Religion and fear of death among older Dutch adults

Nienke P. M. Fortuin, Johannes B. A. M. Schilderman & Eric Venbrux


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15528030.2018.1446068

Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC © 2018 [Nienke P. M. Fortuin, Johannes B. A. M. Schilderman, Eric Venbrux]

Published online: 20 Jun 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 894

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 3 View citing articles
Religion and fear of death among older Dutch adults

Nienke P. M. Fortuin, Johannes B. A. M. Schilderman, and Eric Venbrux

Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
A qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with 26 older Dutch participants was performed to elucidate the complex relationship between religion and death anxiety. Whereas participants expressed seven types of lived religion (lacking, lost, liminal, loose, learned, lasting, and liquid religion), only participants with loose or lost religion expressed death anxiety. This supports previous research indicating that moderately religious people fear death more than nonbelievers or highly religious people. Moreover, the naturalness of death, the length of their life span, the death of others, the goodness of life, and the hope to live on in others also provided acceptance of death.

KEYWORDS
Afterlife beliefs; death; death anxiety; lived religion; older adults

Introduction
When people get older they will increasingly be confronted with death, both by gradual health decline and by increasing confrontation with the death of loved ones. From ancient times religion has provided a source of meaning in the human confrontation with death. Indeed, Kellehear (2007, p. 61) states: “To dismiss the creative and literal power of religious interpretations of death is to miss the one most obvious and powerful resource we have to explain how we got what we’ve got today in society and culture.” The relationship between death and religion has been stressed for a long time in anthropological literature. As early as 1912 Marett stated that the function of religion is to restore confidence when it is shaken by crises, such as sickness and death (Marett, 1912, pp. 211–212). In 1925 Malinowski stated that “Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death—is of the greatest importance” (Malinowski, 1954, p. 47). Taking a similar approach Berger reflected in 1967 that “The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it” (p. 52). However, quantitative research into the relationship between religion and death anxiety has provided contradicting results. In their systematic review of 84 studies Ellis and Wahab (2013) found 40 studies indicating an inverse correlation between religiosity and fear of death, 27 indicating a positive relationship, 32 indicating no significant relationship, and nine indicating a curvilinear relationship. The latter suggest that...
moderately religious individuals fear death more than either nonbelievers or very religious individuals (Downey, 1984; Ellis & Wahab, 2013; McMordie, 1981; Nelson & Cantrell, 1980; Wink & Scott, 2005). More specifically, Wink and Scott (2005) found that participants who scored high on religiousness feared death least, and those who scored low on religiousness reported death anxiety in between the moderate and high religiousness groups. In their systematic review Ellis and Wahab found that first, average sample size of studies reporting an inverse relationship was comparatively small and second, 42% of these studies excluded persons who were nonreligious. Therefore, they state that “However, when non-religious individuals are sampled alongside those who are both moderately and extremely religious, the overall relationship shifts to being curvilinear, and possibly even positive, depending on the aspect of religiosity being assessed” (Ellis & Wahab, 2013, p. 149). The observed curvilinear relationship between death anxiety and religiousness has been explained by the observation that nonreligious people, who dismiss the prospect of an afterlife, have little reason to fear death. Moreover, very religious people, who believe in an afterlife and have lived in such a way as to be confident to have gained a positive eternal faith, have no reason to fear death. However, moderately religious people, who are uncertain about the existence of an afterlife, will fear death most. In addition, if there is an afterlife, they may have doubts whether they (having been less religious) have deserved a blissful eternal faith, which may increase their anxiety (Ellis & Wahab, 2013).

Since quantitative studies considering the relationship between religion and death anxiety have provided contradictory results and since our concepts for quantitatively describing and analysing individual’s religions often “fail to capture how multifaceted, diverse, and malleable are the beliefs, values, and practices that make up many (perhaps most) persons’ own religions” (McGuire, 2008, p. 5), this study will take a qualitative approach. It will focus on “lived religion”: religion as “practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people […] in the context of their everyday lives” (McGuire, 2008, p. 12). In order to evaluate “lived religion” the qualitative method of “reflective lifeworld research” is followed, which focuses on “how the world, with its everyday phenomena, is lived, experienced, acted and described by humans” (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008, p. 95). This article addresses the following research question: How do Dutch adults of 79 years and older describe their attitude toward death in the context of their lived religion?

**Methods**

**Participants and data collection**

As the process of ageing increasingly confronts people with death, this study is based on a sample of older adults. In order to maximise variation of meaning, a purposeful sample was selected (Morse, 2007) maximising
variation in religiosity, health condition, degree of dependence on care, gender, and education. Thirteen males and 13 females aged 79–100 (mean age: 86) born in the Netherlands and living in the eastern part of the Netherlands participated in this study. Fifteen had a Catholic background; nine of them still considered themselves members of the Catholic church.¹

Eleven had a Protestant background; eight of them remained Protestant in the sense of church membership and attendance.² Nine participants were no longer church members. Three participants had, or used to have, a religious vocation. Of the 14 participants who lived in private homes or apartments or serviced apartments, 11 were contacted through (three different) general practitioners and three through spiritual caregivers. The 12 participants living in care homes were contacted through spiritual caregivers.

The first author conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews about lived religion, views on death, dying and the afterlife and experienced quality of life with all participants between December 2015 and March 2017. To encourage the interviewee’s descriptions, the interviewer frequently used follow-up questions, which invited clarification or expansion (Dahlberg et al., 2008). All participants were interviewed once, except one participant who participated in a test interview. All interviews were conducted in private in the participant’s home or apartment. The total duration of interview visits was between one and three hours (average: two hours). The duration of the audiotaped and transcribed part of the interviews was between 38 and 135 minutes (average: 78 minutes).

**Ethical considerations**

The research protocol was first evaluated by the Research Ethics Committee of the Radboud university medical center, which judged in October 2015 that because the research does not entail health risks or other notable burdens it does not fall under the Dutch Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (registration number. 2015–2040). Subsequently, it was assessed by the Ethics Assessment Committee Humanities of Radboud University who gave consent in November 2015 (registration number. 8903). Before research was carried out in a care institution, the board of each institution gave written informed consent. Prior to each interview, potential participants received an information letter describing voluntariness of participation, the aim of the research, the research procedure, contact details, their right to withdraw and the handling and storage of research data.³ Afterward, potential participants were contacted by phone in order to clarify the research and, in case they wished to participate, to make an appointment.⁴ Prior to each interview, participants gave written, informed consent. All participants felt fit enough to be interviewed. All interviews were transcribed with the omission of names and dates and participants were referred to using a code.
Qualitative analysis

Data were analyzed by the first author according to the phenomenological “reflective lifeworld research” approach described by Dahlberg et al., the goal of which is to “discover, analyze, clarify, understand and describe meaning” (2008, p. 96). All interviews, transcriptions, and analyses were performed by the first author. Moreover, in accordance with the qualitative method of “constant comparison” (Holton, 2007) data collection and analysis were alternated so that analytical hunches could be explored in succeeding interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Due to this setup the interviewer had in-depth knowledge of the topics and of growing theoretical concepts. However, no inter-rater reliability could be determined. As Morse (1997) rightly states, determination of inter-rater reliability is not appropriate in the case of unstructured, interactive interviews in which data analysis and collection are alternated. In this case, the comprehensive understanding of data “cannot be conveyed quickly and in a few definitions to a new member of the research team who has been elected for the purpose of determining a percentage agreement score” (Morse, 1997, p. 446). In accordance with the “reflective lifeworld research” approach, data analysis was threefold. First, the analyst transcribed each interview and read it a few times, in order to become familiar with each interview as a whole. Second, using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti, version 7, each interview was divided into smaller meaning units (“quotations” in ATLAS.ti) referring to certain meanings that were assigned one or more codes. During this phase meaning units were closely examined and compared for similarities and differences, adopting a stance of theoretical openness. Also, meanings that seemed to belong together were clustered. This led to 71 codes describing lived religion, death acceptance or anxiety, and afterlife beliefs of participants that were linked to 883 meaning units. Third, after coding all meanings and evaluating their interrelationships, the interviews were approached again as a whole to describe the essence of the studied phenomenon, which can be understood as the “structure of essential meanings that explicates a phenomenon of interest” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 245). In this analysis phase, the lived religion of all participants was critically evaluated for its essence and compared. Based on this comparison, seven types of lived religion were distinguished, each having its own essential structure. These were evaluated with respect to death anxiety. Although Dahlberg et al. (2008, p. 176) modestly state that in reflective lifeworld research we actually cannot talk about saturation because meanings are infinite and always expanding themselves, the fact that no new meanings units emerged when analysing the last four transcripts suggests that the study was at least approaching theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 213–216; Morse, 2007).
Results

The analysis indicates that lived religion of participants, in essence, consists of various kinds of religious beliefs, practices, and experiences. Stark and Glock (1968) view these essential characteristics of lived religion as dimensions of religious commitment. Based on the observed differences we distinguished seven types of lived religion with each having its own essential structure. In order of increasing breadth of religious commitment we discern lacking, lost, liminal, loose, learned, lasting, and liquid religion, of which the main characteristics are presented in Table 1. They will now be discussed in detail and evaluated with respect to death anxiety.

Lacking religion

The essence of “lacking religion” is a faith in God that is non-existent, nor did it exist before. It was expressed by two religiously unaffiliated widowers whose education level ranged from lower secondary school to A levels. The first widower had not been religiously socialised by his parents, but he had been baptised and taken into care in a Catholic children’s home. He had never been much interested in Christianity because of his struggle with theodicy, “the believer’s justification for maintaining faith in a good and powerful deity, in light of the evil in the world” (Brown, 2011): “I don’t believe in the God of the Bible. I have my reasons for that. Because, well, with everything the loving God allows to happen in the world, I cannot imagine a loving God” (p21). He had studied philosophy and Eastern religions but did not follow any movement within philosophy or religion. Although he did not express “religious” experiences, this participant believed in thought transference and related a miraculous event which he experienced as predestined. The other widower had been raised in Protestantism. He had a sceptical stance and had already criticised religious doctrine as an adolescent during catechism:

I said, if the seawater had been two or three degrees warmer or colder, in the development of evolution, we might not have been there at all. It is just...Yes, he [the minister] says, we don’t believe in coincidence. But I, I do believe in co...it is just coincidence. (p25)

The first participant doubted whether there will be something after death. The second expressed his disbelief in an afterlife: “And, well, heaven and hell, they just made that up a few thousand years ago, somebody made that up and wrote it down, but I don’t believe anything of it” (p25). Although both expressed their fear of dying painfully, they accepted death and did not fear death itself. However, one worried what would happen to his cat should he die. Both mentioned the naturalness of death as reason for their acceptance:
Table 1. Types of lived religion and their characteristics. Numbers between brackets indicate the number of respondents in a category having mentioned characteristic. If no numbers are indicated, all respondents in this category have the mentioned characteristic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Religious belief</th>
<th>Religious practice</th>
<th>Religious experience</th>
<th>Afterlife belief</th>
<th>Attitude toward death</th>
<th>Acceptance ground</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lacking</td>
<td>no belief in God; scepticism (1); criticism (1); struggling with theodicy (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>miracle event (1); predestination (1)</td>
<td>doubt (1); disbelief (1)</td>
<td>acceptance; fear of dying painfully; no fear of death; death-related worries (1)</td>
<td>naturalness; full life span (1); death of others (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>no longer belief in God; openness (1); criticism (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>miracle event (1); fate (1)</td>
<td>disbelief; no worries (1)</td>
<td>acceptance (1); no fear of death (1); fear of death (1)</td>
<td>naturalness (1); full life span (1); good life (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liminal</td>
<td>being in between belief and non-belief; criticism; struggling with theodicy (3); tolerance (2)</td>
<td>frequent church attendance (2); praying (2); reading theological books (1); Bible group (1); ritual (1); supporting church (1); watching television sermons (1)</td>
<td>miracle (2); predestination (1); conversation (1); support (1); personal relationship (1)</td>
<td>doubt (3); disbelief (1); no worries (1)</td>
<td>acceptance; no fear of death (1); fear of violent death (1); dying is “being taken” (1)</td>
<td>naturalness (2); full life span (1); good life (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loose</td>
<td>believing without belonging; criticism; tolerance (3)</td>
<td>praying (2); quoting Bible (1); ritual (1)</td>
<td>personal relationship (2); miracle (1); predestination (1); conversation (1); support (1); trust (1)</td>
<td>doubt (3); disbelief (1)</td>
<td>acceptance; fear of death (2); no fear of death (1); fear of dying painfully (1); death-related worries (1); death is predestined (1)</td>
<td>full life span (2); naturalness (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned</td>
<td>belief in God blended with scientific reasoning; scepticism; criticism; holism (2); tolerance (2)</td>
<td>regular to frequent church attendance; praying (1)</td>
<td>fate (1); conversation (1); personal relationship (1); support (1); trust (1)</td>
<td>belief (1); doubt (1); disbelief (1)</td>
<td>acceptance; no fear of death (2); life is a gift (2)</td>
<td>naturalness; faith (1); full life span (1); good life (1); living on in others (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasting</td>
<td>Strong and actively practiced faith that provides strength; criticism (5); tolerance (4); struggling with theodicy (3); holism (2)</td>
<td>frequent church attendance (6); praying (6); reading/quoting Bible/Christian books (5); singing church songs (4); passing on one’s faith (4); supporting church (3); watching television sermons (3); Bible group (3); ritual (2)</td>
<td>personal relationship (1); support (6); trust (5); conversation (3); guidance (3); miraculous event (3); predestination/fate (3)</td>
<td>belief (6); doubt (1)</td>
<td>acceptance; no fear of death (4); death in God’s hands (4); life is a gift (2); death-related worries (2); fear of dying painfully (1)</td>
<td>faith (5); naturalness (4); full life span (4); living on in others (3); death of others (3); good life (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquid</td>
<td>Strong and actively practiced faith blended with new spirituality; tolerance; criticism</td>
<td>frequent church attendance; praying; spiritual practices; supporting church (3); passing on one’s faith (2); ritual (2); Bible group (2); quoting Bible (1); watching television sermons (1)</td>
<td>support; conversation (3); personal relationship (3); trust (3); miraculous event (2); things happen for a reason (2); guidance (1)</td>
<td>belief</td>
<td>acceptance; no fear of death (3); fear of dying painfully (2)</td>
<td>faith; naturalness (1); full life span (1); death of others (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yes, I find that a very normal thing. Everything that lives will die at a certain moment. The cat and the dog and the mice who live on the balcony all die at a certain time. And then it is finished for that creature. And we are no different from a mammal which is actually precisely the same. (p25)

Moreover, one mentioned the (good) death of his partner and the other the fullness of his life span: “Well, we all are fated to die. And when that arrives for me . . . As I think about it now, it’s like, well, so be it. Besides, I have the age for it, don’t I?” [laughs] (p21).

Lost religion

The essence of “lost religion” is belief in God that has been lost: “I used to have it, but not anymore” (p16). It was expressed by two religiously unaffiliated widowers whose education level ranged from primary education to PhD. For the first, his belief in God faded without obvious reason: “I have nothing against faith, not at all, but I have been raised Catholic and since, well, let’s say, since I was twenty it has totally petered out” (p16). However, he still mentioned doubt and even wondered about going to church again: “I still think some Sunday morning I will join them. […] But every time something stops me” (p16). For the second, who had been raised Protestant, negative childhood experiences caused loss of faith:

And at school we had Biblical History every day and in itself I found that quite interesting. But, well, already then for the first time in my life I found it difficult because I thought things were unfair. Er, with a certain Bible text: “He who has, shall be given, and he who does not have, from him shall be taken what he has.” I’ve never forgotten. And then I had to take it back, because Jesus himself had said it. […] Then I was beaten up because I didn’t want to take it back. With a stick, in front of the classroom. Yes, that deeply affected me. And then I had had enough. (p19)

Although he criticised religious doctrine and precepts he had an open attitude toward religion. He did not believe in God but neither considered himself a complete atheist: “Well, in fact I am, let’s say, more or less an atheist. But not completely. Yes, I mean, there are things that...that you cannot explain in a different way” (p19). Here, he refers to his experience of miraculous coincidences that seem to be fated: “Something coincidental, such a coincidence, impresses me. That must have a meaning” (p19). Both participants in this group did not believe in an afterlife; one of them explicitly stated not worrying about it. The first participant mentioned sometimes fearing death. However, his doubt about whether he wished to receive resuscitation because of the good age he had reached indicated that his full life span helped him to accept death. The second participant accepted and did not fear death because of the inevitability of death and the fact that he had had a good life: “For myself, I’m convinced that, when I will be
confronted with it [death] I won’t have a problem with it. I have had a good life, a wonderful life, in fact.” (p19).

**Liminal religion**

The essence of liminal religion is an inner disposition that is balancing between faith and non-faith: “Somewhere something remains, but I have so many doubts. And you are right in between. More towards doubt, than towards faith” (p1). It was expressed by two males and two females with education levels ranging from primary education to PhD. The term “liminal religion” is inspired by Victor Turner’s view on liminal personae as “necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Liminal religion is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). All participants expressing liminal faith had a critical stance toward religion: three criticised religious precepts, religious conservatism and/or old-fashioned sermons, and two criticised the conduct of clerics. Further, two expressed tolerance in religious matters. For the first, highly educated, Protestant participant, liminality of his religion was caused by scholarly and scientific evidence: “But we know, in this time, there are many publications about the existence or non-existence of God. And I also struggle with those ideas” (p13). The others doubted due to their struggle with theodicy:

> Sometimes I think there must be a good Lord. The way nature is. There must be someone who arranges that. And then I think: How can God allow this war? With those children in such a small boat, and they get drowned. God is love, they say. That, that is not love. See, and you hang between these. I want to believe, but I can hardly do so anymore. In this world. (p1)

Apart from the suffering in the world, also the misbehaviour of clerics, personal loss, and personal suffering caused a struggle with theodicy:

> Then you think: My God, those people studied theology, they had years of, well, novitiate and everything; before you are priest it takes eight or nine years. And they fall so deep. How is this possible? That, I sometimes wonder about that, right? (p1)

> Then you get those beautiful stories, that all have to do with the Bible of course. Very beautiful stories of the past. Yes. And then I think … How’s that possible? Well, people were cured. I have to miss my wife, she was fifty-four years old. And she was religious, and she was a loving wife, and a beautiful wife, and good to the children. And then I think: why, why, why? (p4)

> Yes, I also had that last night, when I felt poorly, and then you think: Why does this happen to me? Eh? You never had something like that, or so, and then…Yes,
and then you get confronted with it, and then, well... Then it actually stops, eh? Then, then you don’t believe it that much anymore. (p2)

Notwithstanding their struggle with theodicy, two participants in this group said it was a miracle they were still alive and one mentioned events she experienced as predestined. Most participants in this group still performed religious practice. Two Protestant participants went to church weekly or several times a month. One of them participated in a Bible group, watched television sermons and prayed: “But you pray for something, and it comes, it comes to nothing, actually” (p4). He was the only one in this group who, although stating not believing everything, not even in an afterlife, still expressed his belief in God: “But I don’t believe in certain things. I only believe in, well, our good Lord, that’s what I believe in” (p4). However, considering the extent of doubt and disbelief he expressed, his religion was considered liminal. The other Protestant read theological books and had performed voluntary work for his church. The two other participants in this group, with a Catholic background, were no longer church members. However, one of them still prayed and experienced a personal relationship and inner conversations with Mary and other saints:

Only when I have lost something, I always say: Anthony, you are my patron of lost items. And well, so to speak, have I lost my wallet, help me find it. And if I find it, I say: Thank you, Saint Anthony. Anthony of Padua. Such things you still do, and that has remained from the past. (p1)

She also still performed religious rituals: “But sometimes I still light a candle for Mary at the [street name]. And then I think: in gratitude. Don’t you exist, in God’s name, do you exist, then you have a nice light again” (p1). She felt supported by such practices: “And maybe it is nonsense, but it did me good. There I was, I was happy” (p1).

One participant in this group disbelieved in an afterlife and the others doubted the existence of an afterlife; one of them stated that his doubts do not trouble him. For one of them the cyclicity of nature gave hope of an afterlife: “There could be something after life. Because autumn, summer and winter...” (p1). All participants in this group accepted death. One described dying as “being taken” by “them,” which probably referred to God and/or the angels. One explicitly stated not being afraid of death, but fearing violent death. For two participants the inevitability of death helped them to accept death; for another the length and goodness of the time he had been given aided acceptance.

Loose religion

The essence of loose religion is “believing without belonging,” described by Davie (1990, p. 457) as continuing to believe but having ceased to belong to
one’s religious institution in any meaningful sense: “Yes, I was raised Catholic. Until I finished school, and then I no longer went to church. Because you all had such an obligation. And I still don’t go. But somewhere, I still believe. And I also still pray” (p3). It was expressed by two male and two female participants who had received primary to lower secondary education. Of the three of them who were religiously unaffiliated two had a Catholic background and did not go to church and one had a Protestant background and only went to church on special occasions (such as on Christmas day). The fourth had remained a member of the Catholic church because of his wish to be buried in a Catholic graveyard next to his deceased wife, but no longer went to church. All participants in this group criticised religious obligation, conflict and/or outward appearances and one criticised religious unfairness:

There in the mornings the poor children could receive a glass of milk and a bun. But if it turned out that their father and mother had not been in church on Sunday, then they didn’t get it. And then I got a certain... antipathy towards faith. (p24)

Three mentioned valuing religious tolerance; one of them stressed the importance of being able to believe what she herself wanted to believe:

“Then, then I think, yes, just let me believe in my own way what I myself want to believe. I don’t wish to get it thrust upon me” (p26). Two participants in this group still prayed and expressed a personal relationship with God. The first experienced inner conversations with God, trusted God and felt supported by God, enjoyed burning candles, and quoted from the Bible. He experienced still being alive as a miracle. The occurrence of evil in the world did not challenge his faith: “And that’s the injustice on Earth. Yes, but I don’t know if God is to blame. I don’t think so” (p20). For the second, praying only helped to a certain extent: “Yes [it helps] for a little while. But it doesn’t really help” (p3). The two participants who did not mention praying used vague terms when describing their faith. The first stated: “Yes, I do believe there is something, yes. I still have that belief, yes” (p24). The second believed someone created everything in the past but experienced no personal relationship with this “someone.” However, she did consider everything in life, even death, as predestined.

One participant in this group disbelieved in an afterlife. He had experienced moments of death anxiety during an illness, but did not have any further difficulties with death. The fact that he did not wish to be resuscitated because of his age indicated that the length of his life span helped him accept death. The three others doubted the existence of an afterlife. One of them explicitly stated accepting and not fearing death, but worried about dying in agony. The inevitability of death and the length of her life span helped her to accept death: “I mean, we cannot all become 150, can we? [laughs] No, we all will someday, well... And that time will come sooner than when you were
young” (p26). The second did not mention fearing nor accepting death, but he did worry about leaving behind his partner. He joked about reincarnation and jokingly expressed concern about the afterlife:

But if I would, well, if I should die, meet St. Peter, and be allowed to look around in Heaven, and I saw, and Peter would say to me: No boy, you have, you aren’t allowed in yet. And then I would see people I have known in there. I would not like that. [laughs] (p20)

The third clearly expressed fear of death: “No, I don’t have an image of it. But I do fear it. I always think: Oh, if I didn’t have to experience it. If I wouldn’t have to know” (p3).

**Learned religion**

The essence of “learned religion” is belief in God that is informed by and blended with scientific and scholarly reasoning. It was expressed by three male Catholics with education levels ranging from A levels to PhD whose church attendance ranged from monthly to more than weekly. They had a sceptical attitude:

So, about everything you are being told about “this is how it is,” you say: “Interesting. I’m curious to know how it really is!” (p22)

I mean, I don’t like frippery, and if I cannot humanly understand it, then it is, well … Look, I don’t go in for apparitions. Right? I have to be able to comprehend it. (p17)

All criticised religious doctrine; one also criticised religious hierarchy and the content of Mass. Two expressed religious tolerance. For the first participant, the principle of causality proves there is a higher power:

Well, and for me the most important fact is, how can you…the chicken or the egg, right? Which was first? You can take whatever you like. You can ask: where is the source. Right? I mean, let’s take a plant. First that plant must have been there once, otherwise it could never have been multiplied. Well, that…principle of causality is proof for me that there is a higher power. Which I acknowledge. (p17)

He mentioned daily prayer, a personal relationship and inner conversations with God, trust in God and guidance and support given by God. For the second participant, his learning challenged his childhood beliefs:

And well, the theory of evolution. Right? There it starts. Right? Well, I can no longer imagine what I learned as a child, that somewhere in the galaxy there floats a God who said at a certain moment, well, made a nice little globe, water and land on it, and well, in that park which I have there I will model a little man from clay […] And actually in my experience that has all come into existence through evolution. Well, and because of that religion has strongly been pushed into the background. (p18)
He had replaced his childhood beliefs by a holistic view: “And, well, the God we were taught as a child does not exist for me. More probably there is, I for me think we all form the godhead together” (p18). He had experienced things in life that seemed to be fated. The third also had a holistic view of God: “And, well, I think, with my experience, that it [God] may be too big for us as human beings, and other beings, to grasp. But that we are…contained in it” (p22). He could well reconcile the theory of evolution with his faith:

Just as you see from the evolution of mankind, from evolution in general, that continuously new properties emerge from things that all, well, tend towards a, well, I would say, a kind of love that can be comprehended as the most encompassing category. (p22)

All participants in this group accepted death because of its naturalness; two explicitly stated not fearing death: “No, I don’t fear death. Death is part of life” (p18). For the first participant in this group, who disbelieved in an afterlife, the length and goodness of his life also brought acceptance of death. For the second, who doubted the existence of an afterlife, his notion that after our death others will develop and manage our initiatives and creations gave consolation. For the third, who believed in an afterlife, this faith also brought comfort:

So that becoming, as I tried to say, that becoming, that will not stop when I blow out my last breath here. That will continue, not only for the other people, but, I think, also for the person concerned. How? We will see! (p22)

The first and third participant expressed their view of life as a gift.

**Lasting religion**

The essence of “lasting religion” is a faith in God that is actively practiced, is strong and provides strength. It was expressed by five female and two male participants, of whom five were Protestant and two were Catholic, with education levels ranging from primary to university education. Typically, lasting faith was coupled with frequent church attendance: four participants expressing lasting faith went to church weekly and two several times a month. However, one participant, who always used to go to church, regretted no longer going because of vision and mobility problems: “Yes, so that’s a bit unpleasant, I think. And, because you, church, you find that important, of course” (p15). As she regretted no longer going to church and expressed a strong faith, the religion of this participant was still considered “lasting.” Five participants in this group criticised religious doctrine, practices, precepts, and/or religious conflict; one also mentioned misconduct of a minister. Four expressed religious tolerance: “You think about it like this, I think about it like that. But there is only One” (p23). Also, three struggled with theodicy:
“And then I say to Mary: Couldn’t you do something about that? Help those people, in God’s name!” (p10). Two gave holistic descriptions of God as “all-embracing spirit” (p7) or “the total animation of my existence” (p14).

All participants in this group explicitly mentioned praying, except for one who read the Bible very regularly and probably prayed as well. Five mentioned reading the Bible or other Christian books and/or quoted from the Bible. Four mentioned singing church songs. Also, four mentioned passing on their faith to the younger generation. Three mentioned supporting their church, three participated in a Bible group, and three mentioned watching television sermons. Moreover, two mentioned performing religious rituals. All participants in this group expressed a personal relationship with God or Mary and three mentioned having (inner) conversations with them: “It is not a dead God we are, we are dealing with, but it’s a living God who is busy. Who stays busy, also with your life, although you think things will always come automatically” (p7). All but one mentioned feeling supported by God or their faith: “But, sometimes I say, I have experienced things that I thought, if I had not had my faith, it might have gone wrong” (p23). The one who did not mention feeling supported did mention praying for help or support for others. Five reported trusting God and/or Jesus. Three mentioned events they experienced as “fated” or their belief in predestination. Further, three expressed feeling guided by God and/or the Holy Spirit:

Well, and that is, say, at the end of your life, because there I am by now, you start to discover, eh, you resisted, you disagreed, you thought it should be different, and you also tried to steer it differently, but that is being broken, that, and that, that is being bent. […] I see that as guidance from God. (p7)

Also, three mentioned miraculous events:

And...in the course of my life I must say that with my family I have also experienced things, in a, not miracles or something, but...care. [...] And afterwards I think: How special, that we were so protected...We did have a fire bomb in the garden. In the carrot bed. But it did not... It was a phosphorous bomb. And it didn’t explode. Yes, those are such...miraculous events. (p12).

Six participants in this group believed in an afterlife, although for most of them their view of the afterlife was more open or in accordance with popular beliefs than explicitly Christian. For one the cyclicity of nature provided trust in an afterlife: “Very certainly there will be something. Of course! Just like spring will soon return now. There must be something, otherwise that couldn’t be possible, could it?” (p23). One doubted the existence of an afterlife but still used Christian imagery when talking about it: “I don’t know. Sometimes I think, well, I may see Mary. Right? But, but Mary already has so many persons to greet. She will not even see me, you know, I think then, right?” (p10). All participants in this group accepted death and four explicitly stated not fearing death. However, one
feared dying painfully and two worried about the impact of their death on their loved ones. Four viewed death as decided by God and/or described dying as being taken by the Lord; two of them stated viewing life as a gift. As reasons for their acceptance of death, five mentioned their faith: “And I really have faith that it is good. That it will be all right” (p23). Also, four mentioned the naturalness of death:

I don’t mind at all. On the one hand, I like it. To die. Well, that’s a bit silly, but, well... It’s part of life, right? Yes. So I, well, on the one hand, I don’t mind. But I don’t like it, either. (p15)

Moreover, four mentioned the fullness of their life span; one of them stressed she had had a good life. Further, three mentioned that the (good) death of others helped them accept death: “When I saw how my friend, how peaceful she lay, when she said: ‘You pray for me, then I need not be afraid, do I?’” (p23). Finally, for three participants the notion of living on in others provided consolation:

The body will stop. And it will be put into the ground and decompose. But the spirit won’t. It will remain. It will remain intact. Yes. And that spirit you see taken over by children and grandchildren. And that only makes me happy and joyful. (p7)

Liquid religion

The essence of “liquid religion” is a strong and actively practiced faith that is blended with new forms of spirituality. It was expressed by four female participants (three Catholics and one Protestant) with education levels ranging from lower to upper secondary. The term “liquid religion” is inspired by Zygmunt Bauman’s book Liquid Modernity (2000), in which he uses the concept “liquidity” as a metaphor to grasp the nature of the present phase in the history of modernity. Liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape and are, therefore, associated with mobility and inconstancy (p. 2). According to Bauman it is characteristic of liquid modernity that patterns and configurations that provide meaning are no longer “given”, let alone “self-evident”; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers. (Bauman, 2000, p. 7)

We apply the concept of liquidity to religion, indicating a faith that is not grounded in predetermined configurations but instead is continually self-constructed in the course of an individual’s life. All participants in this group expressed tolerance in matters of faith: “I think, when you are with ten people, then you all believe something different” (p11). They all criticised
religious dogma, doctrine, precepts and/or outward appearances and one also criticised the misbehaviour of clerics.

All participants in this group prayed and were frequent churchgoers (from several times a month to more than weekly); one watched a sermon on television weekly. Moreover, all practiced alternative forms of spirituality (Knoblauch, 2008). They mentioned a range of alternative sources of inspiration: “deviant” Christian traditions, such as esoteric Christianity or “a course in miracles,” Asian religions (especially the concept of chakras), Mayan shamanic religiosities and “those psychological traditions that refer to the hidden dimensions of the inner self” (Knoblauch, 2008, p. 144), in this case, psychosynthesis, which one participant referred to as “a red thread that still goes through my life” (p5). They all practiced or had practiced alternative bodily techniques, such as yoga, shiatsu, meditation, working with chakras and/or going to a healing; two of them also mentioned performing religious rituals. Three mentioned supporting or having supported their church; two mentioned passing on their faith to their children. Also, two mentioned participating in a Bible group and one of them quoted from the Bible.

All participants in this group felt supported by God or their faith: “Basically for me there was something like: you don’t have to do it on your own” (p5). Three experienced a personal relationship and mentioned (inner) conversations with God, Mary, and/or angels: “I do have a hotline with upstairs” (p5). Further, three expressed their trust in God; one of them felt guided by God: “God, well, I...is for me...my creator. He who saw me before I was born. Put me on the earth. Then he will not let go of me” (p5). Two felt that things are not coincidental but happen for a reason. Also, two related miraculous events:

Once I experienced that I was, my computer was broken. And that thing didn’t want to work at all anymore. Trying once again.... And in the end I said: Michael, you must help me. [laughs] Then I was just doing some things. After that I opened it, and imagine, it did work! [laughs] Now I don’t want to say, I’m not a person to say, well, he did it, because I mean ... But yet I have experienced such things several times. And then I find that amusing. (p11)

Especially when events seem “too miraculous to be true” they will generally not be viewed as mere coincidences anymore (Venbrux & Meder, 1995). However, one of them even found significance in numbers on a clock:

I also watch, yes, that is also very strange, when I feel a little bit down or whatever. That something’s wrong. In the kitchen I have a, such a microwave and it has a, well, a clock, right? And...then I look, by chance, not at all that I’m paying attention. And then for example it is, well, 22:22. And then I think, well, but I’m being helped, I think then. Yes, then I always think so, and thank you, and then, well. But that’s very strange, that is. And it happens very often. (p8)
All participants in this group believed in an afterlife. They viewed the afterlife as going toward the light, coming home, or living on of the soul. Although two feared dying painfully, they all accepted death and three explicitly stated not being afraid of death. For all, their faith helped to accept death: “I have total faith that it will be good, yes. Yes. That...it will certainly be good there” (p11). For one, the inevitability of death and the length of her life span also gave acceptance: “I am really approaching the end. I cannot escape that. And actually I am not so afraid of that” (p5). For another, witnessing the death of others provided acceptance: “No, but I am absolutely not afraid of death. Really not. But I, well, actually I have seen so many people die” (p8).

**Discussion**

Our analysis provides three insights in the relationship between religion and death anxiety. First, while religion appears to be related to death anxiety, our analysis shows that, rather than confessional boundaries, the degree of religious commitment determines this relationship. Second, our observations corroborate previous research indicating a curvilinear relationship between religious commitment and death anxiety, suggesting that a strong belief system, whether religious or non-religious, fosters perceptions of increased control and predictability, which lessen death anxiety (McMordie, 1981) and that both firmness and consistency of beliefs and practices buffer against death anxiety in old age (Wink & Scott, 2005). Fear of death was only mentioned by two participants expressing loose faith (whose religious beliefs were inconsistent with their practices) and one participant expressing lost faith (who still doubted his disbelief and wondered about going to church again, which indicated lack of firmness of his belief system). Third, our observation of other participants who doubted their faith (those with liminal faith) or expressed loose faith who did not fear death, suggests that sources other than religion helped participants to accept death. Whereas 10 participants mentioned their faith as providing acceptance of death, 14 mentioned the naturalness and/or inevitability of death, 11 the fullness of their life span, five the (good) death of others, four the goodness of the life they have received and four their expectation to live on in others. Our observation that reaching old age and recognition that death is part of life provided meaning to death for older people corresponds with the observation of Ardelt, Ai, and Eichenberger (2008) that although for younger participants religion and spirituality helped them cope with serious illness, for older retirement community residents their advanced life stage rather than religion gave meaning to their serious illness. It is also consistent with a range of quantitative research indicating that death anxiety declines from middle age to older age (Niemeyer, Wittkowski, & Moser, 2004; Russac, Gatliiff, Reece, & Spottswood, 2007).
Our analysis also provides three insights into “lived religion.” First, our observation of three individuals with liminal religion who doubted their faith but still went to church or prayed and performed religious rituals corroborates McGuire’s (2008, p. 15) statement that lived religion is not necessarily logically coherent, but rather it needs to be effective, to “work”: “and maybe it is nonsense, but it did me good” (p1). Also the combination of belief in God with disbelief in or doubt about an afterlife, which was expressed by eight participants, illustrates the often contradictory nature of lived religion. Second, our observation that three males with education levels ranging from A levels to PhD, who expressed learned religion, had blended their scientific and scholarly learning with their faith in a (seemingly) rationally coherent way corroborates McGuire’s suggestion that “it may be only intellectuals who care about rational coherence in religious ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting” (2008, pp. 15–16). Moreover, science and/or scholarly learning had also caused a male with a PhD to doubt his faith and a male with lower secondary education not to believe at all. Indeed, only males, who were generally higher educated, expressed science and/or academic learning as sources of faith or disbelief. Moreover, liquid religion, a blend of traditional religion with alternative spirituality, was only expressed by female participants. Although our qualitative data are not statistically qualified for comparing groups, these observations suggest a gender bias. Third, our observation that Catholics were over-represented in learned and liquid religion whereas Protestants were over-represented in (more traditional) lasting religion suggests a bias caused by affiliation: due to the syncretic nature of Catholicism, Catholics may have been drawn more toward types of faith that allow blending of religion with science or alternative spirituality.

Notes

1. Seven of them went to church monthly or more often.
2. One originally Protestant participant who no longer went to the Protestant church but volunteered during Catholic church services in a nursing home considered herself half Protestant and half Catholic. As she had been socialised in the Protestant church, she was considered Protestant in this research.
3. In two cases, the information letter had to be read aloud to participants because of visual impairments.
4. In three cases, participants living in care institutions could not be reached by phone. In these cases, contact was made through the spiritual caregivers working in these care institutions.
5. The other two dimensions of religious commitment mentioned by Stark and Glock (1968), knowledge and consequences, were mentioned by some participants but did not emerge as essential characteristics from our data.
6. All presented quotes were translated from Dutch into English by the first author. Code p21 indicates a quotation from participant no. 21.
References


