

## **In the Grip of the Fear of Death**

In late August *The New Republic* published an article, “Death Grip,” in which author John Judis reports on the research of three psychologists regarding the role that the fear of death plays in facing the challenges of life together. What they found, says Judis, is that “the mere thought of one’s mortality can trigger a range of emotions – from disdain for other races, religions, and nations, to a preference for charismatic over pragmatic leaders, to a heightened attraction to traditional mores.”

The psychologists’ findings add academic weight to what many of us already intuitively understand. Nonetheless, their work is particularly important for providing us a fuller grasp of the politics of fear.

One might hope that people of religious faith would not be easily boggled by the fear of death, but experience and evidence suggest the contrary. Indeed, many people seem to be religious precisely because they harbor fears associated with death that beg to be addressed. When I was a pastor in West Virginia in the 1970s some church members complained that I did not preach hell or do enough stepping on their toes. When prominent evangelical preacher, Carlton Pearson, declared a few years ago that he no longer believed in hell, and that he was convinced God forgives everyone, his mega-church congregation soon dwindled to a few hundred. But maybe this was also because he was led to a message of inclusion rather than exclusion and condemnation of others.

No doubt, the fear of condemnation still motivates many religious people. However, I believe that today the largely unconscious fear of death plays itself out primarily in our public life. For much of American politics, fear has become the driving force. Many still fear hell, but the greater fear is associated with the evil terrorists who supposedly threaten our existence. They (along with those judged “soft” on terror) have become the supreme bogeymen of the politics of fear. So our government calls for a permanent state of “war on terror.”

Surely there are real terrorists, and they pose some real threats, but I suspect that those threats are greatly overstated and relatively minor compared to the threats of nuclear weapons, political repression, global climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion. Would to God that we were not so scared about terrorism, and cared more about God’s creation, and the future peace and welfare of the rest of God’s children!

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