

Why Do Some People Believe In Ghosts?

The connection between religion, tormented souls, and spirits.

BY FRANK McANDREW, PH.D.

GHOSTS ARE SAID to come in many shapes and forms. Some haunt individuals, appearing in dreams or popping up unexpectedly. Others haunt a specific location and are prepared to spook anyone who happens to pass by. Some are the spitting images of what were once living and breathing humans. And then there are the noisy and troublesome poltergeists, which appear as uncontrollable supernatural forces.

What might explain such variety? Why are some people more likely to see ghosts than others? Our religious background may influence this phenomenon.

Religion May Ease Big Fears

Religion may have evolved as a terror management device, according to some, a handy way to remove the uncertainty surrounding one of the scariest things we can imagine: our own death.

Almost every religion explains what happens to us after we die, with the assurance that death isn't the end. And there is evidence that very religious people don't fear death as much as others. Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims all believe in a day of resurrection and judgment, in which our souls are directed to heaven or hell based on our good deeds or misdeeds during our time on Earth.

Buddhists and Hindus believe in a cycle of death and reincarnation that can eventually result in a permanent spiritual state, provided you play your cards right over each successive lifetime. The Jewish faith, which doesn't really focus on life after death, still assumes that an afterlife does exist.

By following a clear set of rules, worshipers can assert control.

Religion's talent for easing our death anxiety may have had the perverse effect of increasing the likelihood that we'll be on edge about ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural beings during

While religion may ease our terror of death, it may also increase our chances of feeling haunted by ghosts.

our lifetime. This, however, may depend upon how religious you actually are.

According to research that appeared in the *Royal Society Open Science* journal, those who describe themselves as believers, but don't attend church regularly, are twice as likely to believe in ghosts as those at the two extremes of religious belief: nonbelievers and the deeply devout.

With most religions populated by an impressive cadre of prophets, gods, spirits, angels, and miracles, the tenets of your religious faith may shape what you see. They could determine whether a visitor from the spirit world is a welcome or unwelcome guest, while also influencing whom you think you're meeting.

In medieval Catholic Europe, ghosts were assumed to be the tormented

souls of people suffering for their sins in purgatory. But during the Protestant Reformation, since most Protestants believed that souls went immediately to heaven or hell, paranormal activity was thought to be the work of angels, demons, or other decidedly nonhuman supernatural beings.

While most Protestant sects today are largely silent about the existence of ghosts, Catholic theology remains amenable to their existence. Catholics typically believe that God may permit dead individuals to visit the living on Earth, but curiously, the church has traditionally condemned occult activities like seances and Ouija boards.

In some religions, such as Voodoo, spirits and ghosts play a central role. Religions like Buddhism and Hinduism support belief in ghosts, but they play only a minor role in the religion itself. For Hindus, ghosts are the souls of individuals who suffered a violent death or who were not accorded the appropriate and required death rituals. Buddhist ghosts are reincarnated individuals who may be sorting out bad karma.

Muslims don't believe that dead people can return as ghosts, so if a Muslim thinks he's encountered a ghost, it's thought to be the work of *jinn*—beings that contain a mix of spiritual and physical properties, whose intentions can be malevolent or benevolent depending on the situation. There are several other religions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, that also believe ghostly apparitions are demons in disguise rather than the souls of deceased people.

Jews typically discourage occult activities designed to contact the dead. However, Jewish oral traditions include stories of evil ghosts (*dybbuks*) and kindly, helpful ghosts (*ibburs*) who try to insert themselves in human affairs.

It appears people across eras, religions, and cultures have always been curious about a spiritual world that exists behind the curtain of death. ■

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