-false questions about death (e.g., "Does the thought of leaving loved ones behind when you die disturb you?") and is used frequently in TMT research to activate death-relevant thought (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998). Control participants completed parallel questions regarding fears of dental pain. The PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) and word search puzzle followed this manipulation as in Study 2.

Schultz's (2001) inclusion of the self in nature scale was used to assess feelings of connectedness to nature in a different way than the previous two studies. This instrument is modeled after Aron, Aron, and Smollan's (1992) inclusion

of other in the self scale and presents participants with a series of circle pairs. One circle in each pair is labeled "self," while the other is labeled "nature." The circle pairs were depicted at varying degrees of proximity. Participants selected the pair that best represented their relationship to nature. Scores ranged from 1 (*circles barely touching*) to 5 (*circles almost entirely overlapping*), where higher scores reflected stronger connections between nature and the self ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .88$ ).

On the final page of the packet, participants provided demographic information, completed the 3-item ECSW scale ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = .85$ ,  $\alpha = .62$ ), and indicated their political orientation on a 1 (*liberal*) to 10 (*conservative*) scale ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ).

### Results and Discussion

Regression analyses identical to those in Study 2 were conducted. These analyses yielded no significant main effects of MS ( $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p = .523$ ) or RF ( $\beta = -.11$ ,  $p = .342$ ), but the predicted MS  $\times$  RF interaction emerged,  $\beta = .35$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t(62) = 1.95$ ,  $p < .056$ ; see Figure 3.<sup>3</sup> As predicted, RF was negatively associated with connectedness to nature following reminders of death,  $\beta = -.38$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t(61) = 2.12$ ,  $p = .038$ , but unrelated to nature connectedness following reminders of dental pain ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .604$ ). Consistent with Study 2, no significant effects involving affect emerged ( $ps > .424$ ).

To assess the potential role of political conservatism, the main effects of MS, RF, and their interaction were first regressed on to participants' political orientation. Only the RF main effect was significant,  $\beta = .45$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $t(63) = 3.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ; all other  $ps > .841$ . More importantly, MS, political orientation, and their interaction were also regressed on to connectedness to nature (controlling for ECSW) to assess whether political orientation would predict nature connectedness under conditions of heightened death relevant. These analyses returned no significant effects ( $ps > .463$ ).

As in Study 2, RF was negatively associated with connectedness to nature when death-relevant cognitions were activated, but not when cognitions about another aversive experience (pain) were activated. Study 3 also indicated that political conservatism, a construct often linked to RF, did not interact with death thoughts to predict connectedness to nature. Though future research should certainly consider additional constructs (e.g., materialism) that might influence connections (or lack thereof) to nature, these results suggest that the effects of fundamentalism do not extend to general measures of political conservatism.

### General Discussion

Three separate studies indicated that RF negatively predicted feelings of connectedness to nature when mortality concerns were active. In the absence of death-relevant thoughts, no such relationship surfaced. This pattern of results emerged

regardless of whether death-relevant thoughts were assessed continuously (Study 1) or induced via open-ended questions (Study 2) or a series of T/F questions (Study 3). The results also emerged on two different measures of connectedness to nature and did not emerge when a general measure of religiosity or political orientation was substituted for fundamentalism. Taken together, the present research paints a broad convergent picture of the importance of fundamentalism and the ways that death-relevant thoughts influence its relationship to feelings of connectedness to the natural world.

By exploring the relationship between fundamentalism and connectedness to nature, the present research contributes to a body of work inspired by religious content suggestive of divine distinctions between humans and nature (e.g., White, 1967). For the most part, this work has tended to focus on general concern for the environment, rather than basic feelings of connectedness to it, and has produced mixed results. The present studies extend this work by specifically assessing how religious investment relates to the feeling that one is connected to the natural environment—a construct that is perhaps more closely linked to the psychological dualism between humans and nature that is posited to derive from Abrahamic religions. In addition, the present research is to our knowledge the first systematic experimental effort to elucidate a motivational factor (i.e., death-relevant thought) that predicts *when* this relationship is most likely to emerge.

As such, the present findings may be relevant to contemporary ecological issues and the barriers that block certain people's receptivity to messages concerning global climate change. One common approach to communicating the significance of global warming has been to describe its potentially apocalyptic consequences for people and the planet (Kerr, 2007). Perhaps ironically, research has found that these fear-appeal messages can actually contribute to skepticism about the validity of global warming evidence by conflicting with preconceived notions that the world is a just place (Feinberg & Willer, 2011). The current research suggests another distal barrier to these messages. Given that fear-appeal messages often highlight the life-threatening circumstances of global warming, they may have the capacity to bring online death-relevant cognitions and consequently activate the influence of fundamentalist beliefs on feelings of connectedness to nature. This process might contribute to decreased concern about the importance of global warming and skepticism about the human impact on it. That is, seeing one's self as disconnected from the environment should reduce people's willingness to see connections between their behaviors and its ecological impact. Such possibilities are not too dissimilar from TMT research on health interventions showing that certain types of health information can increase death-related cognitions and arouse underlying motivations that thwart effective health promotion strategies (see Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008). Thus, similar to Feinberg and Willer (2011), the present findings suggest that "doom and gloom" messages about the causes and consequences of global warming may, in certain situations, be counterproductive to their intended aims. Future research should

continue to introduce TMT ideas into this seemingly relevant and exciting domain of inquiry.

The present results also have implications for understanding how religion functions as an existential resource and the reverberation of effects that religious investment can foster under conditions of existential distress. Previous research has shown that RF positively predicts DTA in response to attacks against the legitimacy of one's faith (Friedman & Rholes, 2007) and predicts greater willingness to rely on faith alone for medical treatment when mortality concerns are amplified (Vess et al., 2009). An unwavering religious faith may function as a terror management resource in large part because it affirms one's claim to literal immortality and renders physical death less finite. But the tentacles through which religious identification placates existential distress may be much broader than direct afterlife beliefs. While previous research has examined how mortality concerns influence efforts to affirm symbolic distinctions between humans and other animals (Goldenberg et al., 2001) and preferences for cultivated over wild nature (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005), the present research suggests that religion may offer a unique buffer from the issues associated with people's efforts to situate themselves in a more existentially comforting position in the natural world.

Though the present research supports the guiding hypotheses, there are issues that remain to be addressed. While high levels of fundamentalism may exacerbate a disconnection with the natural world when people contend with death-related ideation, it may also be that low levels of fundamentalism in part facilitate a greater connection to nature under these conditions. This raises the generative possibility that the nature of an individual's religious identification can have different implications for how, in this case, relations to nature, are affected by death-related thought. The fact that general religiosity did not yield similar effects suggests that it is not the amount of religious identification that is critical but the type of identification. Although a devout sense of fundamentalism may channel human-nature relations in accord with the separation tenets ascribed to Abrahamic religions, lower levels of fundamentalism may cue less resistance in connecting to the natural world. There are no doubt evangelical environmentalists (Maltby, 2008), and such ecological empathy may be captured by those who score low on the measure of RF used here. This possibility represents an exciting direction for future research.

On a more practical level, it is also important to note that the samples were comprised almost exclusively of Christians, making any efforts to generalize the results beyond Christian faith or to interpret the effects as exclusive to Christian faith tenuous. From a TMT perspective, the content of particular religions should direct people's feelings of connectedness to nature when death thoughts are heightened. We would thus predict that fundamentalist orientations to other Abrahamic faiths beyond Christianity (Islam) might yield similar effects because they too emphasize a divine separation of humans from the physical world. Fundamentalist orientations to more Animistic faiths, in contrast, might actually foster increased feelings of



connectedness to nature when mortality concerns are salient because these faiths posit that the spiritual and physical realms are intertwined. Future research is needed to address this issue more clearly, but the present research indicates that, at least among Christians, mortality concerns elicit a negative relationship between fundamentalist orientations and connectedness to nature. Such findings open the door to novel insights about a fundamental question of human existence: How do we relate to the world in which we live?

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### Notes

1. No religious affiliation or gender effects emerged in any study.
2. In all studies, ECSW was not significantly correlated with or influenced by any of the predictors. It did, however, significantly correlate with connectedness to nature ( $r_s > .27$ ). Therefore, only the ECSW main effect was entered as a covariate (see Yzerbyt, Muller, & Judd, 2004).
3. An outlier ( $z$  residual = 3.19) was excluded.

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