

## ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH AND THE RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS OF YOUTH

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### Abstract

**Purpose of the study:** this study aimed to analyze the modern representation of death by studying the attitude of religious people, mainly Christians, towards death.

**Methodology:** On the basis of the Siberian Federal University, the authors conducted research on the attitude of student youth towards death. The questionnaire in a standardized fashion was used. Likert scale judgments were analyzed. The methodological concepts of the attitude towards the death of such authors as Philippe Ariès and Gilbert Durand, as well as the Russian cosmists, served as the prerequisite for the formation of the research hypothesis. The group of the respondent demonstrated the religious beliefs and their faith in God. The answers of the group were interpreted on the subject of their attitude towards death, the ideas of death, and the types of protection against the fear of death.

**Main Findings:** In the course of this work, the authors determined that the majority of student youth formed a negative representation of death that does not correspond with the religious ideology. Several concepts that reflect the attitude of youth towards death and their method of fighting the fear of death are described. The authors draw a conclusion on the state of the religious consciousness of student youth that is a result of unfamiliarity with religious norms or the fusion of the traditions of various religions.

**Applications of this study:** The study would serve as an antecedent to further investigation on people's attitude towards death. The research results can also be applied in social anthropology, social philosophy, and sociology.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** The study shows the important attitude of student youth towards death and can help to form the main problems of the religious consciousness of student youth.

**Keywords:** *Social Institutions, Imaginaire, Russian Philosophy, Cosmism, Religion, Christianity, Death Anxiety, Death, Russian Cosmism, Death Studies.*

### INTRODUCTION

Religious beliefs affect many aspects of human existence. Attitude toward death is one of the important and semantic characteristics of religion.

Attitudes toward death change with the development of society and culture. Death in a traditional society is perceived as an accident and a consequence of carelessness and error, then further the attitude towards death undergoes a series of changes. As a society stratification and the formation of monotheistic religions increase, death is perceived as a personal tragedy (Fen'vesh and Andreeva, 2013). As the attitude towards death is transformed into an individual and personal understanding of the phenomenon, turning into tragedy and carrying predominantly negative connotations, there is a fear of death and, therefore, a need for protection from the fear of death.

One of the most important functions of religion is compensatory and therapeutic. The essence consists in the ability to generate ideas consoling people (Danil'yan and Taranenko, 2013). A person turning to religion is trying to find a way for salvation from earthly imperfections including death.

The social institution of religion is intended to satisfy the spiritual needs that no other institution can fully satisfy. Mortal humanity needs ideals and values capable to fill gaps in consciousness, and this is possible by adopting a different, sacred reality (Ivin, 2006), where justice and eternal life triumph.

The last life crisis in the form of death is the epicentre of the most religious concepts. A person hopes for eternal life since not being able to accept the inevitable end referring to the idea of the soul and spiritual existence (Malinowski, 2012). In this case, religion can be very conveniently built-in with the consoling ideas of immortality, endowing a person with a soul that is usually immortal.

Modern society even being a secular, has the social institution of religion performing its functions and existing to the extent that there is a need for it.

The presence of this need determines both the direction of philosophical thought towards human existence and the active development of individual theories reflecting the problem of death and immortality in a more particular way. It is reasonable to devote some time to the analysis of these theories within the framework of modern European and Russian philosophy. The common thing that unites all these areas of thought is the fact that death is considered as an evil that needs to be get rid of ([Aleshin, 2015](#); [Noonan, 2016](#); [Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014](#); [Rodén, 2010](#); [Višňovský, 2015](#)).

## METHODOLOGY

One of the most popular and interesting theories, or rather, the schemes of the history of death is a scheme developed by Philippe Aries. Aries singled out four stages of death perception in Western European culture: “Tamed Death”, “One's Own Death”, “Thy Death”, “Forbidden Death”. According to Aries, at the basis of the evolution of our attitude towards death lies the general evolution of the individual's inner world in its relation to nature and to the “other”. The revolution in relation to death, according to Aries, comes at the beginning of the 20th century. The desire to protect the last moments allotted to a person in this world from unnecessary suffering takes on a different color: to protect from emotional shock not so much the dying person but the relatives. So gradually death becomes a shameful and forbidden subject. He calls it "forbidden death" related to our time. This trend has been increasing since the middle of the 20th century, which is associated with a change in the place of dying. The person now passes away not at home, among his relatives, but in the hospital meeting death alone. The drama's “main character” is changing again for the 17th-18th centuries; Aries noted the transition of the initiative from the dying person to his family. Now the doctor and the hospital team become the “master of death”. Death becomes impersonal, and rituals are basically preserved, but lose their drama. Too open expression of grief is no longer sympathy but is perceived as a sign of either bad education, or weakness, or even mental shift ([Ariès, 1991](#)).

Gilbert Durand, the researcher of the sociology of imagination, noted the decisive role of the mythic, the unconscious above the Logos, and the existence of only the imaginary as a response to the existence of death. Death is time and time not loaded with any events in its pure form is nothing more than an expectation to death.

According to the researcher, everything that a person creates around himself is the answer to death. Moreover, the unconscious reproduces death as something that we need to fight with and what must be resisted. The demonization of death gives rise to the dualistic constructions of the struggle of the dark and light, all types of dualistic myths ([Durand, 1999](#)). Thus, the decisive role of death in a person's life and their immanent opposition are emphasized.

A special desire to fight death, overcome death and achieve immortality differs Russian philosophy. The philosophy incorporates the identification of people's freedom with their immortality ([Solov'ev, 1988](#)), and the vision of life as a struggle against death ([Bulgakov, 2018](#)), and even the definition of death as the ultimate evil ([Berdyayev, 2010](#)). According to Russian philosophy humans as a part of the cosmos can also be eternal, for these various ways of further development were proposed, but one thing was common and essential, it was striving for perfection as a guarantee of immortality ([Shlapentokh, 2017](#); [Twardowski, 2015](#)).

## RESULTS

In this regard, it is necessary to mention such a phenomenon as post-humanism, in which the transition from humanity to posthumanity is considered (often posthumanism is identified with transhumanism - human biotechnological improvement - but post-humanism is rather a whole philosophical school ([Evans, 2015](#); [De Haris, 2005](#))). The transition from human to posthuman is due to achievements in nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science ([Rodén, 2010](#); [2014](#)). This school also examines the philosophical problems of a person's desire to improve the body with the help of technologically advanced devices (replacement of organs, body parts), and the questions of the very essence of a person: whether a person still is a former biological species or become something new.

Speaking of death, we imply imperfection, evil, something to fight with, and put forward an appropriate hypothesis.

Before the discussion of the study conducted on the basis of the Siberian Federal University, it is necessary to agree that Christianity in general means Orthodox Christianity as the dominant religion in the territory of the Russian Federation, and also that we understand the basic tenets of Christianity and its fundamental differences from the other world religions.

We conducted a sociological study among students of the Siberian Federal University in order to find out their attitude to death and identify the concepts that they use to protect against the fear of death. We analyze the answers of 222 students noted they believe in God (a total of 370 students were interviewed). According to the survey, 52% of respondents said that they profess Christianity, 6% Islam, 1% Buddhism, 1% paganism. Considering that the division in areas of study was homogeneous, so there were an equal number of representatives from the humanities and natural sciences.

To the question “Do you believe in God?” the distribution of answers corresponded to the answers about religious affiliation, however, about 2% of respondents who noted their faith in God indicated that they did not belong to any religious denomination. Conversely, respondents who indicated their religious affiliation as Christianity (4%) indicated that they did not believe in God. Obviously, this indicates a very superficial understanding of religion by the

respondents. Since one of the main aspects of a particular religion is a certain attitude to death namely, the idea of the afterlife as we mentioned before, it was necessary to find out how many believing respondents, regardless of religion, believe in the existence of life after death.

The questionnaire was given a scale of judgments (Table 1). It was necessary to agree or disagree with the statements to one degree or another. Recall that further reviews contain answers only of those respondents who indicated themselves as believers (most of them - 98% are Christians).

**Table 1:** A scale of judgments

Judgment	% agreed with the judgment	% disagreed with the judgment	% difficult to answer
There is nothing after death	23	48	29
There is a reincarnation after death	42	24	34
Death is only a physical cessation of life	73	16	11
The existence of the immortal soul begins after death	56	13	31
Death scares me by the uncertainty of what will happen after it	79	13	8
Human life determines what happens after death	46	16	38
The soul goes to heaven or hell after death	46	16	38
Everyone is equal in the face of death	94	3	3
Death can be avoided	24	66	10
everything connected with death causes negative emotions	63	22	15
terminally ill people should be looked after by specialists in medical institutions	65	23	12

According to the distribution of answers, it can be seen that the majority (79%) of respondents say that they are afraid of death. Also, we can observe an interesting division of opinions about the possibility of avoiding death.

More than half of the respondents indicated that death and everything connected with it causes their negative emotions. Approximately the same number of respondents notes the need to keep terminally ill people in medical institutions.

The results show a clear view of death as a fearful, negative phenomenon, which is of particular interest in our survey since we interpret the answers of believers who (in theory) must be protected from the fear of death by the institution of religion. Further, we consider some of the conclusions arising from the analysis of attitudes toward death — attitudes toward religion.

About a half (42%) of respondents noted that there is a transmigration of souls after death, which is peculiar to Buddhism, not Christianity. Most people who call themselves believers have noted the fear of not knowing what will happen after death, and also that death is only a physical cessation of life. Obviously, they nourish the hope for so-called life after death precisely because of the work of the unconscious mechanisms of protection against the fear of the inevitability of death.

In theory, Christianity, as well as religion in general, is the main defense mechanism against the fear of death and provides the person with the necessary faith and hope which is supported by religious practices and is expressed, ultimately, in the form of a formalized social institution.

The presented results indicate a strong vagueness of the ideas of modern youth about religion, in particular, about Christianity.

Remarkably that believers who have identified themselves as Christians choose their own models of salvation for themselves, either faith in the transmigration of souls, or the afterlife, or another opportunity to escape the ultimate and absolute non-existence.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the psychological and physiological characteristics of the respondents (students under 25 years old), a number of assumptions can be made.

First, the fear of death did not form due to the lack of existential experience. In traditional societies, death was experienced much earlier (Aries, 1991).

Secondly, there is a kind of infantilization, when death is perceived as something that very far away and therefore not important for experiencing here and now.

Thirdly, modern culture pushes death to the periphery of the mass consciousness and does everything possible for people not to encounter the phenomenon of death in life, avoiding any mention of death as something unpleasant, harmful and evil.

This inevitably results in the absence of a feeling of mortality, since they simply do not see it, do not collide, and the mortals begin to feel immortal.

Thus, several concepts can be distinguished that reflect attitudes towards death and ways to fight the fear of death among young people: the atheistic as the most popular among young people, consisting in the denial of afterlife existence and so-called humility with the finiteness of human existence; the Buddhist based on belief in transmigration; the infantile reflecting in some way the denial of death at the moment, because it is perceived as a distant phenomenon does not concern today's being.

This study does not set the goal of finding out the cause of such notions of death and posthumous life among Christians but regards this as a social fact that requires further study.

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#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have contributed equally.

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