Jnl of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 77, No. 4, October 2026. © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S002204692510119X

Devotion to Saints as Medieval Death Anxiety Management

by JYRKI NISSI and INES TESTONI
University of Padua/Tampere University, Finland; University of Padua
E-mails: jyrki.nissi@tuni.fi; ines.testoni@unipd.it

This article examines the fear of death in fourteenth-century Italy by analysing miracle testimonies through the methodological frameworks of terror management theory (TMT) and lived religion. It argues that devotion to saints served as a key coping mechanism for existential anxiety. Examples from the canonisation processes of Clare of Montefalco and Nicholas of Tolentino reveal how individuals turned to saints for protection, seeking to prolong life rather than accept death. This study provides both empirical and methodological insights into the medieval fear of death, illustrating its parallels with contemporary experiences of death anxiety.

Since the late 1970s, various aspects of death and dying in the Middle Ages have attracted significant scholarly interest. Scholars have examined a wide range of sources focusing particularly on the Catholic Church's normative guidelines, religious practices, wills, burial customs, the commemoration of the dead and the distinctive macabre art of the era.[1] Notwithstanding this vast body of scholarship, the fear of death in the Middle Ages has received comparatively little attention.

Philippe Ariès's famous assertion that medieval death was a tamed death, where people supposedly accepted their death calmly and without fear, has

Jyrki Nissi's research for this article was supported by the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.

[1] For an overview of the historiography see the bibliography in A. Kinch (ed.), *A cultural history of death in the Middle Ages*, London 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

long been a prevailing paradigm.[2] While Ariès's categorisations have been criticised and have rarely been employed as a structural device in historical analysis, his grand narrative has continued to influence discussions.[3] Medieval people themselves conceptualised an emotional approach to death in a tripartite manner. Isidore of Seville, in his famous *Etymologiae* (*c.* 560–636), described the death of children and young people as harsh and untimely and the death of the elderly as just and natural. This stance was later repeated by the thirteenth-century Franciscan friar Bartholomaeus Anglicus (*c.* 1200–72) in his influential *De proprietatibus rerum*. Thus, Isidore's classification can also be seen as reflecting a learned late medieval perspective on emotional responses to death.[4]

This article examines the fear of death in the context of fourteenth-century Italy. While the fear of sudden death has been more widely studied in previous scholarship,[5] the present study investigates cases of non-imminent death, where time is allowed for spiritual preparation. By integrating terror management theory (TMT) and the methodological framework of lived religion with a close reading of medieval miracle testimonies, the article analyses the emotional responses of so-called common people to the approach of death. The hypothesis proposed here is that despite the Catholic Church's promise of an afterlife and the instruction to face death calmly, the thought of dying evoked profound anxiety among medieval people. Furthermore, this study investigates how the cult of saints helped individuals process and navigate their fear of death.

Fear, like any other emotion, is not ahistorical, hence the need to better understand its impact on the cultural and social dynamics of past societies.[6] The works by Jean Delumeau and Peter Dinzelbacher were pioneering

[2] P. Ariès, *The hour of our death* (1977), New York 1981.

[3] This was observed by H. Kümper, 'Death', in A. Classen (ed.), *Handbook of medieval culture*. i, Berlin 2015, 315–16. Some recent research has continued to accept the paradigm. Miriam Hlaváčková and Zofia Lysá drew on Ariès, noting that 'death frightens us [modern people] to a much greater extent than it did our ancestors': 'For salvation of the soul: rituals before and after death in the Middle Ages', *Forum historiae* xvii (2023), 3. See also their explicit discussion on tamed death at p. 4.

[4] D. Westerhof, 'Dead and dying bodies', in Kinch, *A cultural history of death*, 25.

[5] For example see J. Robson, 'Fear of falling: depicting the death of Judas in late medieval Italy', in A. Scott and C. Kosso (eds), *Fear and its representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Turnhout 2002, 33–65; J. Hamilton Clements, 'Sudden death in early medieval England and the Anglo-Saxon Fortunes of men', in T. Thomaini (ed.), *Dealing with the dead: mortality and community in medieval and early modern Europe*, Leiden 2018, 36–67; and E. Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England, c.1400–c.1580*, 2nd edn, New Haven–London 2005, 310–11.

[6] On the importance of historicising emotions see, for example, P. Maddern, J. McEwan and A. M. Scott, 'Introduction: performing emotions in medieval and early modern worlds', in P. Maddern, J. McEwan and A. M. Scott (eds), *Performing emotions in early Europe*, Turnhout 2018, pp. xiii–xxx.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

studies regarding medieval fear.[7] However, significant progress has since been made towards a more nuanced understanding of medieval emotions.[8] Specifically focusing on the fear of death, a key contribution was Juanita Feros Ruys's analysis of *ars moriendi* literature, which demonstrated that, at least before the fifteenth century, Christian theologians considered fear a beneficial motivator, prompting individuals to turn to God and repent.[9] As with other research on *ars moriendi*, Ruys's study focused on the views of prominent theologians.[10]

Another important contribution to the discussion on the medieval fear of death was Jill Bradley's art historical analysis, where she observed an interesting shift in attitudes over time. In early medieval images, death was not portrayed as dreadful. However, from the tenth and eleventh centuries onwards, images increasingly communicated the message that death would be terrifying for those lacking sufficient purity. By the twelfth century, personifications of death evoked violent emotions, including terror.[11]

Similar to Bradley and Feros Ruys, Amy Appleford posited that the complex ritual practices and instructional literature surrounding death did not succeed in allaying the human fear of death in the late Middle Ages.[12] While these scholars have deepened our understanding of the mentalities and ideals surrounding death and dying in the Middle Ages, this article provides new empirical and methodological insights, shifting the focus to the everyday religious experiences and emotions of ordinary people.

Emotional experiences differ across time, but there must also be some common ground between the emotional landscapes of the past and present.[13] In addition to the observations of Ruys, Bradley and Appleford, this

[7] J. Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident, XIVe–XVIIIe siècles, une cité assiégée*, Paris 1978; P. Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter*, Paderborn 1996.

[8] B. Rosenwein, *Emotional communities in the early Middle Ages*, Ithaca, NY 2006; N. Bouquet and P. Nagy, *Medieval sensibilities: a history of emotions in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2018.

[9] J. F. Ruys, 'Dying 101: emotion, experience, and learning how to die in the late medieval artes moriendi', *Parergon* xxxi (2014), 55–79.

[10] On the late medieval art of dying see, for example, A. Appleford, *Learning to die in England, 1380–1540*, Philadelphia, PA 2015, and J. Robbe, 'The kingdom of heaven cannot be denied to you justly because you have fought correctly: tracing the evolution of *ars moriendi* literature in the fifteenth century', in I. Johnson and A. M. Rodrigues (eds), *Religious practices and everyday life in the long fifteenth century (1350–1570)*, Turnhout 2021, 217–39.

[11] J. Bradley, 'Emotions, mortality, and vitality', in Kinch, *A cultural history of death*, 59–78.

[12] A. Appleford, 'Death's ritual-symbolic performance', in Kinch, *A cultural history of death*, 92–3.

[13] R. Boddice and M. Smith, *Emotion, sense, experience*, Cambridge 2020; Rosenwein, *Emotional communities*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

article builds on Albrecht Classen's and Eamon Duffy's notions that many individuals displayed a powerful lust for life, just as in contemporary society, despite the central role of death and dying in late medieval European culture.[14]

The methodological approach of Terror Management Theory

TMT was developed in the 1980s by Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon[15] as a social psychological framework exploring how humans cope with the awareness of their own mortality. It provides a robust framework for understanding how existential concerns shape human cognition, emotion and behaviour, offering valuable insights into the interplay between cultural meaning systems and individual psychological processes.[16] Rooted in Ernest Becker's existential works, particularly *The denial of death*,[17] this theory posits that the uniquely human capacity to comprehend the inevitability of death creates the potential for overwhelming terror. To mitigate this existential anxiety, individuals rely on two primary psychological mechanisms: worldview defence and self-esteem enhancement. The defence system against the paralysing anguish of death is structured on two main axes: proximal and distal defences.[18]

Proximal defences refer to the immediate, conscious strategies people use to suppress or distract themselves from thoughts about their mortality. Such reactions are triggered when reminders of death (mortality salience) are explicit and in the foreground of awareness.[19] These defences are designed to manage the cognitive impact of death awareness. They often involve denial or rationalisation, focusing on tangible, immediate actions

[14] A. Classen, 'To fear or not to fear, that is the question: Oswald von Wolkenstein facing death and enjoying life: fifteenth-century *Mentalitätsgeschichte* reflected in lyric poetry', in Scott and Kosso, *Fear and its representations*, 274–94; Duffy, *Stripping of the altars*, 303.

[15] T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon and J. Greenberg, 'Thirty years of terror management theory', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* lii (2015) 1–70.

[16] J. Greenberg, T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon, A. Rosenblatt, M. Veeder, S. Kirkland and D. Lyon, 'Evidence for terror management theory, II: The effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who threaten or bolster the cultural worldview', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* lviii (1990), 308–18.

[17] E. Becker, *The denial of death*, New York 1973.

[18] S. Solomon, J. Greenberg and T. Pyszczynski, *The worm at the core: on the role of death in life* (2015), London 2016.

[19] A. Abeyta, J. Juhl and C. Routledge, 'Exploring the effects of self-esteem and mortality salience on proximal and distally measured death anxiety: a further test of the dual process model of terror management', *Motivation and Emotion* xxxliii (2014), 523–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

to reduce perceived threats, such as avoiding risky behaviours, seeking medical advice, or focusing on health-related routines. These key features consist of (a) suppression of death-related thoughts, that is, individuals may actively push mortality-related thoughts out of their conscious awareness to maintain psychological equilibrium and (b) rationalisation or distancing, engaging in rational analysis to dismiss the immediacy of death.[20]

Distal defences are the unconscious, symbolic mechanisms individuals employ to manage the existential anxiety arising from mortality salience conditions, that is, when death-related thoughts are outside of focal attention but remain active in the background of the mind (implicit cognition).[21] These defences are broader in scope and aim to provide existential security by reinforcing cultural worldviews and self-esteem. Cultural worldviews are shared belief systems that provide a sense of order, purpose and immortality (either literal or symbolic) to strengthen individual buffers against death anxiety. For example, individuals may express greater patriotism, religious conviction or moral absolutism after being subtly reminded of their mortality. This mechanism involves the enhancement of self-esteem, which affirms individuals' value within a cultural context. By pursuing achievements, upholding social norms, or receiving validation from others, individuals symbolically insulate themselves from existential threats. Distal defences are triggered when death-related thoughts are implicit, often after the initial salience of mortality has subsided. For example, subtle reminders of death, such as passing by a cemetery or reading about life-threatening illnesses, can unconsciously prompt individuals to act in ways that reinforce their existential security by improving their cultural worldviews.[22]

Parallel studies on ontological representations of death, which refer to the ways in which immortality is represented (passage *versus* annihilation), show that anxiety is highly oppressive when individuals represent death as annihilation in totality.[23] Nevertheless, the belief in an afterlife (literal immortality) generates less anxiety than the belief in complete annihilation

[20] O. Taubman-Ben-Ari and L. Findler, 'Proximal and distal effects of mortality salience on willingness to engage in health promoting behavior along the life span', *Psychology & Health* xx (2005), 303–18.

[21] T. Pyszczynski, J. Greenberg and S. Solomon, 'A dual-process model of defense against conscious and unconscious death-related thoughts: an extension of terror management theory', *Psychological Review* cvi (1999), 835–45.

[22] T. Pyszczynski, J. Greenberg and S. Solomon, 'Proximal and distal defense: a new perspective on unconscious motivation', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* ix (2000), 156–60.

[23] I. Testoni, D. Ancona and L. Ronconi, 'The ontological representation of death: a scale to measure the idea of annihilation versus passage', *OMEGA–Journal of Death and Dying* lxxi (2015), 60–81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

after death.[24] For this reason, although secularisation and post-secularisation have called into question the truth content of religions, promoting a materialistic and reductionist worldview, people continue to believe and construct their self-worth behaviours in accordance with religious morals.

Miracle testimonies as sources of historical research

Medieval sources include hundreds, if not thousands, of death-related miracles.[25] They were primarily recorded in canonisation processes and miracle collections.[26] These are cases in which people turned to saints as they approached death or when loved ones prayed to saints for relatives who were believed to be dead or dying. Death-related miracles, especially resurrection miracles, were regarded as effective proofs of sainthood, as they were the most spectacular miracles intermediated by saints.[27] Theologians believed that such miraculous deeds had the power to convert people into a more pious way of life. Nevertheless, they also provided people with relief and comfort, and this was acknowledged by some theologians as well.[28]

From the extensive *corpus* of late medieval death-related miracles, this article presents three cases each from the canonisation processes of Clare of Montefalco (1268–1308) in 1318[29] and Nicholas of Tolentino (1245–1305) in 1325.[30] Both canonisation processes included more than twenty death-related miracles, making them fruitful sources for analysis. Although Nicolas of Tolentino and Clare of Montefalco apparently never met each other, they were connected by their lifetimes and shared spiritual context.

[24] S. Bianco, I. Testoni, A. Palmieri, S. Solomon, and J. Hart, 'The psychological correlates of decreased death anxiety after a near-death experience: the role of self-esteem, mindfulness, and death representations', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* lxiv (2024), 343–66.

[25] Most comprehensively on death-related miracles see J. Nissi, *The communality of death and dying in 15th century Europe: evidence of miracle narrative and ars moriendi guidebooks*, Tampere 2021.

[26] Some death-related miracles are also documented in chronicles, sermons, theological treatises and devotional texts.

[27] On the biblical examples of medieval miracles see, for example, R. Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims: popular beliefs in medieval England* (1977), New York 1995, 49–50.

[28] On Sante Boncor's theological rationale of resurrection miracles in late medieval Italy see D. Salvi, *L'agiografia su Bernardino Santo (1450–1460)*, Firenze 2014, 37–49. For an early medieval example see an *in vita* resurrection miracle attributed to St Gregory in Rosenwein, *Emotional communities*, 87–8.

[29] On the cult and canonisation process of Clare of Montefalco see E. Menestò (ed.), *Il processo di canonizzazione di Chiara da Montefalco*, Firenze 1984.

[30] On the cult and canonisation process of Nicholas of Tolentino see, for example, D. Lett, *Un Procès de canonisation au Moyen Âge: essai d'histoire sociale*, Paris 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Both followed the Augustinian rule, placing them within the same religious and spiritual framework. These two sources also come from the same geographical area, the heart of the Italian peninsula, and their canonisation processes were initiated under the papacy of John XXII (1316–34).[31] While the cases presented in this article come exclusively from the region corresponding to present-day Italy, a country shaped by its history as the centre of Catholicism, cases similar to those presented here were recorded across Western Christendom in the late Middle Ages.[32]

The use of hagiographic texts in historical research demands careful attention to the methodological challenges they pose.[33] Canonisation processes were judicial examinations aimed at determining whether a person who was in the odour of sanctity ('fama sanctitatis') met the criteria to be considered a true saint.[34] These interrogations followed a structured, trial-like format, where factors such as memory, translation, abstraction and selective reporting modified the original words spoken by witnesses. Thus, their authentic voices are not audible.[35] However, the testimonies were rooted in individuals' and communities' experiences. Therefore, historians generally recognise the value of these sources,[36] even in the study of emotions.[37]

Acknowledging the methodological limitations of the sources at hand, this article does not attempt to uncover the exact events behind the recorded texts. In these allegedly miraculous instances, a divine intervention was believed to change the course of events, influencing the way they were later remembered. However, it is essential to emphasise that these

[31] R. Piccolomini, 'Santa Chiara da Montefalco e San Nicola da Tolentino', in S. Nessi (ed.), *La spiritualità di S. Chiara da Montefalco*, Montefalco 1986, 150–71.

[32] A. Vauchez, *Sainthood in the later Middle Ages* (1981), Cambridge 1997, 468, and Nissi, *The communality*, 53–4.

[33] Specifically on the methodology of the use of death-related miracles as historical sources see J. Nissi, 'Are you content to die? Death acceptance and death denial in deposition of canonization processes', in S. Katajala-Peltomaa (ed.), *Companion to medieval canonization processes: new contexts, perspectives, and comparisons*, Turnhout 2025, 174–96.

[34] Most recently on the methodology of canonisation processes see articles in Katajala-Peltomaa, *Companion to medieval canonization processes*.

[35] For example, D. Lett, *Un Procès de canonisation au Moyen Âge: essai d'histoire sociale*, Paris 2008, 257–70.

[36] On the historiography of using miracles in medieval studies see S. Katajala-Peltomaa, 'Introduction: canonization processes in context and comparison', in Katajala-Peltomaa, *Companion to medieval canonization processes*, 1–23.

[37] For example, M. Cassidy-Welch, 'Emotion, place, and memory at the royal abbey of St Denis', in Maddern, McEwan and Scott, *Performing emotions*, 185–99, and N. Archambeau, 'Tempted to kill: miraculous consolation for a mother after the death of her infant daughter', in E. Carrera (ed.), *Emotions and health, 1200–1700*, Leiden 2013, 47–66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

narratives needed to be credible not only to the commissioners overseeing the canonisation processes but also to the witnesses themselves and their communities.[38] This implies that the recorded details had to be plausible for all parties involved. Thus, while the historical reliability of specific details in trial records may be questionable, their analysis can reveal underlying patterns and offer insights into medieval emotions and experiences.[39]

Fear of death in medieval miracle testimonies

In ancient classical philosophy, the fear of death was considered a harmful emotion that needed to be overcome.[40] This changed with Christianity, as Augustine, for example, viewed the fear of afterlife punishment as a step towards Christ.[41] Building on this idea, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theologians sought to instil a fear of death to inspire moral conversion in their readership and listeners.[42] However, according to Juanita Feron Ruys, this style may have engendered a paralysing fear of death instead of a benevolent fear of God.[43] Accordingly, late medieval *ars moriendi* literature also emphasised a desirable perspective on death, underscoring that it should not be feared but embraced whenever God willed it. To die well was to die gladly.[44]

In hagiographic sources, descriptions of saints' final moments reflect the same desirable and accepting attitude towards death as in *ars moriendi* texts. In the canonisation processes of Clare of Montefalco and Nicholas of Tolentino, this becomes clear. Several deponents testified to Clare's declaration that she did not fear dying,[45] appeared happy to die,[46] and expressed her willingness to be with Christ.[47] In Nicholas's process, this theme was not repeated as often, but a long deposition by Friar Iohannucius de Tolentino asserted that a sound of laughter was heard from

[38] This is revealed by the fact that the written record had to correspond with the oral testimony of the deponents: T. Wetzstein, *Heilige vor Gericht: das Kanonisationsverfahren im europäischen Spätmittelalter*, Köln 2004, 45.

[39] On historical patterns see D. L. Smail, 'Pattern in history', *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* i (2017), 155–69. See also S. Pihko, 'The construction of information in medieval inquisition records: a methodological reconsideration', *I Quaderni Del m.æ.S. – Journal of Mediæ Ætatis Sodalicium* xxii (2024), esp. pp. 182–3.

[40] S. Solomon, I. Testoni and S. Bianco, 'Clash of civilizations? Terror management theory and the role of the ontological representations of death in contemporary global crises', *TPM: Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology* xxiv (2017), 387–8.

[41] Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter*, 16.

[42] Ruys, 'Dying 101'; Robson, 'Fear of falling'.

[43] Ruys, 'Dying 101'.

[44] Nissi, 'Are you content'.

[45] Menestò, *Il processo*, 22, 72, 80, 234, 239.

[46] Ibid. 25, 77, 152–3, 243.

[47] Ibid. 264.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nicholas's cell shortly before his death, as he was so happy to be united with God and Christ.[48]

Similar attitudes were also present, for example, in the *Legenda minor* of Catherine of Siena (1347–80), written between 1416 and 1417 by Tommaso da Siena (known as Caffarini), explicitly describing the saint as longing for death to be united with Christ.[49] Similarly, the deponents of Birgitta of Sweden's (*c.* 1303–73) canonisation process in Rome in the late 1370s depicted Birgitta as demonstrating remarkable courage and patience in situations that would have inspired a fear of death in ordinary Christians.[50] For saints, death was a joyous event marking their passage from this world to a harmonious union with their Creator.

If, according to theological thinking in the late Middle Ages, death was desirable, the same could not be said of the lived religion of the time. Lived religion – a methodological framework in which religion is seen as something actively lived, produced and expressed by people in their everyday lives – understands religion as a social and dynamic process, centred on actions, emotions, corporeality and materiality. Studies using lived religion as a conceptual tool often aim to analyse how communities adopted religious dogmas into their everyday lives.[51] For this purpose, medieval miracle narratives recorded in canonisation processes, miracle collections and other hagiographic texts are useful sources.[52] Within the methodology of lived religion, emotions are a fundamental part of religious practices because they are deeply embodied. They both drive actions and can arouse feelings.[53] This makes the study of religious practices essential for understanding emotional approaches to death in the Middle Ages.[54]

Death-related miracles recorded in canonisation processes present a stark contrast to the above-described death moments of saints. The death moment of *ser* Venturinus Gilioli, a notary in the service of the governor of the Marches of Ancona, recorded in the canonisation process of Nicholas

[48] N. Occhioni, *Il processo per la canonizzazione di San Nicola da Tolentino*, Rome 1984, 489.

[49] E. Franceschini (ed.), 'Sanctae Catharinae Senensis legenda minor', in *Fontes vitae S. Catherinae Senensis historici*, Milan 1942, 158.

[50] I. Collijn (ed.), *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte*, Uppsala 1924–31, 374, 262, 315, 372.

[51] See, for example, N. T. Ammerman, *Studying lived religion: contexts and practices*, New York 2021.

[52] See, for example J. Kuuliala, R.-M. Peake and P. Räsänen-Schröder (eds), *Lived religion and everyday life in early modern hagiographic material*, Cham 2019.

[53] On the importance of emotions in lived religion see Ammerman, *Studying lived religion*, 122–5.

[54] M. Scheer, 'Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuian approach to understanding emotion', *History and Theory* li (2012), 193–220.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Tolentino, exemplifies how people might have expressed their death anxiety on their deathbed.

The depositions regarding the miracle of *ser* Venturinus have been examined by Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, who analysed the death rituals described in the testimonies. Although Katajala-Peltomaa characterised Venturinus' presumed death as untimely, she also interpreted it as serene.[55] Similarly, Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli discussed this case as evidence of domesticated death in which religious rituals have been organised with meticulous precision.[56] These interpretations are corroborated by the evidence, as the depositions provide detailed accounts of the liturgical and paraliturgical preparations undertaken by Venturinus' family following his presumed death. Moreover, Venturinus' testimony included an elaborate and colourful description of his vision of the pleasant angels encountered in the liminal state between life and death.[57]

Nevertheless, the depositions also provide evidence of the deep sorrow felt by Venturinus' wife, *domina* Colucia Cardoli, with a section also illuminating how a dying person might have expressed a fear of death. According to Colucia's deposition, Venturinus had fallen gravely ill in the early 1320s; after prolonged suffering, physicians declared him beyond hope. As he was presumed dead, preparations for his burial began: funeral candles were prepared and mourning clothes were given to Colucia. Before his passing, Colucia, deeply devoted to Brother Nicholas, made a solemn vow that, through Nicholas's intercession, God might spare her husband and restore him to health.[58]

Colucia's deposition continues by recounting that, despite her prayer, Venturinus appeared to die and was laid out on a bier while four Franciscan friars recited the Office of the Dead over his body. Colucia, returning to her chamber, soon fell into a brief sleep. In a vision, she heard a voice telling her to rise because the Angel Gabriel and Brother Nicholas were bringing her husband back. Awakened in astonishment, she went to the room where the body lay and approached it. As she bent over her husband, a drop of candle wax fell onto his hand, and the hand moved slightly. According to Colucia, Venturinus then sighed and opened his mouth, which was full of foam. For five days, he remained silent but accepted broth prepared by his wife.[59]

On the fifth day following his resurrection, Venturinus reportedly began to grasp at the garments he was wearing, pulling at them with his hands as if

[55] S. Katajala-Peltomaa, 'Rituals and reputation: immature death in the fourteenth-century canonization processes', in C. Krötzl and K. Mustakallio (eds), *On old age: approaching death in antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Turnhout 2011, 320.

[56] A. Bartolomei Romagnoli, 'Agiografi e notai: due stili a confronto tra vite e processi di canonizzazione', in R. Michetti (ed.), *Notai, miracoli e culto dei santi*, Milan 2004, 212–13. [57] Occhioni, *Il processo*, 157–8. [58] Ibid. 474. [59] Ibid. 474–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

plucking or tearing them. Colucia, fearing that he was doing this out of death anxiety, said to him, '*Ser* Venturinus, why are you doing this?' He then spoke for the first time: 'Why did you pull me away from such a beautiful and pleasant garden?' She replied, 'And what garden are you speaking of, *ser* Venturinus?' He answered that he had been in the most beautiful meadow, filled with roses and fragrant flowers, in the company of the Virgin Mary, the Angel Gabriel and Brother Nicholas.[60]

Even though Venturinus reportedly appeared reluctant to return to the world of the living, the simple fact that his wife prayed for his resurrection challenges the idea that his alleged death moment exemplified a domesticated or tamed death. Instead, Colucia's refusal to accept her husband's passing should be understood as an intense manifestation of grief. Nevertheless, leaving aside the question of Colucia's grief, what is more relevant for the purposes of this article is her interpretation of her husband's actions as expressions of death anxiety ('ansietatem mortis').

Although Venturinus' authentic emotions are inaccessible through this deposition, Colucia's mere assumption that his behaviour was due to death anxiety is significant. It reveals that death anxiety was something that fourteenth-century Italians sometimes associated with the experience of dying. Colucia's testimony suggests that she instinctively interpreted her husband's physical actions as outward manifestations of an existential crisis. Thus, even if Venturinus himself provided a different explanation for his actions, the deposition suggests that intense death anxiety could be part of the emotional palette at late medieval deathbeds.

Moreover, Colucia's assumption links death anxiety to corporeality – recalling Barbara Rosenwein's observation that emotions power action.[61] Through an embodied interpretation of her husband's behaviour, Colucia understood the dying man's aggression as an expression of fear, revealing the close connection between the body and emotions. Monique Scheer notes that emotions are facilitated and communicated through socially agreed-upon signs; however, there is no guarantee that these signs will be interpreted as intended.[62] In this case, the source suggests that Colucia believed that her husband's distress was caused by his fear of dying, while

[60] 'V die dictus ser Venturinus incepit suis manibus capere pannos suos, quos habebat in dosso, et ipsos quasi manibus depilare. Tunc dicta domina, timens ne propter ansietatem mortis hec faceret, dixit ei: Ser Venturine, cur ita facis? Ipse vero tunc primo locutus est, dicens cum multo labore et plurima tarditate: Cur me traxisti de tam pulchro viridario et ameno? Ad que predicta domina dixit: Et de quo viridario dicis, ser Venturine? Ipse vero rexpondit quod ipse fuerat in quodam pulzerimo prato pieno rosis et floribus odoriferis cum beata virgine Maria, Gabriele angelo et sancto fratre Nicolao': ibid. 475.

[61] Rosenwein, *Emotional communities*, 88.

[62] Scheer, 'Are emotions a kind of practice?', 214.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Venturinus himself explained that his distress had resulted from being dragged away from a pleasant afterlife.

The following examples show other ways in which dying people might have revealed their fear of death. For example, the fear of death motivated a man named Angeluctius to take religious actions in Perugia in September 1318. According to his testimony during the canonisation interrogation of Clare of Montefalco, he had been gravely ill with a continuous fever, during which, greatly fearing death, he got out of bed naked, knelt on the ground and humbly and earnestly entrusted himself to God and Clare of Montefalco, pleading for his recovery. His condition did not improve, and after a few days, those present believed him to be dead. However, he later revived, and the event was interpreted as a miracle attributed to his invocation of Clare of Montefalco.[63]

This account of Angeluctius' actions, along with the description of his fear of death, reveals a connection between the invocation of saints and the intense anxiety surrounding death. Angeluctius' act of kneeling naked on the ground in prayer was an expression of humility in front of God and saints, but also a reflection of the deep emotional turmoil mirroring what could be labelled death anxiety. As the notary's recording about the fear suggests ('timens valde de morte'), the man's plea was not merely a sign of spiritual distress but also an indication of the human fear of loss associated with death. For medieval people, while there was always a level of uncertainty about one's afterlife destiny – since the extent of purgatorial suffering was unknown[64] – the core tenets of faith remained publicly indisputable.[65] This was grounded in the philosophical and metaphysical foundation upon which Christianity was built, as other Abrahamic religions. Viewing death as a passage, rather than total annihilation, shaped both the personal expressions of devotion and communal religious life through which emotions were communicated.[66]

TMT posits that humans have an inherent fear of death, which influences much of our behaviour, even when it is not overtly acknowledged.[67]

[63] 'ipse Angeluctius testis fuit gravissime infirmus febre continua et durante ipsa febre timens valde de morte, ipse nudus lectum exiens genuflexit se in terram et reconmendavit se <et> devovit humiliter et instanter Deo et beate Clare de Montefalco': Menestò, *Il processo*, 318.

[64] On medieval concerns about purgatory see, for example, J. LeGoff, *The birth of the purgatory*, Chicago, IL 1986. On emotions connected to purgatory see M. Rubin, *Emotion and devotion: the meaning of Mary in medieval religious cultures*, Budapest 2009, 82–3.

[65] On medieval religious dissent generally see J. H. Arnold, *Belief and unbelief in medieval Europe*, London 2005. For religious persecutions in medieval Italy see C. Lansing, *Power & purity: Cathar heresy in medieval Italy*, Oxford 1998.

[66] On the connection between emotions and devotional practices in the Middle Ages see Rubin, *Emotion and devotion*, 79–104.

[67] Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, *The worm*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

While medieval people were outwardly instructed to accept death as part of God's plan, their internal emotional landscapes might have been far more conflicted, as the description of Angeluctius' distress suggests. The psychologist Ernest Becker noted that it is precisely the terror of death that moves men.[68] A fundamental aspect of humanity is the desire to live, preserve life and avoid death.[69] Even though our first example suggests that death anxiety might manifest in aggressive behaviour, this sentiment was often expressed in our sources through religious practices, that is, the cultural context and the manner in which people were taught to act and express their emotions.[70] People were accustomed to seeking the help of saints in various hardships.[71] For medieval people, praying for help from saints represented a final recourse after having exhausted earthly remedies,[72] which also applied to death moments.

Angeluctius' brief testimony exemplifies religious devotion as functioning both as a spiritual refuge and a pragmatic response during desperate times, especially when people believed they had no other way to avoid death. By placing their hope in the hands of saints, people built a spiritual connection with the divine. Saints were believed to be integral members of the Christian community, the *corpus mysticum ecclesiae*, which united the living and the dead.[73] These acts of devotion served as attempts to reinforce people's cultural worldview and maintain a sense of belonging within a larger eternal framework. From a TMT perspective, by affirming this kind of communal bond, individuals sought to mitigate the existential threat of mortality.[74] Thus, vows to saints in the face of imminent death, such as that of Angeluctius, served as a means for individuals to manage their death anxiety. Peter Dinzelbacher proposed that the Virgin Mary was the

[68] Becker, *Denial of death*, 11.

[69] E. Severino, *The essence of nihilism*, London 2016, 222–3; Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, *The worm*, 4–5.

[70] On late medieval connections between emotions and religion see Bouquet and Nagy, *Medieval sensibilities*, ch. viii.

[71] For late medieval Italy see, for example, K. McCluskey, 'When the fury of the proud sea re-awoke: water, devotion, and lived experience in renaissance Venice', in Kuuliala, Peake and Räsänen-Schröder, *Lived religion*.

[72] In renaissance Italian context see J. Kuuliala, 'The saint as medicator: medicine and miraculous in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy', *Social History of Medicine* xxxiv (2021), 702–22.

[73] S. L. Taylor, 'Pro defunctis exorare: the communality of the living and the dead in Jean Gerson's Sermones de omnibus sanctis and De mortuis', in A. Classen (ed.), *Death in the Middle Ages and early modern times: the material and spiritual conditions of the culture of death*, Berlin 2016, 297–309.

[74] M. Dechesne, T. Pyszczynski, J. Arndt, S. Ransom, K.M. Sheldon, A. van Knippenberg and J. Janssen, 'Literal and symbolic immortality: the effect of evidence of literal immortality on self-esteem striving in response to mortality salience', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* lxxxiv (2003), 723.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

medieval fear-reliever (*Angstlöserin*).[75] Medieval miracle narratives suggest that local saints served the same function.

Another example from the canonisation process of Clare of Montefalco illustrates how laypeople experienced fear while approaching death. According to the testimony of *domina* Thomassa of Spoleto, her husband, Petructius, suffered from an illness in 1315 and allegedly had a large swelling resembling a small loaf of bread, which caused him great suffering, eventually leading to a fever. She stated that the swelling lasted about three days, after which the fever intensified. A doctor was then called in, who told her husband that his condition was highly uncertain. At that point, Petructius reportedly said to Thomassa, 'What shall I do? The doctor says I am in grave danger and on the brink of death, and I fear for my life.'[76] Overwhelmed with grief and distress, his wife knelt in her room in floods of tears and vowed to God and the Blessed Clare. She promised that if her husband were released from danger, she would walk barefoot to the saint's shrine, bring there a belt made of candles or silver thread, and publicly proclaim the miracle as soon as possible. She further stated that following her vow, she briefly fell asleep and awoke to find her husband completely healed.[77]

In Thomassa's testimony, Petructius is described as being overtaken by the fear of death ('timeo de persona'). He expressed his emotional turmoil to his wife, who reportedly was also afflicted and grieving ('dolens et affligens'). In medieval thought on passions, both grief and fear were understood to arise from evil. However, the main difference lay in the timing: grief stemmed from present evils, while fear arose from evils anticipated in the future.[78] Neither the man nor his wife allegedly displayed calmness during this ordeal. This aligns with the characteristics of the hagiographical genre, where emotions played an integral role in communication with saints.[79] Emotions could also serve as evidence of a miracle when presented in testimonies.[80]

[75] Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter*, 239–44.

[76] 'dixit quod vir suus predictus, sciente et audiente ea, passus fuit unam infirmitatem iuxta pectus in mamilla de suptus, in quo loco apparuit sibi una tumefactio grossa ad modum unius panecti, et que grossities inferebat sibi magnum dolorem et penam; que tumefactio aduxit eum ad febrem. Et dixit quod tumefactio illa steterat et stetit diebus tribus vel circa et in capite ipsorum trium dierum febris invaluit valde; propter quod medicus venit et dixit ei quod erat in mangno dubio. Et tunc vir eius predictus dixit uxori sue predicte: Quid faciam?, quia medicus dicit quod ego in articulo <mortis>et periculo mangno sum, et timeo de persona': Menestò, *Il processo*, 454.

[77] Ibid. 454–5.

[78] Ruys, 'Dying 101', 57–8.

[79] S. Katajala-Peltomaa, 'Just a humble petitioner of a saint? Devotion as a strategy for prestige in depositions of fourteenth-century Italian canonization processes', in M. Bayless, J. Liliequist and L. Webb (eds), *Gender and status competition in pre-modern societies*, Turnhout 2022, 230.

[80] Cassidy-Welch, 'Emotion, place, and memory', 196.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

By making a vow and promising a humble pilgrimage and an expensive counter-gift to St Clare, the woman transformed their tribulation into a negotiable plea. This underscores that vows and offerings functioned as means to manage emotions by appealing to divine mercy. At the moment the vow was made, it served as an emotional outlet for the overwhelming negative emotions caused by the situation. In retrospect, it gave meaning to the hardship, demonstrating to contemporaries that the surprising turn of events was not mere coincidence but the result of divine intervention, thus making it a miraculous experience.

Petructius' plea for guidance positioned Thomassa as the leading figure in their crisis. She assumed responsibility for invoking the saint's help and managing their shared emotions through religious practice – which is how Thomassa chose to recount the events. Deponents of canonisation processes may have shaped their narratives to emphasise their own claims to social or religious authority.[81] Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for women to take on the responsibility of making vows, as this ritual practice provided them with an opportunity to assert agency and gain respect within their community.[82]

Thomassa testified that she had knelt on the ground in floods of tears and devotion. Her actions bore a striking resemblance to the case of Angeluctius, who reportedly knelt naked on the ground as death loomed. In both cases, corporeal expressions mediated devotion and death-related emotions. While Angeluctius took religious responsibility into his own hands in the face of death, Petructius relied on his wife's devotion to intercede on his behalf. This contrast highlights the varying ways in which medieval individuals navigated death-related emotions.

In two previous cases from the canonisation process of Clare of Montefalco, the notary used the word *timere* to describe men's emotional states. A similar usage appeared in the canonisation process of Nicholas of Tolentino. For example, a man named Sensus Angeluctii testified about a miracle he had experienced in 1324. Suffering from a fever for twenty-four days, he recalled how a certain nobleman once vowed to Brother Nicholas for the recovery of a sick Angelus Baldevini, whom doctors had deemed beyond help. Angelus had been miraculously healed. Inspired by this memory, Sensus reportedly made a similar vow during his illness. A day later, his fever ceased entirely. In his deposition, he stated that despite greatly fearing death, he did not believe that the doctors had lost hope in his recovery.[83]

[81] L. Smoller, 'Miracle, memory, and meaning in the canonization of Vincent Ferrer, 1453–1454', *Speculum* lxxiii (1998), 429–54.

[82] In the context of late medieval Italy see Katajala-Peltomaa, 'Just a humble'.

[83] 'Quo voto emisso, sequenti die proxime et aliis non fuit predicta febre gravatus, quam habere consueverat omni die, sed fuit plenarie liberatus, dicens quod predictum suum votum, quod fecerat, nullus alius scivit nisi cui postea revelavit et quod, licet quod

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

In another case, the octogenarian Mancinus Fortis testified about his wife's fear of death. He stated that in 1305, his wife, Tholentina, had suffered from a continuous fever for several weeks. One night, fearing death, she made a vow to the Blessed Nicholas. The following morning, upon rising, she was freed from the illness through the saint's intercession.[84]

While the general meaning of the term *timere* used in these four cases is identifiable – commonly translated as 'to fear' or 'to be afraid of' – its connotations and resonance within medieval emotional communities may have differed from modern understandings. The emotional vocabulary recorded by the notaries presents a significant challenge for historians, and interpreting such terms requires both caution and contextual sensitivity.[85] Beyond the words themselves, it is essential to examine the practices and performances associated with emotional words. As emotions are expressed through actions, practices provide critical insights into lived religion.[86] Here, the key to the medieval mindset is the practice of praying to saints for help.

The use of the word *timere* in contexts where people's actions indicate an attempt to avoid death aligns closely with psychologist Robert Plutchik's framework of fear. For Plutchik, fear is a protective emotion, characterised by responses such as withdrawing, escaping and seeking protection.[87] When the idea is applied to the cases so far described, which deployed the word *timere*, it becomes evident that praying in the face of death was a culturally embedded form of self-preservation. Devotion to saints helped medieval people confront their fear and function despite it.

The final example is a miracle narrative about a man engaged in battle. The canonisation process of Clare of Montefalco included several soldier-related miracles, as the region was affected by Guelph-Ghibelline conflicts in the early fourteenth century.[88] This case highlights that vows to saints served as a coping mechanism in moments of acute fear. The testimony

multum de morte timeret, numquam tamen scivit tunc vel postea nec credit quod a medicis fuerat diffidatus': Occhioni, *Il processo*, 477.

[84] 'Item dixit quod dum domina Tholentina, uxor dicti testis, pateretur febrem continuam, et passa fuerat per plures septimanas et per duos menses dicta domina timens mori de dicta febre, vovit se beato Nicholao quadam nocte et, emisso dicto voto, de mane sequenti cum surrexit fuit liberata precibus dicti beati Nicholai': ibid. 260–1.

[85] Boddice and Smith, *Emotion, sense, experience*, esp. p. 9; Rosenwein, *Emotional communities*, 39–56. See also Nichole Archambeau's analysis on the different meanings of the word *tristitia* in miracle depositions: 'Tempted to kill'.

[86] Scheer, 'Are emotions'; Maddern, McEwan and Scott, 'Introduction'; Ammerman, *Studying lived religion*.

[87] R. Plutchik, 'Emotions: a general psychoevolutionary theory', in K. L. Scherer and P. Ekman (eds), *Approaches to emotion*, Hillsdale, NJ 1984, 200.

[88] M. E. Klotz, *Clare of Montefalco (1268–1308): the life of the soul is the love of God*, Toronto 2001, 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

comes from a man named Thomassius, who reportedly told the canonisation commission that his son, Cecchus, had been on a military campaign led by the people of Spoleto to the village of San Brizio. This allegedly occurred in 1313 or 1314. In the village, the Spoletans encountered resistance and engaged in conflict. At one point, Cecchus, 'seeing himself among the dead, was greatly afraid'. He made a vow to St Clare, saying in his heart, 'Blessed Saint Clare, deliver me from this danger'. The deponent said that after making this plea, in the midst of his great fear, Cecchus was immediately filled with strength and confidence, and it seemed to him that he could not perish.[89]

Despite this being a second-hand testimony, the case illustrates that a person was believed to overcome the fear of impending death through the intercession of saints. No miracle testimony, whether personal or second-hand, provides a direct account of an individual's inner feelings because proceedings are clerical and notarial constructions. Nevertheless, whether they are imagined or real, they reflect widely accepted and shared attitudes associated with the approach to death, thus representing the emotions and experiences of medieval people.[90] Praying to saints for help before a battle was not exceptional in the Middle Ages.[91] What is interesting in this case is that the impending battle was described as filling Cecchus' mind with fear, as he had envisioned himself among the dead.

This illuminating example from medieval sources aligns with the TMT concept of mortality salience, illustrating how the awareness of one's mortality can evoke profound psychological responses. According to TMT, the understanding that death is inevitable may cause a paralysing terror of death. The mortality salience hypothesis suggests that individuals' worldviews, faith and self-esteem serve as buffers against the anxiety provoked by thoughts of their own mortality. When people are reminded of

[89] 'Item dixit quod quidam filius suus, nomine Cecchus, studens in legibus modo Perusii, fuit et invenit se in quadam andata quam fecerunt Spoletani ad villam Sancti Britii, et obviaverunt inimicis et fuerunt in conflictu ipsi Spoletani; et quod dictus filius suus, videns se inter mortuos, tunc habuit magnum tymorem, et quod tunc ipse dixit in corde suo: Sancta Clara benedicta, evade me ab isto periculo. Et multum devote; et dixit quod, facta recomendatione sicut erat in spiritu sui magni timoris, ita reductus est statim ad spiritum mangni vigoris et securitatis, et visum sibi fuit non posse perire. Et evaxit et venit et rediit ad civitatem securus et ab inimicis viriliter se paravit': Menestò, *Il processo*, 392–3.

[90] Cf. McCluskey, 'When the fury', 174–5; Cassidy-Welch, 'Emotion, place, and memory', 195.

[91] On the fear of death on the medieval battlefield see S. J. Spencer, *Emotions in a crusading context, 1095–1291*, Oxford 2019. On war-related miracles in fourteenth-century France see N. Archambeau, 'Miraculous healing for the warrior soul: transforming fear, violence, and shame in fourteenth-century Provence', *Historical Reflections* xli (2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

their mortality (for example, when Cecchus was confronted with the prospect of battle), they tend to seek reassurance and protection from their cultural worldview, often turning to faith or shared values for comfort. Psychological research demonstrates that mortality salience intensifies worldview defence, meaning that individuals become more inclined to uphold, affirm and protect the beliefs and practices that give their lives meaning and coherence.[92]

Cecchus' case demonstrates how the imminence of death prompted him to embrace religious practice as a means of managing his terror of death. In medieval thought, emotions were closely connected to the body and health. Fear, in particular, was associated with various disorders of the brain, such as melancholia, mania and epilepsy, and could also lead to different kinds of fevers.[93] This corporeal dimension of fear made it a natural part of the saints' healing repertoire. Although Cecchus' physical health was not described as being affected by fear, its impact was nevertheless corporeal: it paralysed him and prevented him from fulfilling his duties as a soldier, and neglecting it would have carried the risk of public shame and dishonour.[94] According to the deposition given by his father, Cecchus found a solution to this state in his devotion to St Clare. By turning to his cultural worldview, represented here by the local saint, he was able to overcome overwhelming death anxiety, even believing that death would not claim him.

Devotion as coping

The six cases presented here illustrate how medieval laypeople, shaped by their cultural upbringing, internalised the belief that saints could provide strength in the face of existential dread. The presence of divine powers in medieval people's lives was real and tangible, and their aid was actively sought during times of physical and emotional hardship. This was done either through prayer, as in the cases presented above, or by coming into contact with relics.[95] People's reliance on saints exemplified a key form of

[92] Solomon, Testoni and Bianco, 'Clash of civilizations'.

[93] W. F. MacLehose, 'Fear, fantasy and sleep in medieval medicine', in A. Colin Gow (ed.), *Emotions and health, 1200–1700*, Boston 2013, 90–1.

[94] Cf. the French fourteenth-century case of Lord Ferrarius of Cucuron from the canonisation process of Delphine de Puimichel: Archambeau, 'Miraculous healing'. On the dishonour associated with fear on the battlefield see A. Taylor, 'Chivalric conversation and the denial of male fear', in J. Murray (ed.), *Conflicted identities and multiple masculinities: men in the medieval west*, New York, NY 1999, 169–88.

[95] For a presentation on the different aspects of medieval devotion to saints see, for example, R. Bartlett, *Why can the dead do such great things? Saints and worshippers from the martyrs to the Reformation*, Princeton, NJ 2013.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

medieval religious coping.[96] By turning to a saintly figure for strength, people engaged in a strategy that reinforced their sense of connection to a higher power. With this act, when seen through the lens of TMT, they affirmed their cultural conception of reality. Thus, death-related miracle narratives describe how the acts of devotion supported people's continued existence. The belief in saintly intervention allowed people to transform their fear into an experience of trust and meaning. In terror management theoretic terms, devotion to saints functioned as a buffer against mortality salience for medieval people and enhanced their resilience in the face of mortal danger.[97]

Philippe Ariès's idea of a tamed death aligns with medieval normative sources, which explains its prominence in medieval studies.[98] However, this article advances a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between the medieval ideal of death and death experienced by ordinary people. In addition to challenging Ariès's conception of tamed death, the depositions regarding the death-related miracles did not concur with the idea presented by Isidore of Seville and Bartholomaeus Anglicus that only the deaths of children and young people were untimely and harsh. The exact age of the people involved in the six cases presented above remains unknown.[99] Still, it seems clear that, perhaps besides the battle-engaged Cecchus, who was reportedly a law student, they could not be identified as young in medieval terms but were quite along in life.[100] Thus, despite their age, these people did not see their fate as natural; they tried to dodge death.

The miracle depositions, although shaped by the inquisitorial committee's structured questioning and translation into the formulaic language of notarial records, reveal experiences of anxiety in the face of death. These sources are mediated – just as the experiences themselves are. Approaching death was never a purely personal process; it took shape through the interplay of individual piety, collective memory and cultural expectations.

[96] On the psychology of religious coping see, for example, K. I. Pargament, *The psychology of religion and coping*, New York 1997. On the use of the concept of religious coping in medieval studies see V. Aldrin, 'Parental grief and prayer in the Middle Ages: religious coping in Swedish miracle stories', in M. Korpiola and A. Lahtinen (eds), *Cultures of death and dying in medieval and early modern Europe*, Helsinki 2015, 82–102.

[97] Cf. Dechesne and others, 'Literal and symbolic'.

[98] According to Ashby Kinch, the calm anticipation of death – what Ariès termed 'tame death' – was part of the ideal death throughout the Middle Ages: 'Introduction', in Kinch, *A cultural history of death*, 8–9.

[99] In both canonisation processes studied in this article, only some deponents' ages were recorded.

[100] On age determination and old people in canonisation processes see C. Krötzl, 'Sexaginta vel circa: zur Wahrnehmung von Alter in hagiographischen Quellen des Spätmittelalters', in E. Vavra (ed.), *Alterskulturen des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, Wien 2008, 109–15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Likewise, the depositions reflected these layers of experiences, as the events witnessed were recalled together and interpreted within a shared cultural framework.[101]

As historians of the medieval and early modern eras have adopted the concept of lived religion into their analytical toolbox, they have reached the same conclusion as religious anthropologists: people did not necessarily embrace religious dogmas or theological systems as a whole but selected what best suited their purposes in a given context.[102] This phenomenon is visible in late medieval death-related miracle testimonies. People's desire to postpone death contrasted with theological ideals that emphasised the dangers of attachment to earthly existence and promoted the virtue of accepting death.

The teachings of the Catholic Church were vast and varied, and a notable biblical narrative offered people a way to express attachment to a mundane world in a religiously acceptable manner: the resurrection of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. The story of Lazarus, who was buried and then brought back to life, served as a model for people seeking to express their connection to this world. It also provided a thematic and stylistic framework for both witnesses and canonisation commissions. Thus, the Catholic Church supported medieval people's immortality projects in two ways: (1) promising eternal life in the afterlife, and (2) aiding the prolongation of material life on earth.[103] The miracle testimonies analysed in this article highlight the latter.

The present article's discussion of medieval miracles contributes to the understanding that religions should be viewed not only from a soteriological perspective but also as a tool for coping with the pain and suffering tied to earthly existence.[104] Coping with one's mortality belongs to this category, as saints were believed to mediate not only the physical well-being of medieval people but also their mental and spiritual well-being.[105] The practice of praying to saints for deliverance from death should not, at least in the medieval context, be interpreted through Martin Hägglund's concept of secular faith but as an expression of genuine

[101] On the negotiated and shared nature of experiences in miracle depositions see S. Katajala-Peltomaa, 'Experiencing the miraculous: lived religion in the depositions', in Katajala-Peltomaa, *Companion to medieval canonization processes*, 217–36.

[102] S. Katajala-Peltomaa and R. M. Toivo, 'Introduction: religion as historical experience', in S. Katajala-Peltomaa and R. M. Toivo (eds), *Histories of experience in the world of lived religion*, London 2022, 3–4.

[103] Cf. J. Jong, 'Death anxiety and religion', *Current Opinion in Psychology* xl (2021), 40.

[104] In the medieval context see, for example, Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims*; Kuuliala, *Childhood disability*; and Katajala-Peltomaa, 'Just a humble'.

[105] For example, S. Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic possession and lived religion in later medieval Europe*, Oxford 2020.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

religious commitment.[106] For medieval Christians, religion was deeply integrated into every aspect of life, with its practices serving to promote both well-being in this world and spiritual salvation in the next.[107]

Gordon Raeburn interprets *ars moriendi* literature as an effort by theologians to influence the emotional responses of those in lower social strata, noting that early modern communities may have developed their own ways of managing grief and anxiety surrounding death, sometimes diverging from official teachings.[108] This study has identified that in the late Middle Ages the cult of saints was a way to manage death anxiety. The sheer volume of recorded death-related miracles from that era suggests that medieval people, including clergy,[109] frequently resisted death, notwithstanding theological teachings promoting its joyful acceptance. Thus, the doctrine of embracing death without fear may have remained more theoretical than practical, lacking strong resonance among everyday Christian communities. This highlights people's ability to select suitable religious tools for specific occasions. It is noteworthy, however, that only some prayers led to outcomes interpreted as miracles, and negative results may have significantly heightened death anxiety.[110]

The specific reasons for common people's fear of death are not clearly articulated in our sources. Deeply personal and universal motivations, such as the fear of pain associated with the dying process or the grief of parting from loved ones, may have been significant factors driving death avoidance. However, emotional responses are always deeply embedded in cultural contexts.[111] The religious ideas of the era about possible punishment in hell or purgatory increased people's death anxiety in the Middle Ages,[112] and the emotional responses recorded in miracle testimonies must be seen in light of these beliefs.

Reading miracle testimonies through the methodological lens of TMT provides further insights into medieval death anxiety and its relation to religion. TMT proposes that cracks in an individual's cultural worldview

[106] On the concept of secular faith see M. Hägglund, *This life: secular faith and spiritual freedom*, New York 2019. On its critique see, for example, K. Schilbrack, 'Spiritual values for those without eternal life: Martin Hägglund, This life: secular faith and spiritual freedom', *Sophia* lviii (2019), 753–59.

[107] The lived religion approach typically views religion as all-encompassing: Ammerman, *Studying lived religion*.

[108] G. D. Raeburn, 'Emotions, mortality, and vitality', in G. D. Raeburn and N. A. Warne (eds), *A cultural history of death in the renaissance*, London 2024, 57–8.

[109] Nissi, 'Are you content'.

[110] On an unsuccessful invocation on behalf of a dying person in late medieval Italy see G. Morelli di Pagolo, *Ricordi: nuova edizione e introduzione storica: a cura di Claudia Tripodi*, Firenze 2019, 274–5.

[111] For example, Rosenwein, *Emotional communities*, and Boddice and Smith, *Emotions, sense, experience*.

[112] Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

can engender the terror of death. This is not to say that medieval people who sought to avoid death through religious practices had lost their faith in God or the ontological concept of death as a passage. In fact, their actions show the contrary. However, they may have been dubious about their salvation. TMT posits that when the remedies offered by our cultural worldviews fail, our death anxiety increases. Applying this idea to the medieval context, the less certain an individual was of their awaited salvation, the greater the anguish.

This explains why saints were allegedly happy and unafraid when approaching the end of their lives. They were confident in their upcoming salvation – or at least this is how their followers chose to depict them – and thus had no reason to fear. They yearned for eternal life in a way that no corporeal existence could satisfy.[113] Nevertheless, the common people whose experiences of imminent death were recorded in miracle testimonies longed for continued life. For them, the idea of salvation was far less certain, and therefore their emotions shifted between hope and fear.[114] When fear took over, they turned to a remedy offered by their cultural worldview – the cult of saints – providing them with a meaningful and religiously acceptable framework to express and cope with their death anxiety.

In this article, the contrast between the late medieval ideal of death acceptance (as presented in normative sources and saints' *vitae*) and death denial demonstrated through depositions of death-related miracles is evident. Late medieval people had no problems with this discrepancy, at least not in the context of canonisation processes. According to Chiara Frugoni, saints' lives were not intended to be imitated in their entirety by ordinary people. Only certain aspects could be domesticated and replicated.[115] The emotional ideal presented in saints' *vitae* and other theological texts, which scholars have called tamed death, seems to have been overly challenging for the medieval masses to follow. The depositions of

[113] On hungering for God see C. Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women*, Berkeley, Ca 1987, and I. Testoni, *Il dio cannibale: anoressia e culture del corpo*, Torino 2001, esp. pp. 203–7.

[114] On medieval tensions between hope and fear see A. Angenendt, 'Fear, hope, death, and salvation', in J. Arnold (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of medieval Christianity*, Oxford 2014, 289–304.

[115] C. Frugoni, 'Female mystics, visions, and iconography', in D. Bornstein, R. Rusconi and M. Schneider (eds), *Women and religion in medieval and renaissance Italy*, Chicago, Il 1996, 152–3. A similar point has been made by Caroline Walker Bynum: *Holy feast*, 7. Andrè Vauchez has noted that in the late Middle Ages saints were depicted either as intercessory figures or as moral exemplars, depending on the context: 'Saints admirables et saints imitables: les fonctions de l'hagiographie ont-elles changé aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge?', in *Les Fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (IIIe–XIIIe siècle): actes du colloque de Rome (27–29 octobre 1988)*, Rome 1991, 161–72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

canonisation processes suggest that people facing death viewed saints not as examples to emulate but as attachment figures to whom they turned and from whom they sought protection.

According to John Bowlby, an attachment figure provides a safe haven in times of threat. Attachment relationships are key environments where individuals learn to manage distress, develop emotion-regulation skills, and experience a sense of security and comfort.[116] Psychological research has shown that religious beliefs mirror the dynamics of attachment relationships, with God serving as an attachment figure for many contemporary believers.[117] In the context of the late Middle Ages, the idea of religious attachment figures is more applicable to saints than to God. God was often perceived as an angry, distant judge – and as such a source of fear.[118] Saints, by contrast, were seen as more immediate and approachable intercessors.[119] From another perspective, God was likened to a king, and saints were vassals through whom God became accessible to common people.[120] Saints were, in Peter Brown's words, invisible companions, approachable in moments of emotional and physical hardship.[121] They occupied a central place in the cultural worldview of late medieval people, offering a unifying refuge in times of fear and distress.[122] This explains why many turned to them when facing imminent death.

Unlike previous studies on the medieval fear of death focusing on ideals and mentalities, the use of miracle testimonies allows for an analysis of the lived religion and experiences of medieval common people who approached death. This provides a more refined perspective on the late medieval fear of death. Furthermore, TMT has proven to be a solid theoretical framework for exploring the fear of death in its historical context.

The findings of this study confirm Juanita Ferros Ruys's proposition that reminders of afterlife punishment, characteristic of the fourteenth-century *ars moriendi* genre, may have resulted in a crippling fear of death. Miracle depositions from early fourteenth-century Italy show that the fear of death did not transform into the purportedly beneficial fear of God but, instead, caused people to cling more tightly to the mundane world. Similar accounts

[116] J. Bowlby, *Attachment and loss*, I: *Attachment*, New York 1982; P. Granqvist, M. Mikulincer and P. R. Shaver, 'Religion as attachment: normative processes and individual differences', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* xiv (2010), 49–59.

[117] For a review of the scholarship see Granqvist, Mikulincer and Shaver, 'Religion as attachment'.

[118] B. Gordon, 'Explaining death: belief, law, and ethics', in Kinch, *A cultural history of death*, 134.

[119] M. Goodich, *Violence and miracle in the fourteenth century: private grief and public salvation*, Chicago, IL 1995, 117–20.

[120] Vauchez, 'Sainthood', 461–2.

[121] P. Brown, *The cult of saints: its rise and function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago, IL 1981, esp. ch. iii.

[122] Cf. Goodich, *Violence and miracle*, 154–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press

in which the fear of death was mentioned and people prayed to avoid death can be found throughout medieval Western Christendom. Therefore, the cases of the canonisation processes of Clare of Montefalco and Nicholas of Tolentino should not be regarded as deviant or unique.

The idea of death had terrifying effects on many medieval individuals, much like it does in contemporary society. Nevertheless, the differing cultural worldviews and varying understandings of the ontological nature of death between the medieval and contemporary eras shaped the reasons for and manifestations of this terror. Medieval theologians emphasised that the afterlife could involve physical punishment, which intensified people's fears.

The central theme of death-related miracle narratives is the use of saints as a religious coping mechanism in response to the existential threat of death. A novel methodological approach adopted in this article affirms that the medieval practice of turning to local saints in moments of heightened mortality salience – when death was acutely felt – aligns with findings in contemporary psychological research. In such periods, individuals often reaffirm and strengthen their cultural values. Thus, the research establishes that the devout act of turning to saints in times of heightened mortality salience helped individuals alleviate existential anxiety by anchoring themselves to shared belief systems.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204692510119X Published online by Cambridge University Press