

Article

# Race, Ethnicity, and the Functional Use of Religion When Faced with Imminent Death

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**Abstract:** This article uses religious coping theory to theorize about how and why race and ethnic groups on death row frame religious last statements at the moment of imminent death. Unique data (N = 269) drawn from death row inmates in Texas between December 1982 and April 2016 reveal uniformity in the dominance that black, white, and Hispanic inmates assign to relational forms of expressions that draw them closer to God and expressions that facilitate spiritual intimacy with others, over self-focused expressions that represent efforts to gain control over the imminent death experience or signal a transformed life. There is a hierarchy of preferred religious coping methods that changes for each group following the implementation of a new policy allowing the family and friends of murder victims (co-victims) to witness the execution of inmates. It is concluded that race and ethnic groups differ in the premium they place on preferred religious coping strategies when faced with imminent death, and a change in social context, such as the sudden presence of co-victims at executions, increases the religious content of last statements for all groups.

**Keywords:** religious coping theory; death row; last statements; race; ethnicity

## 1. Introduction

The last statements of those executed by the state have long fascinated scholars and onlookers alike since the origins of the practice in 14th-century Europe. What final words will people utter when they are certain of the exact time and place of their death? The answer, it turns out, runs the gamut from the sublime (“I’m at peace with all of this and I won’t have to wake up in prison any more. I totally surrender to the Lord”) to the humorous (“Where’s my stunt double?”). The systematic study of the final words of death row inmates is a relatively recent development in social science research that began with an interest in documenting the most common themes contained in last statements (Heflick 2005; Hirschmüller and Egloff 2016; Schuck and Ward 2008; Shermer 2018; Vollum 2008; Upton et al. 2017; Vollum and Longmire 2009). More recent inquiries have analyzed the last statements of death row inmates with an eye toward understanding their psychological make-up (Foley and Kelly 2018; Kelly and Foley 2013; Rice et al. 2009), the antecedents and consequences of expressed apologies (Cooney and Philips 2013; Eaton and Theuer 2009), possible race and ethnic variation in the content of last statements (Lester and Gunn 2013; McCaffree et al. 2020), methods of religious coping (Smith 2018), and the multiple dimensions of forgiveness found in last statements (Smith 2019). As important as this research is, at least three important gaps remain. First, there has been no attempt to theorize how and why race and ethnic groups prioritize certain religious coping methods over others in their last statements.<sup>1</sup> Second, no attempt has been made to track change over time in the priorities that race

<sup>1</sup> Despite the conceptual and empirical distinction between the words “religion” and “spiritual,” I use them throughout the text interchangeably.

and ethnic groups assign to religious coping methods. And, finally, we know very little about the role social context plays in influencing the content of last statements across race and ethnic groups.

To fill these gaps this article uses religious coping theory as a lens to view the coping strategies of inmates of race and ethnic groups who utter last statements just moments before their execution. In particular, I explain how and why black, white, and Hispanic<sup>2</sup> inmates prioritize a variety of religious coping methods, and I explore change over time in the hierarchy of preferred religious coping strategies among race and ethnic groups, while examining whether change in the social context in which last statements are elicited engenders change in the content of last statements. I begin with a discussion of religious coping theory to lay the foundation for the analysis described above. I then discuss what we currently know about the last statements of death row inmates. Following a discussion of the data, analytical strategy, and key results, I summarize the research findings, discuss their contributions to the literature, explain the limitations of the study, and provide direction for future inquiries.

## 2. Religious Coping Theory

Researchers have documented the long and intimate history between religion and penal institutions throughout Europe and the United States (Johnson 1990). Not only were state-sponsored executions seen as a way for condemned people to atone for sin (Johnson 1990), but Christianity, the dominant religion throughout most Western prison systems, preached a redemptive theology that included the possible salvation of some of the most reviled offenders in society. Notwithstanding what the state could do to the physical body, with heartfelt belief in Jesus Christ, Christianity promised (e.g., John 3:16) people who have been condemned to die with “literal immortality” (Heflick and Goldenberg 2012).

Despite the strong connection between religion and the death penalty, very little is known about how and why death row inmates use religion to cope with imminent death. Koenig et al. (1998, p. 513) define religious coping as “the use of religious beliefs or behaviors to facilitate problem-solving to prevent or alleviate the negative emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances,” while Pargament et al. (2011, p. 2) refer to religious coping as simply an effort “to understand and deal with life stressors in ways related to the sacred.”

The religious coping literature provides voluminous evidence showing that people are drawn to religion when faced with stressful life events (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament 2010). In particular, not only does church attendance increase among people undergoing stressful life circumstances, but religion is associated with reduced depression among middle-aged inmates (Koenig 1995) as well as improved mental and physical health and reduced rates of mortality (Harris et al. 1995; Oxman et al. 1995; Pargament et al. 1994).<sup>3</sup> When queried about their most frequently used coping methods in times of stress, elderly people, racial minorities, people facing life-threatening crises, and inmates all point to religion (Bulman and Wortman 1977; Conway 1985; Flannelly and Inouye 2001; Koenig 1995).

As important as these studies are, much remains to be learned about the specific functional use of religion when people are faced with life-threatening events. Prior studies are limited because they draw on traditional measures of religiosity (i.e., frequency of church attendance, prayer, viewing religious television, religious affiliation, or self-rated religiousness; Pargament et al. 2011). As Pargament et al. (2011) note, such measures fall short when it comes to accounting for why, when, or how people engage in religious coping behaviors. With this limitation in mind, a growing chorus of scholars have championed the need for more studies featuring “situation-specific” religious coping behavior (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament et al. 2000), specifically as it relates to death row inmates (Smith 2018, 2019). This study is built on the premise that the imminent death process (the period directly preceding the execution) experienced by death row inmates is a situation-specific event that provides inmates the opportunity to verbalize,

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Hispanic” is used by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which is the primary data source used in this study.

<sup>3</sup> For a review see Pargament (2002).

in real time, religious coping strategies to deal with the stress of knowing exactly when and how they will die. As prior research shows, religious expressions are a prominent feature of the last statements of death row inmates (Heflick 2005; Schuck and Ward 2008; Smith 2018, 2019; Vollum and Longmire 2009).

For the purposes of this study, I draw on the religious coping theory of Kenneth Pargament and his associates, leading scholars in this understudied area of social science research. Pargament and his associates assembled the most frequently used measures of religious coping in the literature (Pargament et al. 2011) and showed that when faced with major stressful events, people use religion (1) to find meaning in their circumstance (e.g., viewing the stressful event as part of God's plan), (2) to establish control (e.g., turning the situation over to God), (3) to gain comfort from and closeness to God (e.g., seeking God's forgiveness), (4) to gain intimacy with other people (e.g., looking for spiritual support from others), and (5) to achieve life transformation (e.g., looking to God for a new direction in the present life). Building on prior research (Smith 2018), this study examines the religious coping strategies of black, white, and Hispanic death row inmates made during the imminent death experience—an important yet unexplored area of social scientific inquiry. We know that during moments of imminent death, certain religious coping methods are prioritized over others. For example, (Smith 2018) found that when death row inmates are moments away from execution, their last statements tend to reflect efforts to gain comfort from and closeness to God followed by efforts to gain intimacy with others. However, other religious coping methods proved to be of lower priority, such as attempts to gain control, signal life transformation, or find meaning during the imminent death experience. As important as this research is, it does not speak to the question of whether race and ethnic groups vary in the way they prioritize religious coping strategies during the few moments preceding execution. This new line of empirical inquiry is justified given what we currently know about race and ethnic variation in religious coping during stressful life events. For example, the most common finding in the literature reveals that blacks are more likely than whites to utilize religious coping methods when faced with stressful life events. In particular, when dealing with a variety of illnesses, blacks display a stronger belief in divine control than whites and are more likely to view God as a healer, miracle worker, and savior (Krause 2005; McAuley et al. 2000; Schieman et al. 2006). Similarly, when dealing with anxiety, blacks engage in more positive religious coping than whites (Chapman and Steger 2010). Hispanics are rarely included in these comparative studies, but, when they are, the evidence suggests that the religious coping strategies of Hispanics are more similar to that of blacks than whites when coping with life threatening circumstances (Culver et al. 2002). Thus, given this literature, in the face of imminent death, I expect religious coping methods to vary by race and ethnic group.

### 3. The Last Statements of Death Row Inmates

Rooted in Christian history, the practice of recording the last words of people who have been condemned was an attempt to convey spiritual mercy on the part of the state while also providing the prisoner an opportunity to repent and find salvation moments before death (Elder 2010). According to Elder (2010), the last words of prisoners who are about to be executed are important because they provide an "oral history of the overlooked, the infamous and the forgotten—who nonetheless speak to a common humanity with their last act on earth." Given the uniqueness of such rare moments, it stands to reason that researchers would be interested in the content of last statements. Since the mid-2000s, a small but burgeoning cottage industry of studies has documented the most common themes found in last statements (Heflick 2005; Hirschmüller and Egloff 2016, 2018; Schuck and Ward 2008; Shermer 2018; Vollum 2008; Vollum and Longmire 2009). A frequent observation is how surprisingly positive the themes are (Goranson et al. 2017; Hirschmüller and Egloff 2018; Upton et al. 2017). Last statements have also been used to assess the psychological make-up of death row inmates (Foley and Kelly 2018, Foley and Kelly 2018; Rice et al. 2009), evaluate disparities in the content of last statements uttered by race and ethnic groups (Lester and Gunn 2013; McCaffree et al. 2020), and explore religious coping strategies of inmates (Smith 2018, 2019).

When it comes to common themes, Heflick (2005) content analysis of 237 last statements from Texas inmates on death row revealed six major themes: belief in an afterlife, activism (e.g., promoting social causes and advice to others), appreciation and love, silence, innocence, and forgiveness. Examining the same data, Schuck and Ward (2008, pp. 49–50) rank-ordered the most common themes and found that expressions of love or appreciation aimed at family and friends comprised 65 percent of all last statements, eclipsing expressions addressing family (including the victim's) and friends (55 percent), religious expressions (46 percent), and forgiveness (39 percent). More extensive examinations of the Texas data revealed ten major themes and 56 secondary themes, including expressions of well-wishes (58.6 percent), religion (48.3 percent), contrition (32.9 percent), gratitude (29.5 percent), and personal reconciliation (21.6 percent), to name a few (Vollum and Longmire 2009). Vollum and Longmire further divided their religion category into afterlife expressions (26 percent) and proclamations of faith and giving oneself over to God (24 percent). Further demonstrating that religion was a prominent feature of the final statements, the authors uncovered other important religious themes, such as preaching (15.8 percent), praying for others (13.4 percent), gratitude toward God (7.5 percent), prayer unspecified (6.8 percent), asking for God's forgiveness (6.8 percent), and prayer for self (6.5 percent). As alluded to above, studies documenting the most common themes found in the last statement data generally conclude that the themes are unexpectedly positive (Goranson et al. 2017; Hirschmüller and Egloff 2018; Shermer 2018; Upton et al. 2017) which is remarkable given the dire circumstances that death row inmates find themselves in at the moment of imminent death (Johnson et al. 2014).

Last statements are also a window into the emotional, psychological, and spiritual make-up of death row inmates (Cooney and Philips 2013; Eaton and Theuer 2009; Foley and Kelly 2018; Kelly and Foley 2013; Rice et al. 2009; Smith 2018, 2019). Prior studies show that making a reference to God is the best predictor of apology, with the invocation of God seen as a way of elevating the inmate's status (Cooney and Philips 2013). Eaton and Theuer (2009) found that forgiveness and empathy predict apology, and Rice et al. (2009) discovered that death row inmates are more likely to express repentance in the presence of victims' families and other co-victims. Smith (2019) study examined how the last statement of death row inmates could be used to understand how forgiveness is framed under stressful circumstances. He found, among other things, that death row inmates primarily prioritize efforts to seek religious forgiveness from others, followed by attempts to seek forgiveness from God for themselves. A smaller share of inmates used their final words to forgive others and seek forgiveness from others.

As discussed in detail below, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) not only publishes the last statements of death row inmates, but it also provides demographic information detailing, at a minimum, the inmate's race, ethnicity, and gender status. Such information enables scholarly exploration of possible variations along race and ethnic lines in the content of last statements. To date, two studies of racial and ethnic differences in last statements have yielded important insights that, when paired with what we know about religious coping theory, can inform expectations regarding possible race and ethnic variation in the priority that inmates assign to methods of religious coping at the moment of imminent death. Lester and Gunn (2013) analysis of last statement data from Texas found that Hispanic inmates included more religious expressions in their last statements than did whites and blacks, but blacks and whites included more positive expressions overall. In contrast, McCaffree et al.'s (2020) analysis of the Texas data revealed, among other things, that white inmates were more likely than black inmates to employ "sorry-related" words by a ratio of 2:1. The authors also found that race mediates the relationship between committing an economic crime and the probability of expressing remorse, in that those who expressed the least remorse (blacks) were also more likely to commit capital crimes that were connected to a secondary economically motivated crime such as robbery.

Additional inquiry into possible race and ethnic variation in the content of last statements is further justified given what we know about the intersection of race and the death penalty in general. Prior research shows that race and death penalty outcomes can intersect at the very outset of

capital cases when prosecutors decide to seek the death penalty in the first place (Baldus et al. 1990; Pierce and Radelet 2002; Williams and Holcomb 2001) and extending to the moment when judges and juries decide to impose the death penalty (Bowers et al. 2003; Paternoster and Brame 2008). In both phases, the literature paints a convincing picture of bias against black offenders, especially when the victims are white and female (Paternoster 1984; Williams et al. 2007) or when whites dominate the jury pool (Bowers et al. 2001, 2003).

This study extends inquiries into the intersection of race, ethnicity, and the death penalty not by asking whether there is evidence of racial bias in the last statement of death row inmates, but by, for the first time, revealing the religious coping methods of black, white, and Hispanic death row inmates as they face imminent death. Three previously unanswered questions are asked and answered: Is there race and ethnic variation in the way groups prioritize methods of religious coping? Is there any indication of change over time in the preferred religious coping mechanisms employed by race and ethnic groups? And, finally, is a change in social context associated with a change in the content of religious last statements among race and ethnic groups?

#### 4. Data and Plan of Analysis

The data used to answer these questions come from the (Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) 2016) website. My research assistants and I accessed 537 records of inmates sentenced to death by the State of Texas from 7 December 1982 to 6 April 2016. Out of a total of 429 oral last statements made by death row inmates, we classified 270 as “religious” or “spiritual” if the statement contained a reference to a deity, a prayer, scripture recitation, religious singing, or a mention of the afterlife (e.g., heaven).

This research centers on the State of Texas because, unlike the other capital punishment states, Texas publishes the last statements of death row inmates.<sup>4</sup> This information is accompanied by, among other things, demographic data including the race and ethnicity of death row inmates. Texas is also ideal because of its reputation as a religious state.<sup>5</sup> The Pew Research Center (n.d.) reports that three out of four adults in Texas identify as Christian and nearly 90 percent of adults living in Texas express a belief in God. Thus, the widespread availability of last statement data reaching back to 1982, the demographic information it provides, and Texas’s high self-reports of religiosity make the Texas data particularly well suited for an exploration of change over time in the functional role that religion plays among race and ethnic groups at the moment of imminent death.

As part of a larger project, I worked with two external coders to isolate all verbalized last statements in the Texas data (N = 429).<sup>6</sup> We used an open-coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to inductively identify major themes in the data. We then isolated all religious last statements (n = 269) and stratified them by race and ethnic group (and later by time period). I then proceeded to conduct a detailed content analysis of the 269 religious statements to determine the extent to which the content of the last statements aligned with Pargament et al. (2011) methods of religious coping. That is, I asked to what extent the statement represented efforts on the part of the inmate to (1) gain comfort from and closeness to God; (2) gain intimacy with others; (3) gain control; or (4) achieve life transformation. For the

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<sup>4</sup> Missouri also publishes the last statements of death row inmates. See Upton et al. (2017) for an analysis of Missouri data.

<sup>5</sup> Considering the religious orientation of Texas, one anonymous reviewer asked why Texas would be in the business of collecting and retaining the last statements of death row inmates, and subsequently, making them available to researchers. This important question is beyond the scope of the paper but, noted on p. 3, historical explanations for recording last words were linked to attempts on the part of the state to convey mercy and provide the inmate with an opportunity to repent before execution (Elder 2010). That said, it is not clear why Texas would make the last statements available to the public. Certainly the rationale behind that decision is worthy of future research.

<sup>6</sup> During the study period, 108 inmates declined to give a last statement. Thus, we have no way of knowing whether those inmates would have expressed themselves in religious terms. A much smaller subset of inmates provided incoherent or rambling statements. The idea that death row inmates would decline or offer an unintelligible last statement is interesting in its own right. Consistent with ethnographic investigations (Johnson et al. 2014, p. 147), such instances may be a function of the consequential and debilitating effects of years of confinement on death row.

purposes of this article, [Pargament et al. \(2011\)](#) coping method of finding meaning from the imminent death experience was eliminated from the analysis due to excessively small cell counts once the data were stratified by race and ethnic group (See Appendix A, Table A1 for a detailed description of Pargament et al.'s coping methods, subscales, and definitions). I then sought to assess whether inmates relied more heavily on certain religious coping methods than others. This strategy involved isolating the religious last statements of each group and calculating the proportion of religious expressions that reflected each coping method. I then constructed a hierarchy of preferred religious coping expressions for each group beginning with the most preferred (i.e., largest proportion of) expressions at the top of the hierarchy and concluding with the least preferred expressions at the bottom of the hierarchy. For each group, the analytical goal was simply to determine the proportion of religious expressions representing efforts to gain comfort from and closeness to God, build intimacy with others, establish control over the imminent death moment, or signal a transformed life. Finding more than one religious coping theme in one last statement was par for the course. For example, expressions seeking comfort from and closeness to God were often found alongside attempts to gain intimacy with others.

### *The Social Context of the Death Chamber and Change over Time*

The social context in which last statements are orally delivered is like no other.<sup>7</sup> In the modern era, state-sponsored executions involving lethal injections are largely ritualistic, regimented, clinical, and even theatrical.<sup>8</sup> In the death room, the inmate is the center of attention, but the warden and often a chaplain or a religious representative of the inmate are also present and they serve as nontrivial players in this morbid drama. Witnesses to the execution peer through glass windows with family members of the inmate separated from family and friends of the murder victim in adjacent rooms. Representatives of the news media are also present. Once the inmate is strapped to a gurney, it is the warden who typically asks if the inmate would like to make a last statement. Whether the inmate responds “yes” or “no” or offers no response at all is immaterial to the start of a lethal administration of a cocktail of debilitating drugs. We know this because some inmates’ last statements clearly indicate that they could feel the drugs coursing through their bodies (e.g., “I can feel it now,” “I can taste it,” “I can feel it, it’s affecting me now”).

This unique social context motivates the examination of race and ethnic variation over time in the functional use of religious coping methods. First, on 1 December 1996, Texas implemented a new policy allowing immediate family members of victims and those with a close relationship to the victim to witness the execution of the offender convicted of killing their loved one in person. The policy was amended in 1998 to also include friends of the victim’s family ([Rice et al. 2009](#); [Texas Department of Criminal Justice \(TDCJ\) 2017](#)). I argue that the new policy dramatically altered the social context of the death chamber. For the first time, death row inmates were provided an opportunity to speak directly to co-victims. This new arrangement naturally leads to an important empirical question about social context: To what extent might the qualitative content of last statements made outside the presence of co-victims (pre-1996) differ from the content of last statements made in the presence of co-victims (post-1996)? Investigating a similar question, [Rice et al. \(2009\)](#) analysis of the Texas data revealed a noticeable uptick in expressions of guilt and repentance after the implementation of the new policy. More recent research shows that religious expressions ([Smith 2018](#)) and, in particular, expressions of forgiveness ([Smith 2019](#)), substantially increased following the implementation of the new policy. While important, that research did not address whether the influence of social context on the content of last statements of death row inmates varied in any way by race or ethnic group—a central focus of the current study.

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<sup>7</sup> A handful of last statements were written by inmates or an associate prior to the inmate’s trip to the death chamber. Since this study is focused on the spontaneity of oral statements, all written statements are excluded from analysis—an exclusion that does not alter in any way the results of the study.

<sup>8</sup> See [Elder \(2010\)](#) for a rendering of last statements delivered during historical eras featuring executions by hanging, firing squad, electric chair, and the gas chamber. And see [Johnson et al. \(2014\)](#) for a more contemporary description of the process.

A second reason for pursuing an analysis of change over time in the qualitative content of last statements among race and ethnic groups has to do with the proposition that religious coping methods may vary over time and across situations among individuals. Pargament et al. (2011) encourage researchers to investigate this possibility. Ideally, this kind of exercise would be suited to a longitudinal analysis that follows the same people and their statements over time. But last statements are by definition made at one point in time by a single individual and are therefore cross-sectional in nature. Fortunately, the data do allow for an evaluation of whether the aggregate religious coping methods of inmates faced with the same imminent death situation change among race and ethnic groups over time. Such an inquiry significantly extends the study of last statements and insights into the most frequent mechanisms of religious coping employed at the moment of imminent death.

To explore the role that social context plays during the imminent death experience and to track change over time in the qualitative content of religious last statements, I divided the data into three time periods: 1982–1995, 1996–2000, and 2001–2016.<sup>9</sup> The first period represents the time preceding the implementation of the new policy, the second period covers the new policy, and the third period allows us to explore whether any changes that occurred between the first and second periods carried over into the third period. Following the implementation of the new policy, and informed by prior literature, it is reasonable to expect (1) an increase in religious expressions for all groups; (2) greater investments in religious expressions that represent efforts to draw *comfort from and closeness to God* and greater *intimacy with people* (relational modes) for all, but (3) Hispanics and blacks will exceed whites in making such investments.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Race/Ethnic Variation in Religious Statements

Table 1 shows the racial and ethnic breakdown of all executions in Texas (row 1), the number of valid oral statements (row 2), the number of oral religious statements (row 3), and the number of oral religious statements as a percent of all valid oral statements (row 4) for inmates executed between 7 December 1982 and 6 April 2016. During this time period, the absolute number of whites (239) executed in Texas exceeded that of Hispanics (100) and blacks (196). Whites (190) also outnumbered Hispanics (81) and blacks (157) in the total number of oral statements and the total number of religious oral statements (whites 124; Hispanics 56; blacks 89). However, when given the opportunity to utter a final statement, a larger proportion of Hispanics (69%) compared with whites (65%) and blacks (57%) expressed themselves in religious/spiritual terms. This preliminary finding comports with Lester and Gunn (2013) discovery that during their last statements, Hispanics are more likely than other groups to express themselves in religious terms—a finding contradicting statistical evidence that black men are more religious than Hispanic men (Cox and Diamant 2018).

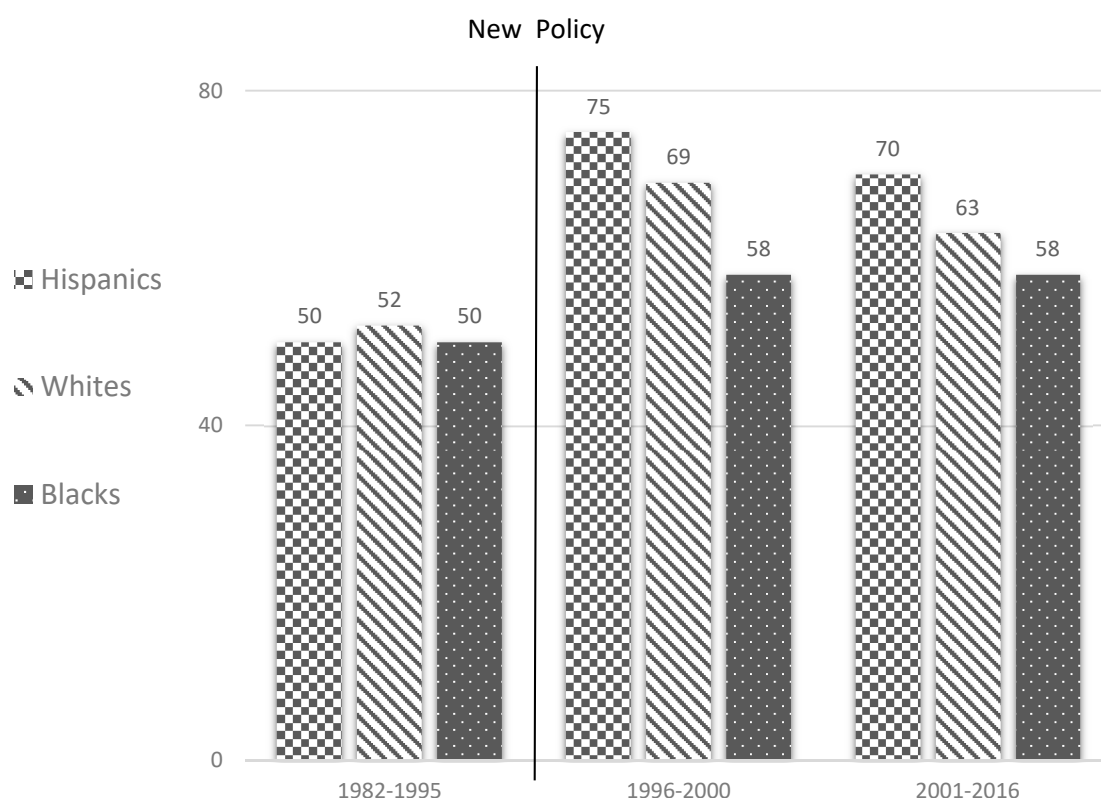
**Table 1.** Number of Executions and Religious Statements by Race and Ethnicity (7 December 1982–6 April 2016).

	Hispanic	White	Black	Total
1 Number of executions	100	239	196	535
2 Number of oral statements	81	190	157	428
3 Number of oral religious/spiritual statements	56	124	89	269
4 Religious statements as a percentage of all oral statements	69%	65%	57%	63%

<sup>9</sup> Before 1995, executions in Texas were comparatively sparse, so the first time period (1982–1995) encompasses executions that took place over a thirteen-year period. After 1995, executions accelerated to such an extent that aggregating the data into four- to five-year time spans generated roughly as many executions as the first time period.

### 5.2. Race/Ethnic Variation in Religious Statements over Time

Figure 1 displays the percent of oral religious statements for each race and ethnic group by time period. Before the implementation of the family and friends policy (1982–1995), about half of whites (52%), Hispanics (50%), and blacks (50%) expressed themselves in religious terms. However, the period during which the new family and friends policy was implemented (1996–2000) witnessed the greatest increase in religious expressions as a percent of all oral statements for each group. In particular, Hispanics experienced the greatest increase, jumping by 25 percentage points between the first (pre-policy) and second (policy) time periods, while the increase for whites and blacks over the same time period was 17% and 8%, respectively. These patterns strongly suggest that each race and ethnic group responded to the presence of co-victims at the execution by increasingly framing their final utterances in religious terms.



**Figure 1.** Percent of Valid Oral Religious Statements by Race, Ethnicity, and Time Period.

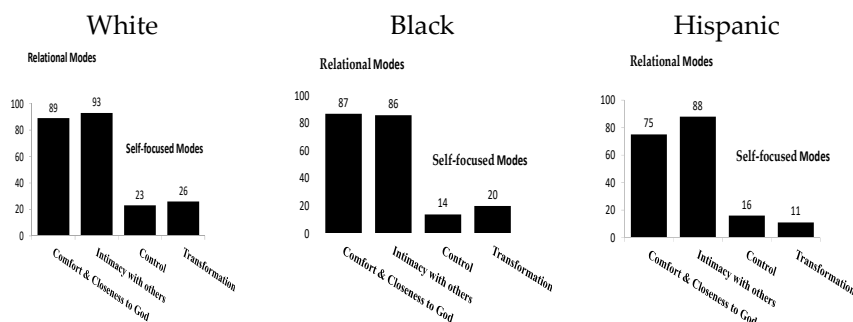
Figure 1 also shows that between the second (1996–2000) and third (2001–2016) time periods, the commitment to religious expressions decreased from 75% to 70% for Hispanics and from 69% to 63% for whites, but remained steady for blacks at 58%. Thus, the impact of context varies, not only over time, but also by race and ethnic group. Consistent with prior research, Hispanics appear to place a higher premium on expressing themselves in religious terms at the moment of imminent death (Lester and Gunn 2013). What is novel here is the finding that this pattern is most apparent after the implementation of the new policy allowing co-victims to witness the execution.

### 5.3. How and Why Race and Ethnic Groups Express Themselves in Religious Terms during the Imminent Death Experience

Having established race and ethnic variation in response to the changing social context of the death chamber, I now turn to the unanswered questions of how and why black, white, and Hispanic inmates express themselves in religious terms in the first place. Religious coping theory provides a useful framework for answering these queries. To address these questions, I stratified the religious last



statement data by race and ethnic group and qualitatively examined the extent to which each group employed religious coping methods. The results of this procedure, displayed in Figure 2, suggest broad consensus across race and ethnic groups in the dominance of relational modes of religious expressions over self-focused modes, but also significant variation in the importance given to specific religious coping methods. Several findings are worth highlighting.



**Figure 2.** Hierarchy of Religious Coping Methods as a Proportion of all Religious Last Statements among Texas Death Row Inmates by Race/Ethnicity (7 December 1982–6 April 2016), (N = 269).

First, when it comes to the most preferred coping methods at the moment of imminent death, whites (93%) and Hispanics (88%) highly favor expressions reflecting efforts to *gain intimacy with others*. Such expressions, enveloped as they are by religious references, are deep and personal and often aimed at multiple audiences: “I would like to tell the surviving victims here, society, my family and friends, that I ask that they forgive me. I beg for your forgiveness” (White inmate). “I want to say I am sorry and I say a prayer for you so you can have peace and I hope you can forgive me” (Hispanic inmate).

As the second most common religious coping expression, both whites (89%) and Hispanics (75%) favor efforts to seek *comfort from and closeness to God*, usually in the form of direct references to a deity or an afterlife: “I am going to be face to face with Jesus now” (white inmate); “Thank you, Jesus Christ. Thank you for your blessing. It is you Jesus Christ, that is performing this miracle in my life” (Hispanic inmate). Third, the patterns for whites and Hispanics contrast sharply with those of blacks. As shown in Figure 2, when faced with imminent death, the top two modal religious coping methods among black inmates suggest that they are as likely to utter expressions that draw them *closer to God* (87%), such as “I want to give all praise to God and glory and thank him for all that he done for me,” as they are to seek *intimacy with others* (86%), as in “Betty, you have been wonderful. You guided me to the Lord. You have been like a mother to me.”

Further analysis revealed little race/ethnic variation in the content of “closer to God” expressions, but the little that does exist shows that blacks are eight times more likely than whites and Hispanics to make specific reference to Allah as a deity. In some ways, this ratio reflects the lack of Muslim chaplains in the American prison system.<sup>10</sup> The data show that one white inmate and one Hispanic inmate made reference to Allah, compared to nine black inmates who mentioned the deity. As one black inmate offered: “My fear is for Allah, God only, who has at this moment the only power to determine if I should live or die. As a devout Muslim, I am taught and believe that this material life

<sup>10</sup> In a related matter, in 1982, Charles Brooks, Jr, earned the dubious distinction of becoming the first man executed by lethal injection in the United States. Mr. Brooks was accompanied by a Muslim chaplain, Akbar Nurid-Din Shabazz who, according to his New York Times obituary, recently died of Covid-19 (New York Times, 27 June 2020, A24). Beyond the warden, prison chaplains or other spiritual advisors are the only personnel allowed into the death chamber with the inmate. While chaplains pray with the inmate and offer some measure of comfort leading up to the execution, inmates who practice a religion other than Christianity or Islam may find themselves void of this option. The Supreme Court recently weighed in on the side of an inmate who requested that a Buddhist chaplain accompany him into the death chamber after the Texas Department of Criminal Justice rejected his request. Arguing that the inmate’s religious rights had been violated, the Court issued Texas an ultimatum: either supply a chaplain for inmates of all religions, or ban the practice altogether. Texas decided to ban the practice altogether (Montgomery 2020).

is only for the express purpose of preparing oneself for the real life that is to come.” Another black inmate intoned at the moment of imminent death: “There’s no God but Allah, and unto thy I belong and unto thy I return.”

Fourth, when it comes to expressions of personal *transformation*, whites (26%) and blacks (20%) share a commonality, in that such utterances of transformation represent the third highest priority of expressions for both groups when facing imminent death. Among other things, personal transformation expressions usually allude to a religious change that has occurred since the inmate’s incarceration: “I am not the same person that I used to be, that person is dead. Christ has changed me” (white inmate). “Ya’ll do understand that I came here a sinner and leaving a saint. Take me home Jesus, take me home. Lord, take me home Lord” (black inmate). By contrast, among Hispanics (11%), expressions of personal transformation reside at the bottom of their hierarchy of preferred religious coping mechanisms; however, the content of such expressions are quite similar to that of whites and blacks, as in “I hope you have found God just like I have. God bless y’all” and “I got love for everybody. I am a Christian now.”

Finally, when it comes to utterances that seek to establish *control*, whites (23%) place a higher premium on such expressions relative to Hispanics (16%) and blacks (14%). Expressions of *control* usually take the form of active religious surrender to a deity:

Jesus take me home. (white inmate)

Lord Jesus Christ, I commend myself to you. I am ready. (black inmate)

Thank you, Lord Jesus receive my spirit. (Hispanic inmate)

To summarize, there are important similarities and differences across race and ethnic groups in the hierarchy of preferred religious coping methods employed by inmates at the moment of imminent death. Religious coping methods to *gain comfort from and closeness to God* and *intimacy with others* overwhelmingly reside at the top of the religious coping hierarchy of each group. However, the data reveal no overall, uniform hierarchy across groups. Instead, the order of priority does vary across race and ethnic groups, with whites and Hispanics prioritizing religious methods of coping to *gain intimacy with others* over efforts to *gain comfort from and closeness to God*, while blacks draw on both methods of coping fairly evenly. Further, whites and blacks place a higher premium on expressions of personal *transformation* than do Hispanics, while Hispanics and blacks share roughly similar levels of commitment to uttering religious expressions to gain *control* over the imminent death moment.

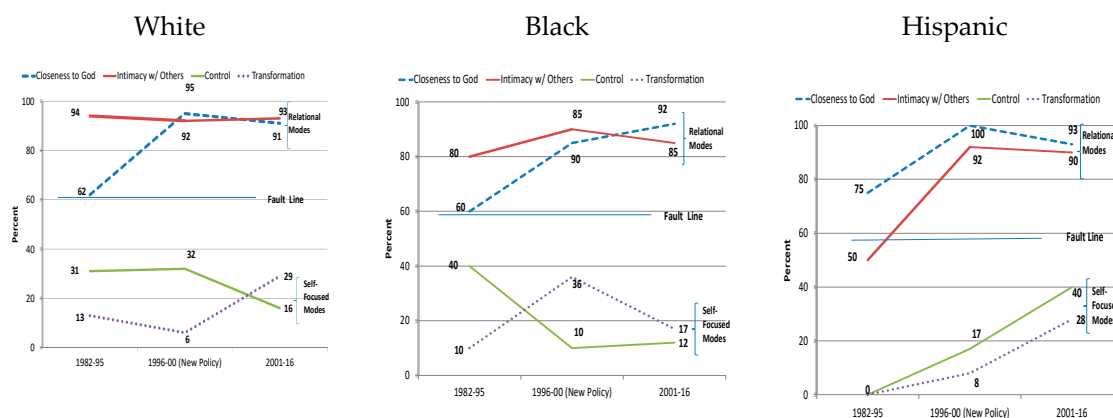
Supplemental analyses relate to overt claims of innocence, apology, and forgiveness. The data show that a higher proportion of whites (41%) than Hispanics (30%) and blacks (22%) use their religiously themed last statements to express remorse or apology (McCaffree et al. 2020), while whites (20%) are also more likely than Hispanics (14%) and blacks (17%) to seek interpersonal forgiveness.

Overall, when it comes to methods of religious coping, Figure 2 reveals a major fault line showing that “relational” modes of coping (comfort from and closeness to God; intimacy with others) are used at a much higher rate than “self-focused” modes of religious coping (seeking to gain control; achieve transformation). This pattern, which is consistent across all race and ethnic groups, raises the question of whether inmates chose to invest more in relational coping methods following the implementation of the new policy allowing the family and friends of their murder victims to witness the execution.

#### 5.4. Race, Ethnicity, and the Hierarchy of Preferred Religious Coping Methods over Time

Having unveiled race and ethnic similarities and differences in the hierarchy of preferred religious coping methods at the moment of imminent death, I now turn to the question of whether such hierarchies change over time and, if so, whether such change is in any way associated with the implementation of a new policy allowing co-victims to witness the execution of the individual convicted of killing their loved one. Arguably, the presence of co-victims represents a change in the social context of the execution process—a change that may coincide with a re-prioritizing in the way

race and ethnic groups express themselves in religious terms. While prior research has shown that context matters when it comes to the manner in which death row inmates frame their last statements (Rice et al. 2009; Smith 2018, 2019), this is the first attempt to explore possible race and ethnic differences in such framing. Figure 3 depicts change over time in the hierarchy of religious coping methods for each race and ethnic group. Several patterns are worth reporting.



**Figure 3.** Hierarchy of Religious Coping Methods as a Proportion of all Religious Last Statements among Texas Death Row Inmates by Race, Ethnicity, and Time Period (7 December 1982–6 April 2016), (N = 269).

#### 5.4.1. Intimacy with Others

First, looking across the three panels representing the patterns for each race and ethnic group, we see that whites (94%) placed a substantially higher premium in the pre-policy time period (1982–1995) on religious expressions aimed at gaining intimacy with others compared with blacks (80%) and Hispanics (50%). By the middle time period (1996–2000), during the implementation of the new policy to allow co-victims to witness executions, there was no discernible uptick for whites as they remained high even as they slightly declined to 92%. In contrast, during the same time period, the proportion of expressions framed as gaining intimacy with others for both blacks (90%) and Hispanics (100%) substantially increased. Thus, when it comes to attempts to gain intimacy with others, there is little evidence that the presence of co-victims mattered much for how whites framed their religious last statements. However, for blacks and Hispanics, the presence of co-victims coincided with an increase in religious coping expressions aimed at gaining intimacy with others.<sup>11</sup>

#### 5.4.2. Gaining Comfort from and Closeness to God

With regard to efforts to draw closer to God, change in social context as represented by the new co-victims policy appears to have played a greater role for all groups. In particular, the first panel in Figure 3 shows that the proportion of whites who framed their final statements in a way that reflected efforts to gain comfort from and closeness to God increased from 62% in the pre-policy period to 95% during the period that witnessed the implementation of the new policy and settled at 91% in the recent period (2001–2016). By comparison, blacks steadily increased from 60% to 85% to 92% over the three periods. Similarly, Hispanics seemed to respond to the new policy by increasing their proportion of expressions of drawing closer to God from 75% (pre-policy) to 100% (middle period) and settling at 93% by the recent period. Again, these patterns show that following the implementation of the new policy, all groups experienced a substantial increase in the proportion of religious expressions designed

<sup>11</sup> Caution should be taken when interpreting the numbers for Hispanics as their cell counts are very small.

to draw them closer to God. Whites experienced the largest proportional increase (33 percentage points) followed by blacks (25 percentage points) and Hispanics (25 percentage points), respectively.

#### 5.4.3. Gaining Control

Whereas efforts to gain intimacy with others and closeness to God reflect relational modes of expression, efforts to *gain control* can be regarded as a self-focused mode of expression. Overall, self-focused expressions display far more variation across groups than relational modes. There is no evidence that the presence of co-victims at the execution altered the manner in which whites expressed themselves in control terms. As Figure 3 displays, the proportion of control expressions among whites remained virtually unchanged between the first (31%) and second (32%) time periods, but it did show a precipitous decline by the recent period (16%). For blacks, however, the presence of co-victims as witnesses to their execution coincided with a steep decline in expressions of control, decreasing from 40% in the first time period to 10% during the period of the policy change and settling at 12% by the recent period. With regard to Hispanics, there were no expressions in the first time period that could be clearly classified as efforts to gain control, but during the policy change period, 17% of religious last statements reflected efforts to gain control, and the proportion continued to rise to 40% during the recent time period. Overall, these patterns suggest that expressions of control, a decidedly self-focused method of expression, show the most variation among the three groups.

#### 5.4.4. Achieving Life Transformation

Declarative statements of “transformation” (“I am truly repentant”), the second self-focused mode of communication, also show stark race and ethnic variation across time. For whites, the new policy corresponded with a seven percentage point decline in expressions of transformation between the first (13%) and second (6%) time periods, but the percentage quadrupled to a high of 29% by the recent period. By contrast, for both blacks and Hispanics, the presence of co-victims coincided with a substantial increase in expressions of personal transformation. But again, there are important group differences, as the proportion of such expressions declined for blacks from 35% (middle period) to 17% (recent period), while statements of transformation among Hispanics increased from 8% to 28% across the two recent time periods. Thus, as the middle period ushered in the new policy of welcoming co-victims at executions, there was a decrease in statements of personal transformation among whites, but an increase among blacks and Hispanics. After the middle period, however, whites and Hispanics displayed a greater propensity to utter expressions of personal transformation, while among blacks, such statements fell out of favor.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

A recent increase in the scientific study of religious coping methods has paralleled heightened investigation into the last statements of death row inmates, although the body of work of the former is more voluminous than the latter. Building on these two strands of literature, this study employed religious coping theory as a framework to interpret the last statements of black, white, and Hispanic death row inmates made moments before their execution. The investigation of possible race and ethnic differences in this unique context is justified given well-documented findings regarding group variation in religious expressions alongside copious research confirming racial differences in the administration of the death penalty in the United States. Overall, the results enhance our understanding of the important role that religion plays in the lives of race and ethnic groups undergoing the most stressful life circumstance imaginable: imminent death by lethal injection. Three previously unanswered questions framed the analysis: Is there race and ethnic variation in the way groups prioritize methods of religious coping? Is there any indication of change over time in the preferred religious coping mechanisms employed by race and ethnic groups? And, does change in social context portend change in the content of religious last statements? The answers to these queries extend what we previously knew about

race and ethnic disparities in last statement content (Lester and Gunn 2013; McCaffree et al. 2020) and explorations into the religious last statements of death row inmates (Smith 2018, 2019).

An aerial view of the data reveals a deep and wide fault line between relational modes of coping (drawing comfort from and closeness to God and intimacy with others) and self-focused modes of coping (establishing control and signaling personal transformation) among all race and ethnic groups (Figure 2). This pattern remains intact across the 35 years covered by the data. In particular, from the first (1982–1995) to the recent (2001–2016) time periods, the fault line gap ranges from roughly 56% to 70% among whites, 45% to 74% among blacks, and 63% to 58% among Hispanics (Figure 3)—suggesting that the gap increases over time for whites and blacks but narrows for Hispanics.

At a deeper level, the nuanced analysis employed here reveals variation in the priorities that race and ethnic groups assign to religious coping methods during moments of imminent death, and variation in how race and ethnic groups respond to dramatic change in the social context of the death chamber. Whites and Hispanics place a slightly higher premium than blacks on efforts to establish intimacy with others (i.e., largely those witnessing the execution). In contrast, blacks prioritize efforts to draw comfort from and closeness to God almost equally with efforts to gain intimacy with others and, unlike other groups, blacks are more likely to make a reference to Allah, however, to be sure, references to Christian themes inform the content of the vast majority of last statements for all groups. Expressions of personal transformation—signaling a changed life during the time of incarceration—are the third highest priority among whites and blacks, but Hispanics place such statements at the bottom of their hierarchy of preferred coping mechanisms. A higher proportion of whites and Hispanics than blacks offer expressions of control during the imminent death experience and these ostensibly self-focused utterances, when viewed through the lens of religious coping theory, are better understood as attempts to wrest control over their bodies from the state by relinquishing control over their souls to God.

Prior research shows that the implementation of a new policy allowing co-victims to witness the execution of offenders convicted of killing their loved ones corresponds with an increased reliance on religious coping methods (Smith 2018, 2019). The present study corroborates this finding (Figure 1), but also extends it in significant ways by revealing that the implementation of the new policy coincided with changes in the hierarchy of preferred religious coping mechanisms employed by race and ethnic groups (Figure 3). During the implementation of the new policy, religious expressions representing attempts to *gain intimacy with others* shot up precipitously among black and Hispanic inmates, while the numbers remained relatively flat among white inmates. Consistent with religious coping theory, attempts to gain intimacy with others at times came in the form of “religious helping” whereby inmates would provide spiritual support and comfort via direct prayers to co-victims, expressions of remorse, or apology. Part of this disparity has to do with two overlapping patterns: first, from the very start of the data period (1982–1995), white inmates placed an extremely high premium on expressions representing attempts to gain intimacy with others, and this commitment, which averaged in the low 90% range, was evident throughout the entire 34-year period covered by the data in this study. In contrast, in the first time period, much lower proportions of blacks and Hispanics invested in expressions aimed at gaining intimacy with others. So, once the new policy was implemented during the second time period (1996–2000), blacks and Hispanics had a greater distance to travel to reach near parity with whites.

A second explanation points to evidence showing that whites, relative to other groups, turned more of their attention to efforts to draw *comfort from and closeness to God*. Under religious coping theory, this method represents a form of “religious focus”—engaging in religious activities to shift focus from the stressful event of imminent death; and “spiritual connection”—experiencing a sense of connectedness with forces that transcend the individual (Pargament et al. 2011). Between the first time period (before policy implementation) and second time period (during policy implementation), whites experienced a 33 percentage point increase in expressions aimed at drawing them closer to God—a margin far greater than any other group. Importantly, the large increase in direct appeals to God among whites during the period of the new policy implementation and beyond was accompanied

by increases in expressions of apology, remorse, and requests for forgiveness that superseded all other groups.

Furthermore, the data show that typical efforts to *gain control* over the imminent death experience come in the form of “active religious surrender” to a deity. I explored the extent to which inmates engaged in such forms of religious coping following the implementation of the new policy allowing co-victims to witness executions. This change in the social context of the death chamber had little effect on white inmates’ expressions of control, as they remained fairly steady at 31% during the first period and 32% after the implementation of the new policy. It is noteworthy that by the most recent time period, expressions of control among whites plummeted to 16%, a 50% decline relative to the previous two periods. In contrast, blacks felt less need to express themselves in control terms following the new policy—as their control expressions fell from 40% before the policy to 10% during the policy. At the same time, expressions of control among Hispanics increased from 0% to 17% between the first and second time periods and later skyrocketed to 40% in the more recent time period. These patterns suggest that expressions of control show the most variation among the three groups.

Finally, the self-focused expressions of personal *transformation*, displayed here, are largely declarations of “religious conversion” (“Christ has changed me”). As with efforts to gain control, the introduction of the new co-victims policy produced radically different responses across the three race and ethnic groups. For whites, the new policy corresponded with an initial decline in statements of transformation between the first and second time periods, although by the recent time period, the proportion of transformation expressions among whites increased by nearly fivefold. The pattern for blacks was virtually the opposite. Blacks appeared to respond to the onset of the new policy by initially increasing their expressions of personal transformation, between the pre-policy and policy implementation time periods, but by the recent time period, the commitment to expressions of personal transformation was nearly halved. Hispanics, by contrast, starting at a much lower base, steadily increased their commitment to expressions of personal transformation from 0% in the first period to 8% and 28% during the second and third periods, respectively. Thus, over time, whites and Hispanics felt more emboldened to express themselves in the self-focused mode of personal transformation, whereas the opposite was the case for blacks.

These findings must be weighed against several limitations. First, the results here may not be generalizable to other death penalty states. Outside of Missouri, Texas is the only death penalty state that publishes the last statements of death row inmates, making Texas and Missouri outliers in some respects. One study showed that death row inmates in Missouri expressed themes similar to those found in the Texas data (Upton et al. 2017). Second, Texas is also unique in its relatively high levels of religiosity, conservatism, and history of racism. These factors may influence the imminent death process in ways not captured by the data presented here. Third, the data were restricted to death row inmates who verbalized a religious last statement moments before execution. Thus, it would be useful to extend this line of inquiry to nonreligious statements in an effort to explore how and why the coping methods of nonreligious inmates may differ from those of religious inmates. Fourth, a sizeable number (N = 108) of death row inmates opted not to utter a last statement when given the opportunity to do so. Thus, we know nothing about the coping strategies they employed, if any at all, to deal with their imminent death. For example, these inmates could have decided to pray silently or recite spiritual phrases silently, or they may have been thinking nonreligious thoughts. Either way, it is important to acknowledge these missing data. Fifth, in a very small number of cases, the last statements of death row inmates were scrubbed of profane language and in other cases inmates used a language or spoke in a way that was unintelligible to those recording the last statement. However, the number of such cases was miniscule and therefore did not influence the results reported here. Finally, the data are largely limited to Christian offenders within a largely Christian context and may therefore not be generalizable to non-Abrahamic religious beliefs and other prison contexts.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study extends what we previously knew about the coping mechanisms of death row inmates. There is broad cross-group uniformity in the preference for relational

over self-focused modes of expressions but there is also variation in the way that race and ethnic groups prioritize specific religious coping strategies. Moreover, social context matters. Not only do changes in religious coping priorities correspond to changes in the social context of the death chamber, but the change in priorities varies by race and ethnic group.

This study points to a number of future research directions. First, as the findings suggest, changes in the social context of the death chamber and the composition of witnesses may influence how death row inmates chose to represent themselves in their last statements. Thus, an ethnographic approach similar to that conducted by Johnson and his associates (Johnson et al. 2012, 2014) can shed further light on the social context of confinement, the physical and mental toll it takes on death row inmates, and the influence it may have on their last statements. Second, religious coping theory offers one explanation as to why death row inmates draw on religious themes for self-presentation during the imminent death experience. Prior studies have also considered terror management theory (TMT) as a construct by which to interpret last statements (Heflick 2005; Schuck and Ward 2008). Proposed by Greenberg et al. (1986), TMT, through its *mortality salience* hypothesis, asserts that when people are asked to contemplate their own death, they will call on their beliefs to provide a “worldview defense” against the anxiety and terror that such thoughts impose. Under such conditions, the theory asserts that human beings are said to minimize or solve the problem by calling on their cultural worldviews (Becker 1973) which include, among other things, their religious understanding of life and death. Cultural worldviews, it is argued, help to explain what happens after death” (Arndt et al. 2005, p. 193). In several respects, RCT and TMT are complimentary, not competing, theoretical paradigms. While TMT asserts that people are drawn to their religion during moments of intense fear (Becker 1973; Solomon et al. 1991, 2004), RCT, as the data reported here show, further explains *why* people turn to religion under such circumstances: primarily to gain a sense of comfort and closeness to God and intimacy with others and, secondarily, to gain a sense of control and personal life transformation. Future research could further explore how these two theoretical paradigms cohere (or not) using different samples and different life-threatening events. Finally, the religious coping methods revealed here are likely to be good examples of religious coping strategies around death outside of the death penalty context. As one anonymous reviewer suggested, and as I pose here as a fruitful line of inquiry for future research, it might be interesting to compare the religious coping methods employed here with other religious discourse around imminent death, such as people in hospice care.

Beyond the confines of the death chamber, one implication of the findings reported here suggests that social context matters in another way. As the “capital of capital punishment” (Johnson et al. 2012, p. 15), and as one of the most religious states in the nation, Texas presents a peculiar irony amid waning support for the death penalty in the United States. Christianity, the dominant religion in Texas and Texas prisons, presents to the religious supporter of the death penalty a stark dissonance that seems to be playing out in real time. On the one hand, Christianity is a redemptive religion that promotes the forgiveness of sins for all who believe, no matter how vile the sin, and such forgiveness is not only applicable in this life, but in the life to come. The data shown here suggests that this redemptive promise of radical transformation in the here and now (“I am not the same person. Christ has changed me”) and the reward of literal immortality in the afterlife (“I’m going to heaven and I’ll see you there”) informs the hope that embodies the last statements of religious death row inmates. On the other hand, many Christians still support the death penalty, seeing no contradiction at all between state-sponsored execution and the Christian message of redemption and salvation. For these believers in Christianity and the death penalty, vengeance appears to outweigh the possibility of redemption.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Pargament et al. (2011) Religious Coping Subscales and definitions of religious coping methods \*.

<b>Religious Methods of Coping to Gain Control</b>	
Collaborative religious coping	Seeking control through a problem-solving partnership with God
Active religious surrender	An active giving up of control to God
Passive religious surrender	Passive waiting for God to control the situation
Pleading for direct intercession	Seeking control indirectly by pleading to God for a miracle or divine intercession
Self-directed religious coping	Seeking control directly through individual initiative rather than help from God
<b>Religious methods of coping to gain comfort and closeness to God</b>	
Seeking spiritual support	Searching for comfort and reassurance through God's love and care
Religious focus	Engaging in religious activities to shift focus from the stressor
Religious purification	Searching for spiritual cleansing through religious actions
Spiritual connection	Experiencing a sense of connectedness with forces that transcend the individual
Spiritual discontent	Expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with God's relationship to the individual in the stressful situation
Marking religious boundaries	Clearly demarcating acceptable from unacceptable religious behavior and remaining within religious boundaries
<b>Religious methods of coping to gain intimacy with others and closeness to God</b>	
Seeking support from clergy or congregation members	Searching for comfort and reassurance through the love and care of congregation members and clergy
Religious helping	Attempting to provide spiritual support and comfort to others
Interpersonal religious discontent	Expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with the relationship of clergy or congregation members to the individual in the stressful situation
<b>Religious methods of coping to achieve a life transformation</b>	
Seeking religious direction	Looking to religion for assistance in finding a new direction for living when the old one may no longer be viable
Religious conversion	Looking to religion for a radical change in life
Religious forgiving	Looking to religion for help in shifting to a state of peace from the anger, hurt, and fear associated with an offense

\* Religious methods of coping to find meaning have been omitted from the analysis due to small cell counts for race and ethnic groups.

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