

*From Suffering to Hope*

*Park Street Church*

*Spring 2020*





*Class  
Facilitators*

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## *Class Aims*

01

To conceptualize a biblical – theological way of understanding suffering

02

To consider how a Christian approach compares to other worldviews

03

To facilitate healing and growth as we face suffering in self & others

## *Some Limitations*

- Levels of Theological Inquiry
  - Direct, Inferential, Speculative
- Modes of theological inquiry
  - Biblical Revelation (primary)
  - Reason
  - Individual Experience
  - Collective Experience (tradition)
- Theory + Practice
- General statements, not particular
- Suffering is a mystery, requires humility
  - Glimpses of reality
  - Much held in silence
- A group of seekers and learners

# What is Suffering?

Suffering is an intense, often prolonged disintegration of personhood, experienced in loss of a perceived good.

T.J. VanderWeele, "Suffering and Response"



# Nine Characteristics of Suffering

## CIRCUMSTANTIAL



Duration

Pervasiveness

Intensity

## SUBJECTIVE



Loss of Control

Loss of Identity

Loss of Purpose

## OBJECTIVE



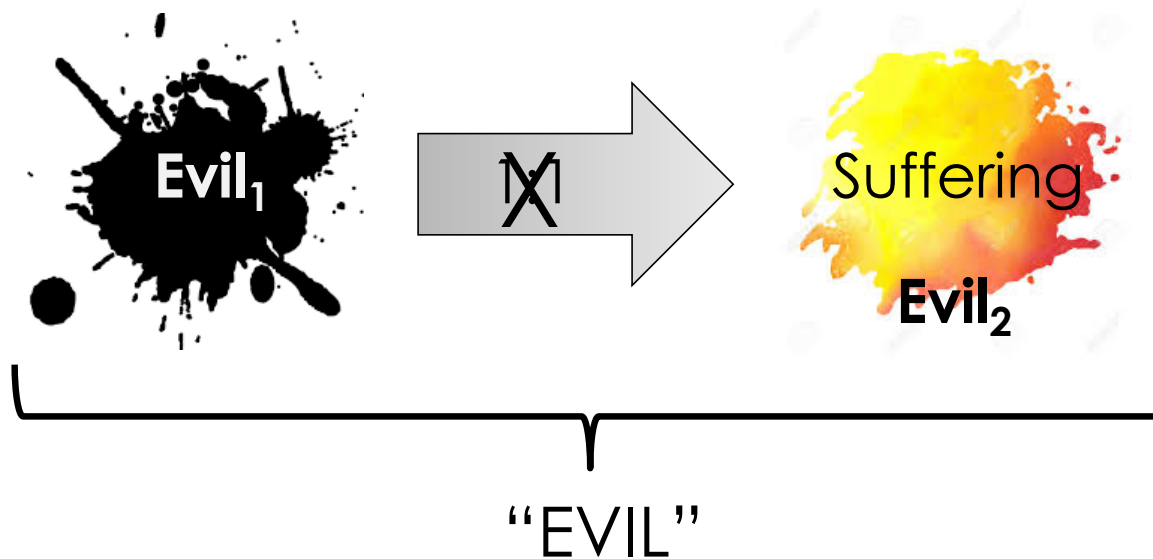
‘Desert’

Object lost

God’s ‘nearness’

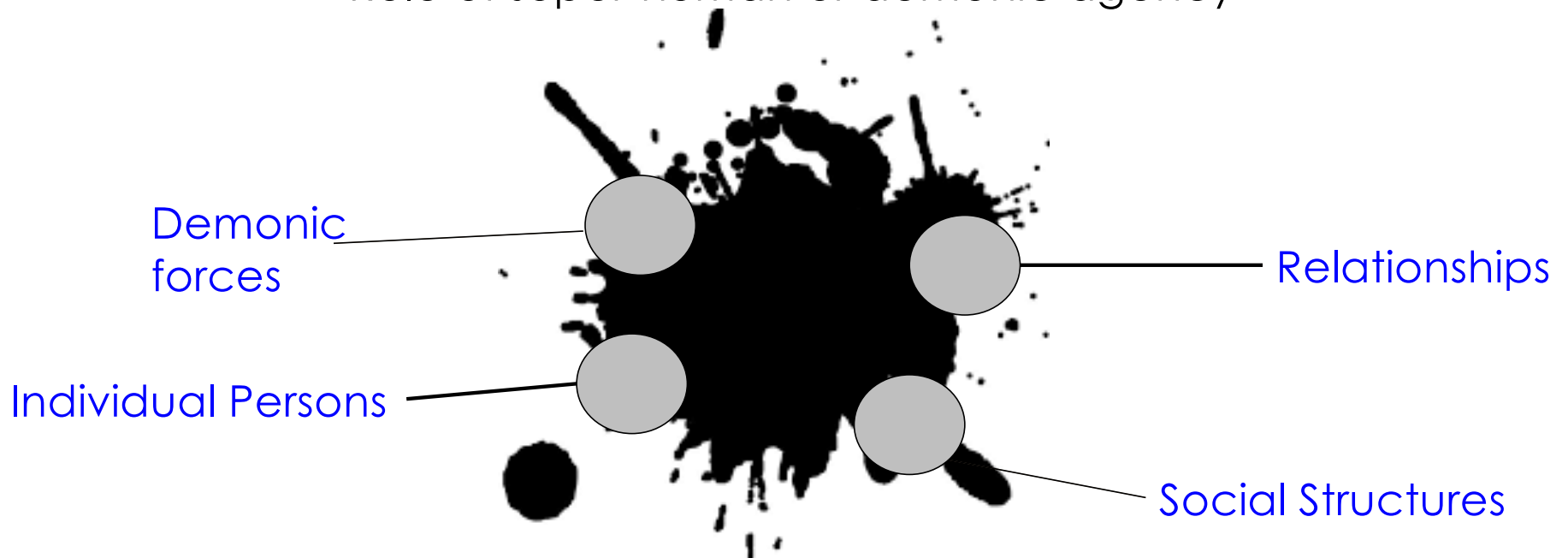
# What is evil?

- Evil<sub>1</sub> = moral deprivation & rebellion from God
- Suffering = evil's impact creates suffering (evil<sub>2</sub>)
- Affliction = Exponential increase of suffering



# Evil<sub>1</sub>

- Image of God & common grace but...
- Relational State: Rejection of God
- Activity: Moral agents rejecting God's word
  - Brokenness of human nature (Rom 3)
  - Role of super-human or demonic agency





## Romans 3

### No One Is Righteous

**9** What then? Are we Jews<sup>l</sup> any better off?<sup>2</sup> No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both <sup>k</sup>Jews and <sup>l</sup>Greeks, are <sup>m</sup>under sin, **10** as it is written:

<sup>n</sup>“None is righteous, no, not one;

**11** no one understands;  
no one seeks for God.

**12** All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;  
no one does good,  
not even one.”

**13** <sup>o</sup>“Their throat is <sup>p</sup>an open grave;  
they use their tongues to deceive.”

<sup>q</sup>“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

**14** <sup>r</sup>“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

**15** <sup>s</sup>“Their feet are swift to shed blood;

**16** in their paths are ruin and misery,

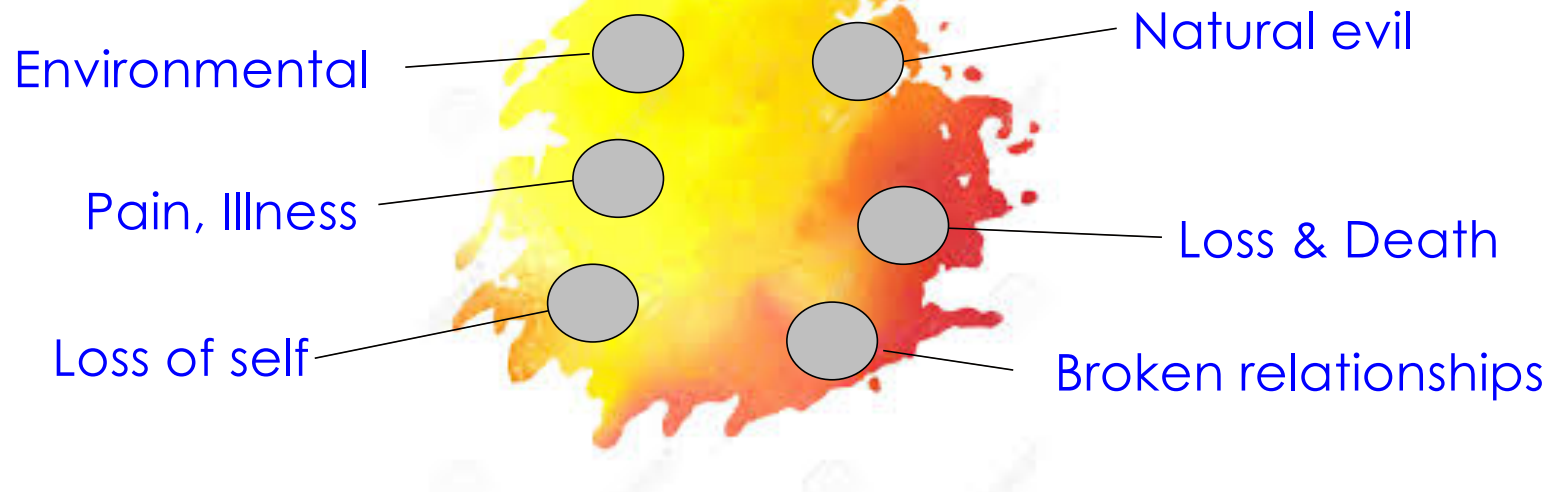
**17** and ‘the way of peace they have not known.”

**18** <sup>u</sup>“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

**19** Now we know that whatever <sup>v</sup>the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, <sup>w</sup>so that every mouth may be stopped, and <sup>x</sup>the whole world may be held accountable to God. **20** For <sup>y</sup>by works of the law no human being<sup>3</sup> will be justified in his sight, since <sup>z</sup>through the law comes knowledge of sin.

## **Evil<sub>2</sub> = Suffering = consequence of moral evil**

- Environmental: destruction of surroundings, victimizing others
- pain + illness experience
- Relationships: fragmented relationships
- Loss: loved one, 'things,' & personal identity
- Natural evil: earthquakes, etc.



## *Secular Humanism (e.g., atheism, naturalism)*

Key Questions	category	Secularism
Why is there suffering?	life	Random accident
What is evil?	cause	Evil is perception
How do we overcome suffering?	response	Avoidance & Minimize
What comfort and hope can be provided to the sufferer and bereaved?	future	Make world better

## *Pitiless Indifference*

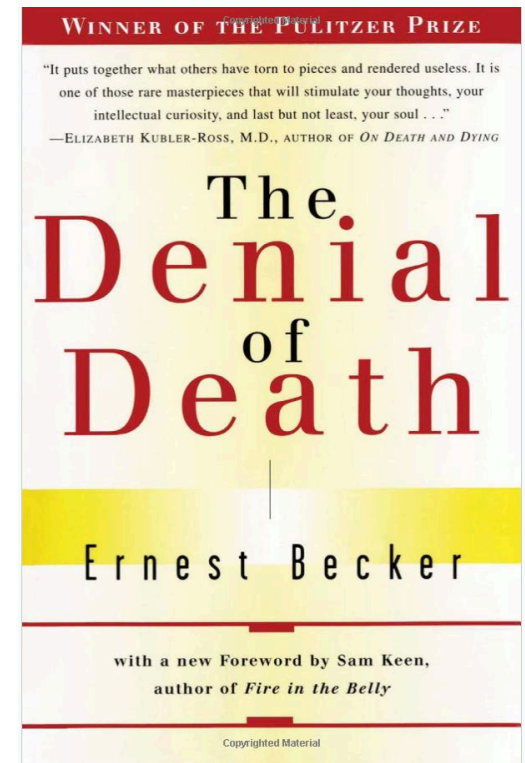
In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 133.

# From Religion to Camouflaging Death

Trad. religious rationales removed from culture

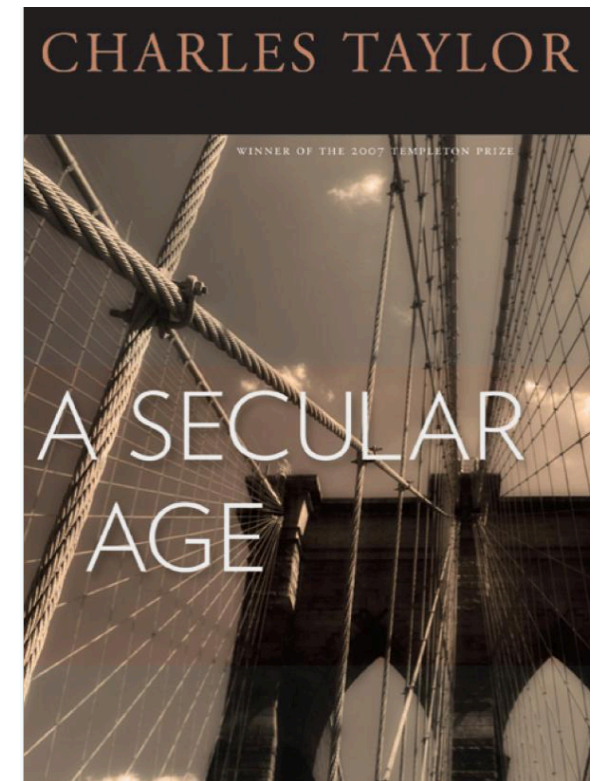
- Universal fear of death / terror of extinction without meaning (Becker)
- Religion explained suffering & death; the “great anxiety reliever”
- A cultural strategy is necessary to deal with suffering & death



## Avoidance Culture

Enlightenment rise of secular rationality

- Interpreting human experience w/out transcendence
- But how can secular worldview cope with terror of death?
- Death denial coping strategies: avoidance, hiding feelings, compartmentalizing, purposeful deception, resistance (e.g., “fighting cancer”)



## Camouflaging Death, social practices

### Camouflaging Suffering and Death (Aries)

1. Taboo and forbidden topic Chronically-ill patients (Knauft, 2005)
  - 32% had EOL discussion
  - 86% ~ “I’d rather concentrate on staying alive than talk about death”
2. Location of death from home to institution
  - In-hospital deaths in the United States from 49% in 1989 to 36% in 2007
  - 2007, 75% of all deaths took place in institutional contexts outside home

## **Camouflaging Death, social practices**

3. Handling the dead body
  - From home & family to funeral directors
  - Cosmetic enhancement of corpses
4. Bereavement practices
  - From public mourning rituals (wearing black)
  - To medical deviance (DSM5: bereavement diagnosed as major depressive disorder)
5. Burial practices
  - From local burial grounds
  - To distant locations
  - From burial to cremation (eliminates memory of the dead)



# Camouflaging Death

## Epidemiological: living longer & fewer deaths

Life expectancy globally and by world regions since 1770

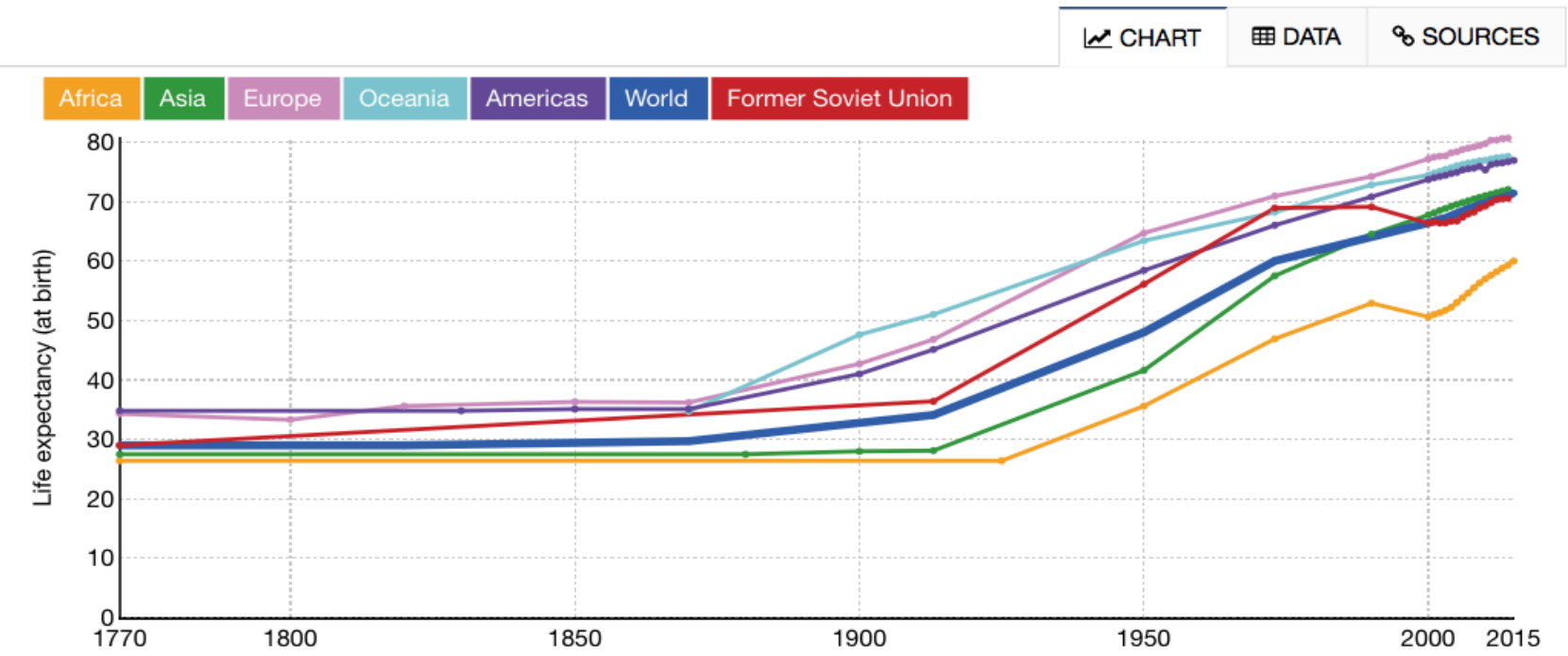
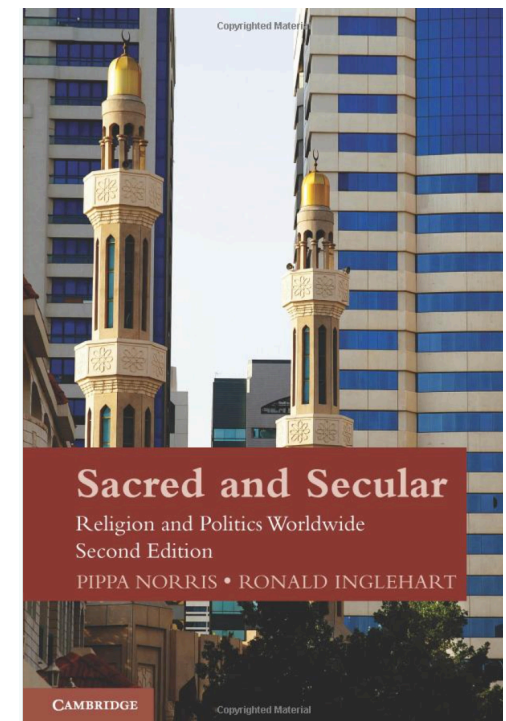


CHART DATA SOURCES

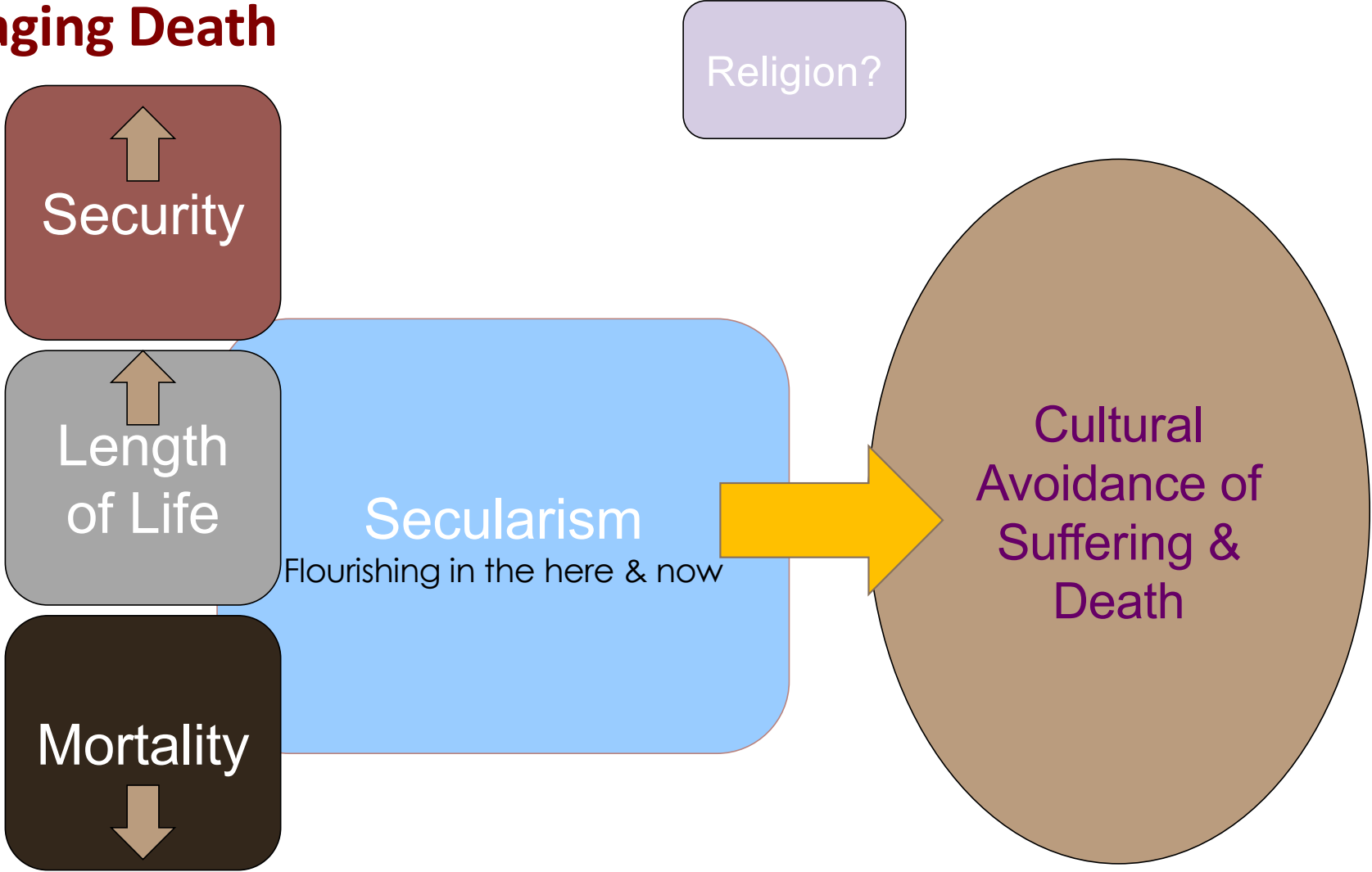
# Camouflaging Death

## Existential Security Thesis

- Secularization based on World Values Survey
- Greater social levels of security (economic equality, education, literacy, healthcare, social welfare, affluence and income, human development)
- Negatively correlated with religious identity and practices



# Camouflaging Death



# Next Week: Expand Christian Conceptual Model

Now?

From theory to practice

