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# FEELING QUEASY ABOUT THE INCARNATION: TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY, DEATH, AND THE BODY OF JESUS

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Throughout Christian history, at different times and places, believers have expressed ambivalence regarding the Incarnation. There has always been something scandalous and shocking about God taking a fully human form. What is the source of this discomfort? Recent work in Terror Management Theory has shown that people feel ambivalent toward their bodies and bodily functions because the body functions as a mortality/death reminder. If this analysis is correct it might explain why many Christians, from the earliest days of the church, have resisted the notion of the Incarnation. Thus, it was the thesis of this study that existential concerns are intimately involved in Incarnational ambivalence. The study sought to test this formulation by assessing Incarnational ambivalence, death anxiety, and other facets of an existential faith orientation to determine if existential fears were implicated in Incarnational ambivalence. Overall, the results of the study supported the predictions. Respondents reporting greater death anxiety and displaying a more "closed" faith orientation, existentially speaking, were the most likely to reject strong body-scenarios involving Jesus, finding these scenarios uncomfortable, demeaning to Jesus, unrealistic, and unbiblical.

## *Death, the Gnostic Impulse, and Incarnational Ambivalence*

Throughout Christian history, at different times and places, believers have expressed ambivalence regarding the Incarnation. There has always been something scandalous and shocking about God taking a fully human form. In the early centuries of the church this *Incarnational ambivalence*—discom-

fort in imagining a fully human Jesus—was observed in the Gnostic and Docetic heresies. Yet Incarnational ambivalence has been observed in every era up to our own, particularly in Protestantism (Hall & Thoennes, 2006; Lee, 1987). What is the source of this discomfort? Why do many Christians feel queasy about the Incarnation? Recent work in Terror Management Theory (Solomon, Greenburg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Greenburg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) may provide one answer. Specifically, across a variety of studies it has been shown that people feel ambivalent toward their bodies and bodily functions (e.g., sex) because the body is a mortality/death reminder (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenburg, & Solomon, 2000). If this analysis is correct it might explain why many Christians, from the earliest days of the church, have resisted the notion of the Incarnation. Perhaps a fully human Jesus is theologically and psychologically worrisome because Jesus becomes too vulnerable to the forces of decay, the very forces that cause us such deep existential dread. Phrased another way, a super-human Jesus, one not affected by bodily functions, pain, or vulnerability, might seem a better prospect, psychologically speaking, to rescue us from our existential anxieties. Thus, it is the thesis of this study that death concerns are intimately involved with Incarnational ambivalence. Consequently, this study sought to test this formulation by assessing Incarnational ambivalence, death anxiety, and other facets of an existential faith orientation to determine if existential fears are indeed implicated in fleeing the body of Jesus.

## *Feeling Queasy About the Incarnation: The Psychology of Gnosticism*

*Gnostic views of the body and the Incarnation.* As noted above, ambivalence concerning the body and

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the Incarnation has a long history in Christian thought starting with the Gnostic heresies. Although an in-depth account of Gnosticism is beyond the scope of this study, a theological overview of the Gnostic influence upon Christian thought will help place the current research in a larger context, particularly as body and Incarnational ambivalence is still encountered in various sectors of Christianity. (For an excellent account of the influence of body and Incarnational ambivalence within Christianity see Hall & Thoennes, 2006).

For the purposes of this study we need only focus on two features of Gnostic theology. First, the Gnostics had a very low view of the material universe deeming it to be created by a malevolent deity who could not be the true God of goodness and love. This view manifested itself in an extreme matter/spirit dualism: The material universe was depraved, broken, and evil while the spirit existed in a realm of beauty, health, and perfection. Salvation, then, in the Gnostic view, is the liberation of the spirit from the evil encasement of the body and the material cosmos. As Bart Ehrman (2003, p.119) summarizes:

There must be a greater God above this world, one who did not create this world. In this understanding, the material world itself—material existence in all its forms—is inferior at best or evil at worst, and so is the God, then, who created it. There must be a nonmaterial God unconnected with this world, above the creator God of the Old Testament, a God who neither created this world nor brought suffering to it, who wants to relieve his people from their suffering—not by redeeming this world but by delivering them from it, liberating them from their entrapment in this material existence.

The second feature of Gnostic theology is related to the first. Specifically, the value-laden matter/spirit dualism of the Gnostics affected their view of the body. If matter is evil then the body, as a material object, must also be. Given that the body was a source of evil and depravity many of the Gnostics advocated mortification (Ehrman, 2003, p. 126):

Gnostics were ascetic, advocating the strict regulation and harsh treatment of the body. Their logic was that since the body is evil, it should be punished, since attachment to the body is the *problem* of human existence, and since it is so easy to become attached to the body through pleasure, the body should be denied all pleasure.

Obviously, this view of the body had implications for how the Gnostic Christians viewed the body of Jesus in the Incarnation. Specifically, if the body is evil was it possible for Jesus, the Son of God, to have an actual, physical, fully human body? As Ehrman (2003, p. 124) notes, this was “one of the puzzles the Gnostics

had to solve, and different Gnostic thinkers did so in different ways.” It is not necessary to review these theological systems except to note that they are symptoms of Incarnational ambivalence, an anxiety at the notion that Jesus did indeed exist in a fully human body.

*Gnostic influences in Christianity.* A historical survey of Gnostic views of the body would be of little interest if it were not for the fact that these Gnostic ideas have lingered and continued to be a part of Christianity, both past and present. As Philip Lee (1987, p. 49) has noted in his historical survey of Gnostic influences upon Christianity, “From Simeon Stylites to St. Francis of Assisi to certain aspects of Calvinism, the aversion to this world with a desire to escape it has been one of the most prominent strands in the fabric of Christianity.” Further, this aversion has “led to some unfortunate attitudes toward the flesh, human nature, and sexuality” (Lee, 1987, p. 53) within contemporary Christianity.

Lee’s historical survey provides ample and interesting examples of pervasive and continuing body ambivalence within Christianity. Take, as an example of the rejection of the physical, this assessment of Jonathan Edwards, a father of American evangelicalism (cited in Lee, 1987, p. 87):

The world is all over dirty. Everywhere it is covered with that which tends to defile the feet of the traveler. Our streets are dirty and muddy, intimating that the world is full of that which tends to defile the soul, that worldly objects and worldly concerns and worldly company tend to pollute us.

A similar example, this one more focused on body ambivalence, comes from the Puritan leader Cotton Mather. Mather’s lament about the depravity of the body is triggered by his encounter with a dog while urinating (cited in Lee, 1987, p. 131):

I was once emptying the Cistern of Nature, and making Water at the Wall. At the same Time, there came a Dog, who did so too, before me. Thought I; “What mean and vile Things are the Children of Men, in this mortal State! How much do our natural Necessities abase us and place us in some regard, on the Level with the very Dogs!” ... Accordingly, I resolved, that it should be my ordinary Practice, whenever I step to answer the one or other Necessity of Nature, to make it an Opportunity of shaping in my Mind some noble, divine Thought.

Perhaps nowhere is body ambivalence more acutely felt within Christianity than in the area of sexuality. At various times and places mere participation in sexual intercourse, even within the marital bond, was considered by Christians to be disgusting and depraved, a spiritual failure.

*Incarnational ambivalence.* These views of the body, seemingly driven by disgust surrounding bodily functions such as urination or sex, have also affected views of the Incarnation. Sharing the concerns of the Gnostics Christians from all eras have wondered if Jesus fully participated in the human condition, physically speaking. Given the pervasive body ambivalence throughout Christian history the temptation has always been to resist a fully embodied Jesus. As noted earlier, the Gnostic impulse across the centuries has pushed many Christians to adopt a “disembodied” or “super-human” vision of Jesus: “Gnostics of all eras have maintained a most profound mistrust of the body...[and] their disdain for the physical led them to a docetic, disembodied view of Christ” (Lee, 1987, p. 130).

We still observe this Incarnational ambivalence in that candid discussion concerning Jesus’ sexuality is still taboo in many Christian communities. One only need to witness the religious angst and outrage associated with robust depictions of Jesus’ humanity (and associated sexuality) such as in Kazantzakis’ *Last Temptation of Christ* to see that Incarnational ambivalence continues to linger in many quarters of Christianity.

### *Fleeing the Body: A Terror Management View*

*The body as a mortality reminder.* Given the pervasiveness of body ambivalence within Christianity it seems reasonable to ask if any psychological factors are at work. Helpfully, a large literature based on Terror Management Theory now exists which persuasively links body ambivalence to death concerns.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) is fast becoming one of the most influential theoretical and empirical paradigms in social psychology (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Rooted in existential psychology, primarily the work of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT attempts to understand the psychological mechanics involved in how persons cope with existential “terrors,” most notably the fear of death. Much of this research has focused on the relationship between cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and death transcendence. Specifically, following Becker (1973), TMT posits that cultural worldviews provide persons with symbolic structures of achieving self-esteem via death transcendence and repression. Given that these cultural worldviews carry such a heavy existential load, these worldviews are “defend-

ed” when we become existentially threatened. Documenting this “worldview defense” in the face of death has been one of TMT’s most impressive empirical accomplishments (e.g., Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991).

Beyond worldview defense TMT research has also examined how various facets of everyday existence can become existentially problematic, particularly when functioning as death reminders. We are unsettled upon being reminded of our death and, thus, tend to repress or avoid aspects of life that make death salient. Much of this research has focused on how the body functions as just such a mortality reminder. Specifically, the vulnerability of our bodies highlights the existential predicament that we will one day decay and die. Further, the gritty physicality of the body (e.g., blood, sweat, odors, waste) highlights our animal nature, which also functions as an existential affront to our aspirations of being transcendent spiritual creatures. Cotton Mather’s encounter with the dog springs to mind.

Based upon these insights, an impressive body of empirical work has strongly linked body ambivalence to death concerns. For example, morality/death concerns have been linked to sexual ambivalence (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenburg, & Solomon, 1999; Goldenberg, Cox, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2002; Landau, et al., 2006), avoidance of physical sensation (Goldenberg, Hart, Pyszczynski, Warnica, Landau, & Thomas, 2004), concerns over physical appearance (Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000), and resistance to human/animal comparisons (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Kluck, & Cornwall, 2001). Much of this research is summarized by Goldenberg et al. (2000) who conclude: “[T]he body is a problem because it makes evident our similarity to other animals; this similarity is a threat because it reminds us that we are eventually going to die.”

*A terror management view of Incarnational ambivalence.* Given the link between morality concerns and body ambivalence it seems reasonable to posit that mortality concerns might also be driving, or at least implicated in, Incarnational ambivalence. That is, if our physical bodies with their sexual demands, waste products, and vulnerabilities activate death concerns there might exist some psychological resistance to allowing Jesus, the Divine Son of God, to fully participate in human existence. The body is felt, at some level, to be too degrading for

Jesus. This drives a queasiness in imagining Jesus being physically weak, vulnerable, experiencing bodily urges (e.g., sexual arousal) and participating in bodily functions (e.g., defecation). The research from TMT suggests that this queasiness might be rooted in deep existential anxieties associated with our own bodies.

It is the thesis of this article, therefore, that the Gnostic impulse within Christianity broadly and Incarnational ambivalence specifically is rooted in existential anxieties that arise due to the fact that the body functions as a mortality/death reminder. To date, no research has explored this association. More, no study has attempted to systematically quantify Incarnational ambivalence. Consequently, to take a first step in this direction the present study attempted to 1) operationalize Incarnational ambivalence to introduce the construct to the research community and 2) to examine the associations between Incarnational ambivalence, death anxiety, and existential faith orientations to determine, in a preliminary way, if existential concerns are implicated in Incarnational ambivalence.

*Faith and existentialism: The varieties of religious experience.* Before proceeding to hypothesis testing, some discussion is needed concerning the existential dynamics involved in Christian belief. And noted above, a central thesis of this research is relatively straightforward: Death anxiety is implicated in Incarnational ambivalence. Beyond this prediction, the study also assessed religiosity variables relevant to research into religious belief and existentialism. Specifically, early TMT research appeared to suggest that religious belief functioned as an existential buffer involved in death repression (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Rosenblatt, Veeder, Kirkland & Lyon, 1990). However, recent research by Beck (2004, 2006), building upon the insights of William James (1902), has argued that existential defensiveness is not generally implicated in belief systems as the early TMT research suggested. While acknowledging that existential defensiveness may be observed in some Christian believers, where faith is mainly aimed at providing existential comfort and solace, Beck (2004, 2006) has shown that many believers appear to eschew existentially comforting beliefs. Further, these same believers do not seem reactive to TMT mortality manipulations (Beck, 2006). That is, these believers do not appear “defensive” in the face of death, suggesting that the belief system is not being used for death repression.

To operationalize the variety of these religious experiences—embracing versus eschewing existentially comforting faith configurations—Beck (2006) developed the *Defensive Theology Scale (DTS)*. High scores on the DTS indicate that the person strongly endorses existentially comforting religious beliefs while low scorers appear to eschew this comfort. For example, a high scorer on the DTS would believe that he and his loved ones will, because they are Christians, experience less pain and suffering in life. Low DTS scorers resist this notion (among others) and the associated comforts it might provide. (And to clarify, the relevant issues associated with the DTS are not involved with assessing the theological truth of belief but to note the relative comfort a belief can confer upon believers *relative to alternative beliefs*.)

Beck’s (2004, 2006) research is important for the present study in that it suggests that when faith is studied from an existential vantage the degree of existential “openness” in the faith system needs to be assessed as persons who vary on this construct handle existential threats (such as death) differently. Consequently, in this study the attempt was made to follow Beck (2004, 2006) and assess faith in an existentially nuanced manner. Specifically, Beck’s (2006) *Defensive Theology Scale* was employed to assess its relationship with Incarnational ambivalence. If, as has been argued, certain faith configurations (i.e., high scores on the DTS) are involved in death repression then persons holding these beliefs should manifest greater Incarnational ambivalence. That is, if the body, specifically the body of Jesus, creates an existential threat, religious persons who appear to prize existential comfort are predicted to resist strong visions of the Incarnation. Further, given that the DTS is a relatively new measure, Batson’s (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991) Quest scale, a frequently used measure of an existential faith orientation, was also employed. The association between Quest and Incarnational ambivalence was predicted to mirror the association between Incarnational ambivalence and the *Defensive Theology Scale* but in the opposite direction. Specifically, Quest, as a measure of existential “openness”, was predicted to be negatively associated with Incarnational ambivalence (i.e., the greater the existential openness the less ambivalence concerning the Incarnation).

### Summary

From the earliest centuries Christianity has been bedeviled by the Gnostic impulse, the desire to

demean, disregard, or deemphasize the body. Even though the early Gnostic sects were effectively dismantled, facets of Gnostic thinking have continued to affect Christian thought concerning the body, particularly the body of Jesus. Specifically, there has always been something scandalous about imagining a fully human Jesus. Recent work in Terror Management Theory has convincingly shown that death/mortality concerns produce body ambivalence. If this is true, death/mortality concerns might also be implicated in feeling queasy about the Incarnation. To test this thesis, research participants were asked to complete measures of death anxiety and Incarnational ambivalence hypothesizing that death anxiety would be positively associated with Incarnational ambivalence. Further, taking a cue from work examining religious faith from an existential vantage, it was also predicted that participants who hold existentially comforting faith configurations (high DTS scores and low Quest scores) would resist strong Incarnational images relative to other participants.

## METHOD

### *Participants and procedure*

Participants were 228 undergraduate volunteers enrolled in undergraduate classes at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, TX. The mean age of the participants was 19.24 ( $SD = 2.18$ ). Sixty-four percent of the sample was female. The ethnicity breakdown was as follows: 81.6% Caucasian, 5.3% African-American, 5.3% Hispanic/Latino, 1.3% Asian American, 6.6% Other. The religious affiliation breakdown was as follows: 51.8% Church of Christ, 21.3% Non-denominational, 12.3% Baptist, 2.2% Catholic, 11.8% Other. After providing informed consent and demographic information, participants completed measures of Incarnational ambivalence, death anxiety and religious belief.

### *Assessment Instruments*

***Incarnational Ambivalence Scale.*** The *Incarnational Ambivalence Scale* (IAS) was developed for this study to operationalize psychological resistance to envisioning various body scenarios concerning Jesus' life on earth. Four broad body scenarios were identified: Body fluids, body flaws, hygiene, and physical vulnerability. These scenarios were selected because each has been found to activate death/mortality concerns (Goldenberg, et al., 2001). Respondents were asked to read a specific body scenario

and imagine Jesus experiencing (or affected by) the physical condition. Under the category of body fluids there were three scenarios: Diarrhea, nocturnal emissions, and vomit. Under the body flaws category there were four scenarios: Scarring, tooth decay, near-sightedness, and malformation. Under the hygiene category there were three scenarios: Bad breath, body odor, and dandruff. Finally, under the physical vulnerability category there were two scenarios: Chronic back pain and chronic headaches.

Again, the respondents were asked to imagine each body scenario applying to Jesus and then rate each hypothetical along four scales, rated from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. The four rating scale prompts were as follows: *This image makes me uncomfortable*, *This image is demeaning to Jesus*, *This image is unrealistic*, and *This image is unbiblical*. The first two prompts were drafted to capture an emotional response to each scenario (i.e., discomfort, offense) while the final two prompts were drafted to capture a more intellectual, perhaps theological, response. The entire IAS can be found in the Appendix.

Given that the operationalization of Incarnational ambivalence was central to the goals of the study, the psychometric properties of the IAS are presented in the first part of the Results section prior to the use of the IAS in any hypothesis testing.

***Death Anxiety.*** Death anxiety was assessed with the *Templer Death Anxiety Scale* (TDAS; Lonetto & Templer, 1983). The TDAS is a 15-item self-report scale that uses a True/False response format. Example items from the TDAS include "I am very much afraid to die" and "I often think about how short life really is." In this sample, the TDAS generated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .85.

***Defensive Theology Scale.*** The *Defense Theology Scale* (DTS; Beck, 2006) is a 22-item self-report measure developed to capture facets of existential defensiveness in Christian belief as described by Beck (2004). Each item is rated on a 1-7 likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree). DTS items assess five related themes: *Special protection* (e.g., "I believe God protects me from illness and misfortune," "I believe that fewer bad things will happen to me in this life because God is protecting me from harm"), *Special Insight* (e.g., "God gives me clear and obvious signs to communicate His will to me," "When making a choice or tough decision, God gives me clear answers and direction"), *Divine Solicitousness* ("Nothing is too small, like finding my lost keys, to

**TABLE 1**  
*Intercorrelations between Incarnational Ambivalence Scale (IAS) Ratings*

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. IAS-Uncomfortable				
2. IAS-Demeaning	.70			
3. IAS-Unrealistic	.57	.78		
4. IAS-Unbiblical	.52	.75	.78	
5. IAS-Total	.79	.92	.90	.88

All correlations  $p < .001$

pray to God about," "If you have deep faith and pure motives God will grant even your smallest requests"), *Special Destiny* ("God has a very specific plan for my life that I must search for and find," "God has a destiny for me to find and fulfill"), and *Denial of Randomness* ("Every event around us is a sign of God's larger plans and purposes," "God controls every event around us, down to the smallest details"). Consequently, high scores on the DTS reflect a faith configuration that is existentially more comforting relative to lower scores. In this sample, the DTS generated a Cronbach's alpha estimate of .89.

**Quest.** The version of Batson's Interactional/Quest Scale used in this study was his 12-item measure (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). The Interactional Scale is a self-report scale where participants rate their item endorsement on a 1 to 9 likert scale. Although summed to create a single score, Batson's measure assesses three related dimensions: Readiness to face existential questions (e.g., "God wasn't very important to me until I began to ask questions about the meaning of my own life."), perception of doubt as positive (e.g., "It might be said that I value my religious doubts and uncertainties."), and openness to change (e.g., "As I grow and change, I expect my religion also to grow and change."). In this sample, the Interactional Scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .77.

**Orthodoxy.** As a measure of Christian orthodoxy the *Christian Orthodoxy Scale* (COS; Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982) was used. The COS is a 24-item scale that assesses the degree to which someone accepts beliefs central to Christianity (e.g., Jesus was the Son of God, Jesus was resurrected, Jesus performed miracles). The COS uses a self-report format where respondents rate

their degree of belief or disbelief along a 6-point continuum (?3 = *strongly disagree* to +3 = *strongly agree*). In this sample the COS generated a Cronbach's alpha of .90.

## RESULTS

### *The Psychometrics of the Incarnational Ambivalence Scale*

Recall that each incarnational scenario from the IAS (12 in all) was rated along four different dimensions: *Uncomfortable*, *demeaning*, *unrealistic*, and *unbiblical*. Although it was expected that these ratings would be highly correlated with each other this assumption needed to be evaluated prior to summing the IAS ratings. A principal-components analysis was conducted on the 48 IAS ratings (12 scenarios each rated across four dimensions). Overall, a single factor best explained (via a scree test) the variance among the 48 IAS ratings (factor eigenvalue = 26.24, 54.67% of variance) indicating, as expected, redundancy among both the 12 IAS scenarios and the four rating dimensions. These interrelationships can best be observed in Table 1 where the zero-order correlations between the sums of each rating dimension (e.g., sum of *uncomfortable* ratings across the 12 scenarios, sum of *demeaning* ratings across the 12 scenarios, etc.) along with the overall IAS total are presented. As can be seen in Table 1, participants who expressed discomfort with the Incarnational scenarios also reported that the scenarios were demeaning to Jesus, unrealistic, and unbiblical (and vice versa). Further, each of the four dimensional ratings were highly redundant with the overall IAS summation. Overall, then, these

TABLE 2

Zero-order correlations between Incarnational ambivalence, death anxiety, and belief measures

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Incarnational Ambivalence Scale				
2. Orthodoxy	.01			
3. Death Anxiety	.13*	-.04		
4. Defensive Theology Scale	.30**	.52**	-.01	
5. Quest	-.24**	-.18**	.14*	-.39**

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .001$ 

analyses supported summing the 48 IAS ratings to create a total score for use in hypothesis testing. The mean for the summed IAS ratings was 135.37 ( $SD = 69.07$ ). The 48 IAS items generated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .90.

#### *Incarnational Ambivalence, Death Anxiety, and Existential Orientation*

After creating the IAS score, the Incarnational ambivalence measure was correlated with the measures of orthodoxy, death anxiety, and existential orientation in religious belief (*The Defensive Theology Scale* and *Quest*). These associations are presented in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 2, Incarnational ambivalence was not correlated with Christian orthodoxy. Comfort or discomfort with strong Incarnational images of Jesus did not seem associated with subscribing to or rejecting core Christian dogma. This association (or lack thereof) is important as it helps address concerns that strongly rejecting or embracing the Incarnational scenarios might be associated with heterodox positions within Christianity.

As predicted, a positive correlation was observed between Incarnational ambivalence and death anxiety. Those reporting greater death anxiety were more likely to reject the Incarnational scenarios, rating the scenarios as uncomfortable, demeaning to Jesus, unrealistic and unbiblical.

An existential interpretation of the association between death anxiety and IAS scores was supported by observing the associations between Incarnational ambivalence and the two measures of existential orientation in religious belief. Specifically, *Defensive*

*Theology Scale* ratings were positively associated with IAS scores. That is, respondents possessing a relatively more comforting faith posture (e.g., God will protect me from misfortune) were the participants most resistant to the Incarnational scenarios. A convergent association was observed with the *Quest* measure. Specifically, respondents with lower *Quest* scores (indicative of an existentially "closed" posture) were the most rejecting of the Incarnational images. These two associations were explored with partial correlations using orthodoxy ratings as the covariate. Partialing out the shared variance with orthodoxy ratings did not significantly attenuate the associations found in Table 2. Consequently, the associations between the DTS and *Quest* ratings with IAS scores did not appear to be due to covariance with a rejection or acceptance of Christian belief.

Finally, given that both death anxiety and the existential orientation measures shared an association with Incarnational ambivalence two multiple regression analyses were conducted to explore the relative contributions of these variables to the prediction of Incarnational ambivalence. In the first analysis, death anxiety and DTS ratings were used to predict IAS scores. As can be seen in Table 3, both measures significantly contributed to the prediction accounting for 10.9% of IAS variance. Table 4 presents a comparative analysis replacing DTS ratings with *Quest* scores to predict IAS ratings. Overall, the analysis in Table 4 converged upon the analysis in Table 3 with both predictors making significant contributions and explaining 8.7% of the IAS score variance. These analyses seem to suggest that death anxiety and an existential faith orientation have independent and direct associations with Incarnational ambivalence.

TABLE 3

*Defensive Theology Scale and death anxiety ratings predicting Incarnational ambivalence*

Predictors:	Beta
Death Anxiety	.14*
Defensive Theology Scale	.30**

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .001$ ;  $F(2, 225) = 13.71, p < .001, R^2 = .109$ 

TABLE 4

*Quest and death anxiety ratings predicting Incarnational ambivalence*

Predictors:	Beta
Death Anxiety	.17*
Quest	-.27**

\* $p < .01$  \*\* $p < .001$ ;  $F(2, 225) = 10.69, p < .001, R^2 = .087$ 

## DISCUSSION

### *Fleeing the Body of Jesus*

The thesis of this study was that existential issues are implicated in ambivalence imagining Jesus fully participating in the human experience, particularly experiences associated with physical vulnerability and body-related disgust (e.g., deformity, waste). More specifically, it was predicted that death anxiety would be associated with Incarnational ambivalence with greater death anxiety predicting increased rejection of strong Incarnational images of Jesus. Further, following research that has investigated the existential facets of religious belief, it was predicted that an existentially “closed” or “defensive” faith posture (i.e., a belief system that produces relatively more *comfort* or *certainty*) would predict greater resistance to strong Incarnational images. Overall, these predictions were consistent with the results of the study. Further, these associations appeared to be unrelated to covariance with doctrinal orthodoxy. This suggests, although caution is warranted in drawing this conclusion, that the dynamics involved in Incarnational ambivalence may be more psychological than theological in nature.

Reflecting on the empirical and theoretical literature the results of this study are not overly surprising. A great deal of empirical research has linked body ambivalence to mortality concerns. Further, disgust-related facets of the human body (e.g., deformity, body fluids) have also been associated with death

anxiety. This research suggests that the physical body functions as a mortality reminder. More, the body and its functions (e.g., urination) highlight our “animal” nature, which is felt to be demeaning to humans. Recall Cotton Mather’s experience with the dog while urinating: “*How much do our natural Necessities abase us and place us in some regard, on the Level with the very Dogs!*” Consequently, it is not surprising that ambivalence toward the body is extended to the body of Jesus. This ambivalence, it has been suggested, can contaminate envisionings of the Incarnation. Not only do we flee our bodies, but also the body of Jesus. Thus, strong Incarnational images are resisted, particularly by persons with heightened death anxiety or by believers who have adopted faith configurations apparently aimed at managing existential anxieties. In conclusion, although Christians *intellectually* endorse the proposition that Jesus was “fully human,” for many Christians their existential anxieties may cause them resist this notion. They feel queasy about the Incarnation.

### *The Gnostic Impulse and the Psychology of Theology*

The introduction of this article dwelt considerably upon the Gnostic influence that has been a part of the Christian experience from the earliest days of the church. This influence was referred to as the Gnostic impulse, the tendency to demean, disregard,



or deemphasize the human body. This impulse has waxed and waned at different times and different places within the Christian experience. Although this historical context was not necessary to state the predictions of the current study, it does now help frame the implications of the results. Specifically, the historical framework suggests that pervasive theological tendencies within Christianity may have psychological roots and influences. This is not to say that psychological needs and motivations dictate theological outcomes, but it does suggest that psychology and theology potentially affect and influence each other. To be clear, it is very unlikely that the Gnostic influences within Christianity can be reduced to death anxiety or existential terror. But death anxiety driving body ambivalence may be one among many influences that make Gnostic attitudes toward the body perennially attractive.

This influence of psychology upon theology might be described with a *sweet tooth metaphor*. Our sweet tooth is a natural and universal psychological bias. Our appetites gravitate toward sugars and fats. Yet, the sweet tooth does not dictate our diets. If anything, the sweet tooth is resisted, a known to be pernicious influence upon us, a temptation. In a similar way, psychological dynamics might create *theological sweet teeth*. That is, psychology doesn't dictate a theological outcome (as a sweet tooth doesn't dictate diet), but psychology might create biases that continually exert a pull on less than rigorous theological thinking. Using the present study as an example, it may be that a psychological phenomenon such as body ambivalence unconsciously tugs upon theological reflection, as a sweet tooth tugs on dietary choices. This tug can be resisted, perhaps easily so, but the tug can pull belief systems into its orbit. Perhaps Gnostic attitudes toward the body persist because there are biases that make these attitudes psychologically "attractive."

None of this is a particularly novel observation. Of course psychology influences theological reflection. And we should not forget other major players in belief formation, such as culture and society. The point of this discussion is, rather, to encourage psychology of religion researchers to examine *particular* theological beliefs from a psychological vantage. The psychology of religion literature tends to assess and study Christian faith from a global perspective. Rarely are specific and particular beliefs isolated and examined from a psychological angle. For example, this study sought to isolate particular attitudes con-

cerning the Incarnation in an effort to explore the psychological dynamics involved. This investigation only scratches the surface when one considers the great diversity of Christian belief. Beliefs regarding hell, the problem of evil, the doctrine of election, original sin, Providence, views of worship, and the function of prayer all spring to mind as areas where psychological biases might be affecting theological reflection. Further, future research should continue to examine the role of body ambivalence upon Christian belief. For example, how might body ambivalence be implicated in Christian attitudes toward sexuality? Armchair observation seems to indicate that although many Christians subscribe to the notion that "all sins are equal" in practice it appears that sexual sins tend to be treated as "worse" in many churches. Might this be another example of a psychological sweet tooth tugging at belief, creating a disjoint between our beliefs as theologically articulated versus psychologically experienced?

#### *Limitations, Cautions, and Conclusions*

Of course, caution is warranted in generalizing beyond the current study. The research was limited by a number of sampling and design issues. The sample was very homogeneous, demographically and religiously. The correlational and cross-sectional nature of the design is also problematic. Further, the observed trends, although significant and convergent, were small to modest as effect sizes. Consequently, the associations between death concerns, religious belief, and Incarnational ambivalence should be subjected to further research. The current study is best seen as a first step in firmly establishing these associations. An excellent next step would be to examine these associations in an experimental situation. One way to do this would be to manipulate or prime death awareness across experimental conditions prior to exposing participants to Incarnational scenarios with the expectation that heightened (or primed) death awareness would produce greater Incarnational ambivalence.

In conclusion, this study suggests that existential concerns may be implicated in attitudes toward the Incarnation. From a historical stance, these findings are intriguing given the longstanding and lingering body ambivalence within Christianity. It suggests that psychological dynamics might be implicated in the adoption (or rejection) of certain theological beliefs. The exact nature and scope of

the psychological impact upon theological reflection is an interesting and exciting question awaiting the attention of continued research.

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**APPENDIX**

*Incarnational Ambivalence Scale (IAS)*

Directions:

Although Christians believe Jesus was human as well as divine, people differ in how they imagine this. Below are various statements concerning Jesus and his human body. Read each item and then give your response using the rating scales below.

IAS Items:

1. Jesus regularly had bad breath.
2. Jesus regularly had bad body odor.
3. Jesus had dandruff.
4. Jesus was born with a malformed hand.
5. Jesus had tooth decay and cavities.
6. Jesus was nearsighted (i.e., today he would have worn glasses).
7. Jesus had diarrhea during some of his illnesses.
8. Jesus experienced nocturnal emissions (i.e., wet dreams).
9. Jesus experienced vomiting during some of his illnesses.
10. Due to a back injury, Jesus had chronic back pain.
11. Jesus' face was scarred from the sores of a childhood illness.
12. Jesus suffered from severe headaches, which interfered with his activities.

Each item is followed by these rating scales:

This image makes me uncomfortable.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>			<i>Neutral/Mixed</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>		

This image is demeaning to Jesus.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>			<i>Neutral/Mixed</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>		

This image is unrealistic.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>			<i>Neutral/Mixed</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>		

This image is unbiblical.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>			<i>Neutral/Mixed</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>		

Scoring Instructions:

IAS Score = Sum of all four ratings across all 12 items

IAS Short Form suggestion: Select one of the four rating scales to create a short 12-item measure. Factor analytic results from this study recommend the *demeaning* rating.

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