

A Little Faith May Be a Dangerous Thing

Wellesley Psychologist Finds People Fear Death Due to Religious Beliefs

WELLESLEY, Mass. -- Know God? No fear. No God? No fear. It's the area between these two extremes that has us worried.

Wellesley College psychology professor Paul Wink has found religious belief doesn't necessarily ease fears about death. Those who take their religion seriously have little fear of the great beyond since they lead a god-centered life. But atheists also report they are unafraid to die since they fear no retribution awaiting them. However, people who believe in an afterlife, but don't often attend church-- a large proportion of Americans, according to Wink-- are most afraid of dying.

"The moderately religious believe there is life after death, but think they may not make it into heaven because they may not be practicing their religion," said Wink, who worked with researcher Julia Scott on the findings, published in the *Journal of Gerontology*.

Moreover, you might think people turn to religion for comfort as they age, but Wink found a surprising outcome there, too. "Our data, which tracked the same people over many years, showed religiousness increased significantly from age 50 to age 70," he said. However, religion takes a U-turn in midlife, declining in importance for people in their 40s and 50s when, Wink says, career responsibilities and the absence of young children at home may draw attention away from religion. At retirement, people return to the level of religious devotion they felt when they were younger. There's no surge of religious fervor as old age creeps in.

Using data from a 60-year longitudinal study established by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley, Wink conducted his own follow-up interviews with subjects who were youngsters when first surveyed. Now in their late 60s and 70s, they have been interviewed six times over the course of their lives on myriad social and psychological topics. In making generalizations, the study sample has some limitations, Wink admits: Most of these subjects are white, middle class and Christian. However, the unusual six decade time span allows researchers like Wink to gauge how people change (and don't change) over time.

In addition to investigating fears about death, Wink asked other questions in studies he has undertaken with University of New Hampshire sociology professor Michele Dillon and researchers Britta Larsen and Kristen Fay:

"Does religion make people happy?" In a study published in the journal *Research on Aging*, Wink found that by itself, the answer was no. But for people who experienced hard times, religion did serve as a buffer for life's slings and arrows, including poor health. And, the more religious a person is in early adulthood, the better they will function as older adults, revealing a resilience that religion may impart.

"Does spirituality encourage more self-absorption compared to traditional religious moral values?" In a study published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Wink focused on the debate about modern moral values. Many fear American values are declining -- including altruism and giving to others -- in the face of the growing number of people who belong to no religious denomination but who define themselves as spiritual.

Wink found a healthy level of self-interest among the spiritual, but nothing "pathologically narcissistic" about it. In fact, spirituality is associated with a healthy form of self-interest "characterized by personal autonomy and with concern for the welfare of future generations," he said.

Since 1875, Wellesley College has been a leader in providing an excellent liberal-arts education for women who will make a difference in the world. Its 500-acre campus near Boston is home to 2,300 undergraduate students from all 50 states and 68 countries. For more information, go to www.wellesley.edu.