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**Afterlife Beliefs Among Evangelical and Mainline Protestant  
Children, Adolescents, and Adults: A Cultural-Developmental Study in the U.S.**

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### **Abstract**

This cultural-developmental interview study examined afterlife beliefs in relation to religious culture (evangelical and mainline Protestants) and age (children, adolescents, and adults;  $N = 120$ ). Quantitative results showed that evangelical and mainline Protestants differed on every analysis: beliefs about what happens to us when we die, whether and why people experience different afterlives (e.g., heaven and hell), and the importance and desirability of the afterlife. Significant findings involving age mostly intersected with culture. Children and adolescents more than adults adhered to the religious teachings of their respective church communities. Qualitative analyses showed that participants' descriptions of the nature of the afterlife were highly diverse. For example, they depicted living in the presence of a transcendent being, living in an ideal moral world, and the continued existence of self and others in physical, psychological, and spiritual ways. The number and breadth of descriptions suggest that afterlife beliefs do not derive from one cognitive mechanism but rather constitute a nexus for multiple psychological mechanisms and motives. Furthermore, these mechanisms and motives are shaped by culture in the course of development.

*Keywords:* afterlife beliefs, life course development, culture, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants

## **Afterlife Beliefs Among Evangelical and Mainline Protestant**

### **Children, Adolescents, and Adults: A Cultural-Developmental Study in the U.S.**

Belief in an afterlife is widespread among human cultures. A recent study used archival data from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample to determine the most common religious beliefs among 33 hunter-gather societies and by implication, according to the authors, the origins and evolution of religion (Peoples et al., 2016). Belief in an afterlife was present in 79% of the societies, only superseded by animism which occurred in all the societies. Afterlife beliefs are also widespread across countries. International surveys show that about 80% or more of the adult population in countries such as Chile, Ireland, the Philippines, Turkey, and the United States believe that it is either certain or probable that there is life after death (International Social Survey Programme, 2018). Even in a highly secular country such as Denmark, in-depth interviews suggest that beliefs in some kind of afterlife are quite common (Arnett & Jensen, 2015).

In spite of the seemingly deep origins of afterlife beliefs and their current prevalence, psychological research on how people conceptualize the afterlife is strikingly rare. Two veins of research, however, have provided helpful insights. Some studies have focused on whether people believe that an individual continues to exist after death in a physical body or in an immaterial way. The primary purpose of these studies has been to address the question of whether children's afterlife beliefs derive from an inherent cognitive predisposition to differentiate the material and immaterial. A different and very small vein of qualitative research has focused on adults' accounts of the afterlife. These studies have aimed to provide rich descriptions of afterlife beliefs among adults who live in relatively secular societies. Taken together, the two lines of research—which will be described below—suggest that culture is an important factor in beliefs about life after death, and that development too may have an influence.

Thus, the present study took a cultural-developmental approach to people's beliefs about the existence and nature of an afterlife (Jensen, 2015, 2020). It included children, adolescents, and adults from two religious cultures, evangelical and mainline Protestants in the United States. Researchers have emphasized the importance of investigating—rather than “ignoring”—the role of religious culture in the

development of afterlife beliefs (Rosengren et al., 2014, p. 95). Here, the focus was on two of the major religious cultures in the U.S. Furthermore, as explained below, these two religious cultures have to some extent become divided in ways that apply more broadly to American society. Participants in the study took part in in-depth interviews that delved into questions such as whether or not they believed in an afterlife, what they envisioned the afterlife to be like, and the importance they attributed to the present life versus the afterlife. Participants' answers were analyzed in both qualitative and quantitative ways in order to elucidate the meanings and intricacies of afterlife beliefs from childhood to adulthood in the two religious cultures.

It is important to note that here culture is defined as symbolic and behavioral inheritances constructed and institutionalized by members of a community (Goodnow, 2010). Symbolic inheritances involve conceptions of persons, society, nature, and the supernatural. Behavioral inheritances consist of habitual familial and social practices. Culture, then, is not synonymous with country or ethnicity but rather describes communities whose members share key beliefs and behaviors. Following this definition, evangelical and mainline Protestants are members of different cultures, even those who live within the same region within the United States, as in the present study.

The present definition does not mean that all members of a culture are alike, of course, and scholars have long observed that cultural communities include heterogeneity among individuals and subgroups. Variation also exists between cultural communities, including on their degree of heterogeneity and change over time (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Throughout this paper, cultural groups (and all other groups) will be listed in alphabetical order when possible in order to avoid any suggestion of a preference for some groups over others or a presumption of a power differential. There is a tendency for more powerful cultural groups to be mentioned first (Jensen, 2015).

### **Cognitive Dualism and Afterlife Beliefs**

Research on afterlife beliefs has been spurred by the thesis that such beliefs grow out of cognitive dualism. According to this argument, children have an inherent propensity to differentiate the material and the immaterial. Young children may initially believe that an individual who dies will live on in their

biological form, but then a dualistic conception will emerge with children believing that an individual's existence after death will occur in an immaterial way. With age, according to this thesis, people may "consolidate" their understanding of death and come to see it as the final cessation of life, unless their religious beliefs override such understanding (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Bering et al., 2005).

Research addressing this thesis has typically presented participants with vignettes about a mouse or a person who has died and asked them if subsequently the mouse or person still experiences various biological and psychological states (e.g., seeing and thinking). While researchers disagree about the extent of support for the thesis, findings show the influence of culture on afterlife beliefs (e.g., Banerjee & Bloom, 2013; Giménez & Harris, 2005; Harris, 2011; Sebestény & Emmons, 2017). For example, one study comparing Catholic and secular children (ages 5 to 12 years) in Spain found that the Catholic children were significantly more likely to believe that the protagonist mouse would continue to have biological and psychological experiences after death whereas the secular children were more likely to believe that death was final in every respect (Bering et al., 2005). Another study that compared children, adolescents, and adults in the United States and Vanuatu (an archipelago in Melanesia) found that the participants in Vanuatu believed that a dead person would experience an afterlife with God in both biological and psychological ways. In contrast, the Americans believed that psychological experiences would continue after death, but not biological ones (Watson-Jones et al., 2017).

In sum, research suggests that within some cultural communities there may be a dualistic developmental pattern where material conceptions of life after death decline with age while immaterial conceptions increase. In the two studies described above, this pattern was found for the American sample as well as for both the Catholic and secular children in Spain. A similar pattern has also been found among Greek children (Misailidi & Kornilaki, 2015). In other cultural communities, however, material and immaterial conceptions coexist over the course of development (Miller & Rosengren, 2014). Participants of all ages from Vanuatu, as described above, believed that a dead person lives on with God in both biological and psychological ways. A study among the Vezo of rural Madagascar has also shown that coexistence of material and immaterial conceptions was even more common in adulthood than

childhood (Astuti & Harris, 2008). As to the thesis that people may eventually “grow out” of a belief in an afterlife, immaterial or otherwise, there is a need for more research to determine when and where that happens. But clearly, culture impacts whether or not people believe in an afterlife, as well as their beliefs about the nature of the afterlife.

### **Qualitative Findings on Afterlife Beliefs**

While the above studies have focused on cognitive processes that undergird afterlife beliefs, a few studies have aimed to provide in-depth understanding of the extent and nature of people’s afterlife beliefs. This qualitative research adds to our knowledge of afterlife beliefs in several respects. In the studies that address cognitive dualism, the biological and psychological states that research participants affirm or deny as experienced by a dead mouse or person are all states that animals and humans experience while living. Qualitative research, however, may uncover beliefs about the afterlife that are not akin to experiences from this life. Furthermore, the studies on people’s own descriptions of the afterlife do not focus solely on what participants have to say about the state of an individual or the self upon death, but rather the nature of participants’ afterlife beliefs as a whole. Qualitative studies that pose open-ended questions about afterlife beliefs also provide an opportunity to gain new and unexpected knowledge.

In order to assess the nature of afterlife belief among Australians, Singleton (2016) conducted interviews with a purposive sample of 52 adults (ages 18 to 85). He pointed out that “Scholars in Australia have largely overlooked the study of everyday beliefs, especially from a qualitative perspective, and we know little about how beliefs are formulated or what it *means to believe* (or not believe) in life after death, heaven, hell, and the difference this makes to the experience of death” (Singleton, 2016, p. 169, emphasis in original). The interviews took place in the context of Australia having become increasingly secular, while simultaneously offering a “spiritual marketplace” with a wide range of ideas that draw on the religious and spiritual beliefs of the country’s diverse population.

Findings showed that almost none of the Australian participants fully embraced official religious doctrines. Instead, they held individualized beliefs. Most participants’ belief fit into four broad categories:

1) Belief in some kind of heaven; 2) Belief that an aspect of our being, but not our individual personality, continues after death; 3) Belief in reincarnation; and 4) Belief that death is the end. (The study did not provide percentages for the prevalence of each category.) Interestingly, qualitative excerpts from the study show that some participants conceptualized the afterlife in ways that do not align with experiences that humans have while living. For example, one participant said that “we won’t have the same feelings as humans...because we’ll no longer be human beings” (Singleton, 2016, p. 172). Another participant envisioned a collective state, stating “When we die, whatever spark of life...goes back into the melting pot as it were, ...just sort of an amorphous mass” (Singleton, 2016, p. 175). While participants provided diverse descriptions of the afterlife, many also simultaneously expressed a fair amount of uncertainty about the nature of the afterlife. These findings largely echo those from an earlier mixed-methods study by Singleton (2012) where a survey found that a sample of adolescents and emerging adults (ages 13 to 24) commonly professed a belief in reincarnation. The qualitative component of the research delving more deeply into afterlife belief primarily focused on Australian emerging adults (ages 18 to 29). Interviews revealed that the emerging adults expressed highly individualized beliefs, and even statements pertaining to reincarnation took on an idiosyncratic flair. Their beliefs were also privatized, in the sense that they seldom—if ever—had shared their afterlife beliefs with others.

Another qualitative study with Danish emerging adults (ages 18 to 27) addressed how growing up in one of the world’s most secular countries influences religious beliefs and conceptions of the afterlife (Arnett & Jensen, 2015). When young people grow up in a highly secular society, do they reach the threshold of adulthood without any religious and afterlife beliefs or do they create their own? Interviews showed that 80% of the emerging adults described themselves as agnostic, atheist, or as having no religious beliefs. Despite unbelief being the norm, 62% nonetheless believed in some form of afterlife. They were vague about what form it might take. To some, it seemed illogical that death should be the end of existence (“I find it difficult to accept that it’s just over and done”). For others, it was emotionally unpalatable to believe that there is no life after death (“I can’t tolerate the idea that if someone in your family dies, there’s nothing more”). Still others stated a belief in a soul that goes on in some form (“Our

soul can't just disappear. It lives on, in one place or another, but I don't know how") (Arnett & Jensen, 2015, p. 674).

The qualitative studies highlight that even in secular cultures belief in an afterlife are quite common. They also highlight the influence of culture. Even if Australian and Danish adults' afterlife belief are individualized, they nonetheless draw on ideas available within their cultures. As Singleton (2016) noted, "No one is imagining something completely radical.... For many people, beliefs are an independent achievement, drawing eclectically on a range of cultural possibilities" (pp. 179, 182). While the above qualitative studies have illuminated the role of culture, they have focused on adults and do not speak to the development of afterlife beliefs from childhood into adulthood.

### **Two Religious Cultures: Evangelical and Mainline American Protestants**

The present study included children, adolescents, and adults who belonged to evangelical and mainline Presbyterian churches in the United States. The two groups of Presbyterians were selected because they constitute different religious cultures, as will be described below. The inclusion of different age groups within the two religious cultures allowed for an examination of influences of culture, development, and their intersection on afterlife beliefs. In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of researching links between culture and the development of religion and spirituality (Jensen, 2021; King & Boyatzis, 2015; Richert et al., 2017).

While Presbyterian churches have a history and organization that to some extent is distinct from other Protestant denominations, a bifurcation has occurred over time between American evangelical and mainline Presbyterians that is emblematic of what has happened within many other American Protestant denominations (Wuthnow, 1989). "Mainline Protestant" refers to churches such as American Baptist Churches in the USA, the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (the denominational affiliation of the present mainline participants). These and other churches often collaborate on social and political issues through ecumenical organizations, such as the National Council of Churches (National Council of Churches, 2021). On the basis of a nation-wide survey of mainline Presbyterians in the U.S., researchers concluded that: "the fact that most modern Presbyterians would feel comfortable in



Methodist, Lutheran, or United Church of Christ churches reflects a breakdown of denominational loyalty and identity, but it also reflects the realistic perception that most aspects of Presbyterian religious culture have become virtually indistinguishable from the culture of Methodism or the United Church of Christ...” (Hoge, et al., 1994, p. 120).

Mainline Protestant denominations have become differentiated from charismatic, evangelical, and fundamentalist Protestant denominations. Some churches within this latter grouping remain independent, but here too there is parachurch collaboration (Hunter, 1991). For example, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the denominational affiliation of the present evangelical participants, is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals. This association includes such denominations as the Assemblies of God, the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, the Free Methodist Church USA, and the Open Bible Churches (National Association of Evangelicals, 2021). Thus, contemporary evangelical Presbyterians are in many ways similar to other evangelical Protestants (Wuthnow, 1989).

According to numerous scholars, the modern bifurcation experienced by Protestant churches in the United States echoes tendencies also seen among Catholics and Jews, and even in American culture more broadly (e.g., Bellah, 1987; Jones et al., 2012; Wuthnow, 1989). Scholars vary on what they name the two sides. One side has been described with terms such as fundamentalist, orthodox, and religiously conservative. Modernist, progressivist, and religiously liberal are examples of designations applied to the other side. The bifurcation often finds passionate expression in public debates, in fact, to the point where there were claims of the American “culture wars” in the early 1990s (Hunter, 1991)—a term that has remained in common use (e.g., Senior, 2020). As might be expected, scholars addressing this division recognize complex overlap between the two sides.

Briefly, those who are fundamentalist, orthodox, or religious conservative share a commitment to a transcendent authority—an authority that is regarded as independent of, prior to, and more powerful than human experience. In their view, this transcendent authority originated a definitive moral code and revealed it to human beings. In contrast, modernists, progressivists, and religious liberals tend to regard moral truth as subject to change and progress. In their view, moral precepts are not revealed once and for

all by a transcendent authority but may be altered as human and individual understandings unfold and as society changes. Thus, they are more accepting of some measure of moral pluralism or relativism, compared to those who are fundamentalist, orthodox, and religiously conservative. They are also more accepting of individual choices (e.g., Bellah, 1987; Jensen & McKenzie, 2016; Wuthnow, 1989). In short, the division between the two sides is not confined to particular moral or political issues, but revolves around bigger differences pertaining to moral, epistemological, and metaphysical understandings.

These kinds of differences are also reflected in the official statements about the afterlife of the present two Presbyterian denominations. Briefly, the Presbyterian Church in America unequivocally states that “The Word of God, rather than tradition, is the only guide for the Church. God alone saves through his immeasurable mercy and according to his sovereign plan.... [W]e proclaim the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ” (Presbyterian Church in America, 2021). In contrast, the Presbyterian Church (USA) posts an essay on “life after death” that portrays the views of the church as changing over time, and that ends on a pluralistic note. The title of the essay is “Do we still believe in heaven? Does it make a difference if we do?” It concludes that “Our most recent ‘Brief Statement of Faith’ has only one line explicitly mentioning eternal life. The rest of the confession is devoted to present life on this earth.... Rather than articulating life-after-death narratives, the Bible offers a variety of images. The Biblical call is not to believe in one known scenario but to trust both the present and the future to God” (Presbyterian Church (USA), 2021).

Most of the sociological and historical analyses described above have involved surveys of organizations and their leaders. The present study, in contrast, focused on lay believers and their afterlife beliefs. A mixed-method methodology was used. Scholars have noted that the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is particularly fruitful for yielding valid and rich insights into people’s religious and spiritual beliefs (Kimball et al, 2016).

Based on the psychological and sociological research described above, the expectation was that culture would be important and that participants from the present two religious cultures would consistently differ on their afterlife beliefs. Age groups differences were also expected, as previous

research has suggested changes from childhood into adolescence and adulthood. In line with most of the previous research and cultural-developmental theory, age group differences were expected commonly to intersect with culture. Specific hypotheses for specific questions could not be put forth since the qualitative side of the present study aimed to uncover the kinds of answers that participants would provide, as detailed below in the section on the Analytic Approach.

## Method

### Participants

The study included 60 evangelical and 60 mainline Presbyterians ( $N = 120$ ), divided evenly into three age groups ( $n = 20$ ): children (ages 7 to 12,  $M = 10.03$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ), adolescents (ages 13 to 18,  $M = 15.03$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), and adults (ages 36 to 57,  $M = 45.88$ ,  $SD = 4.65$ ). There were no significant age differences between evangelical and mainline participants within the three age groups, children:  $t(38) = .57$ ,  $p = .57$ , 95% CI [-.63, 1.13]; adolescents:  $t(38) = .69$ ,  $p = .49$ , 95% CI [-1.38, .68,]; adults:  $t(38) = .37$ ,  $p = .71$ , 95% CI [-3.56, 2.46]. There was an equal distribution of female and male participants within each age group in the evangelical and mainline groups (female:  $n = 10$ , male:  $n = 10$ ).

Participants resided in a large metropolitan area on the East Coast of the United States. The mainline Presbyterians attended a church affiliated with The Presbyterian Church (PC)—USA. PC (USA) is the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States, with over 1.7 million members (Presbyterian Church (USA), 2021). Evangelical participants attended a church that is affiliated with The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). PCA is the second largest Presbyterian denomination, with over 380,000 members (Presbyterian Church in America, 2021). Validating the classification of participants, the two samples differed significantly on religious self-identifications. In response to a common survey question about religious orientation, participants from the PC (USA) church rated themselves as significantly more liberal than participants from the PCA church,  $F(1, 118) = 77.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .42$  (mainline:  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .90$ ; evangelical:  $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = .74$ ; 1 = *very conservative* and 5 = *very liberal*). Also, provided with various options, 100% of participants from the PC (USA) church described themselves as “Mainline Protestant” and 98% of participants from the PCA church described themselves as “Evangelical Protestant,”  $\chi^2(1, 84) = 80.09$ ,  $p <$

.001. The mainline group reported attending religious church services less than the evangelical group,  $F(1, 119) = 14.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$  (mainline:  $M = 5.35, SD = .78$ ; evangelical:  $M = 6.05, SD = 1.27$ ; 1 = *never or almost never* and 7 = *more than once a week*). Both groups, however, reported regular and quite frequent service attendance. The mean for mainliners was above 5 (i.e., *about 2-3 times a month*) and the mean for evangelicals was 6 (i.e., *about once a week*). As background information, it is useful to note that about 15% of American adults self-identify as mainline Protestants and 25% as evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center, 2018).

The evangelical group was more ethnically diverse,  $\chi^2(2, 119) = 13.57, p < .001$ . The evangelical sample was 17% African American, 3% Asian American, and 80% European American, whereas all mainline participants were European American. Evangelicals were more often married (88%) than mainline adults (78%),  $\chi^2(5, 120) = 12.65, p < .05$ . Evangelicals also had more children ( $M = 3.17, SD = 1.24$ ), compared to mainline adults ( $M = 2.25, SD = .99$ ),  $F(1, 119) = 20.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ .

The two religious groups did not differ significantly on highest level of educational attainment. This was the case for adult females in participant households,  $F(1, 100) = .02, p = .88, \eta^2 = 0$  ( $M = 5.39, SD = .67$ , 1 = *less than high school* and 6 = *post-graduate education*), and adult males,  $F(1, 99) = .28, p = .60, \eta^2 = 0$  ( $M = 5.54, SD = .67$ ). On work status, there also was no significant difference in terms of five categories of *full time, part time, unemployed, full time homemaker, and other* for adult females,  $\chi^2(3, 97) = 3.80, p = .28$ , and adult males,  $\chi^2(3, 95) = 2.64, p = .45$ . Nevertheless, mainline participants had a higher mean family income ( $M = 5.72, SD = .86$ , 1 =  $< \$19,999$  and 6 =  $> \$100,000$ ) than evangelicals ( $M = 4.55, SD = 1.11$ ),  $F(1, 119) = 39.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$ . (Parents or guardians completed the demographic questionnaire on behalf of children, including the questions about religious identification reported above. Adolescents were free to confer with their parents about demographic information. For child and adolescent participants, information pertaining to highest education attained, work status, and family income was reported for their parents or guardians.)

For recruitment, lists of active church congregants were obtained, along with letters from ministers indicating their support for the study while also stating that participation was voluntary. The ministers' letters

and a letter from the research team explaining the project were mailed out. Congregants then received follow-up phone calls. The participation rate was 87%.

### **Procedure**

Participants took part in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews addressing beliefs about the afterlife, along with other worldview conceptions. The study received Institutional Review Board approval. At the outset, written informed consent was obtained from adult participants, and from parents or guardians on behalf of children and adolescents. Children and adolescents provided oral assent.

Interviews ranged in total length from 30 to 180 minutes, with an average of 63 ( $SD = 22$ ) for children, 68 ( $SD = 20$ ) for adolescents, and 89 ( $SD = 29$ ) for adults. Interviews (95%) took place in participants' homes in order to help them feel at ease. This may be particularly important for children. The researchers' impression was that children also provided longer and more detailed interviews because they were free to take breaks as needed. Every participant was interviewed without being overseen or overheard by others. For children and adolescents, a parent or guardian was present in the household. At the conclusion, participants received compensation in the form of \$10 for children, \$15 for adolescents, and \$20 for adults. The audio-recorded interviews were converted into verbatim transcripts for analysis.

### **Materials**

Participants responded to a set of six questions. The questions aimed to provide an understanding of whether or not participants believed in an afterlife, what they envisioned the afterlife to be like, whether and why different people experience different afterlives, and the importance of the present life versus the afterlife. The questions were formulated based on pilot interviews with persons representing each age and religious group. The interview protocol called for researchers to ask follow-up questions when necessary to encourage participants to clarify or elaborate on their answers. The six questions were the following:

- 1) What happens to us when we die?
- 2) What is [participant's terminology for the afterlife, e.g., "heaven", "hell"] like?
- 3) Do different people go to different places after they die?

- 4) On what basis do people go to [participant's terminology for the afterlife]? Who decides? How is that decided?
- 5) What do you think is the most important [part of existence (these bracketed words were only included in interviews with adolescents and adults)]: This world or the afterlife?
- 6) Which one do you think would be your favorite: This world or the afterlife?

As much as possible, researcher used participants' words for the afterlife in order to gain insight into their terminology and ways of thinking, as well as to avoid imposing terminology and new ideas. For example, in response to the first question, a participant answered that "we either live forever or we are damned depending on the choices we made here on earth". When moving to the second question of the interview protocol, the researcher proceeded to probe each of these concepts by using the participants' terminology: "And when we live forever, what is that like?" "And what about being damned, what is that like?" Thus, in line with the purpose of the study, researchers sought to elicit emic concepts rather than only using etic ones. Briefly, etic concepts are the ones that researchers have formulated prior to going into a culture to do research, and which they now intend to use in studying a new culture. In contrast, emic concepts derive from the study of a culture. They are the concepts that people in the culture use. Research on emic concepts is necessary in order to achieve ecologically valid knowledge (Jensen, 2021).

### **Analytic Approach**

The first analytic step was to generate coding categories for responses to each of the interview questions. Based on a grounded theory approach which provides for the coding and analysis of qualitative and emic data, the following issues were considered: What kinds of answers occur with some regularity? Are there answers—even uncommon ones—that stand out on their own? What kinds of distinctions can be drawn among answers? In grounded theory analysis, this process is referred to as "open coding" and the integration of categories. The entire process is also referred to as the "constant comparative method" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 2012).

Two researchers who were blind to demographic information about participants read and coded all the transcripts. As they started reading, they gradually drafted a coding manual and constructed a

qualitative database. They continuously refined the manual during the process of reading and discussing more interviews in order to be inclusive of diverse participant responses and to clearly define coding categories. Discussions of interviews involved a team of three researchers. The qualitative database recorded both the coding category and participants' verbatim answers. By sorting all verbatim answers in the database according to coding categories, the coherency of categories was continuously assessed and the coding manual further refined. There were three draft manuals prior to the fourth and final one. Once the coding manual had been completed, interrater reliabilities were assessed on 20% of randomly selected interviews. Across all interview questions, interrater reliability was 91.2% with a range from 79.3% to 95.8%.

For all questions, coding categories were categorical rather than continuous. Only categories used by 10% or more of participants will be included here. For coding categories that were not mutually exclusive (i.e., a participant's answer could invoke two or more categories, for example, describing heaven both as a physical place and as a reunion with others), frequencies will be presented. When categories were mutually exclusive, Chi-square tests were conducted to test for differences between the religious groups and age groups. For the age groups, a priori contrasts compared children to adolescents and adults combined and adolescents to adults, based on the common age differentiations in the research on cognitive dualism and the afterlife. Interactions between two independent variables cannot be addressed statistically for the present results but notable frequencies suggesting the role of both culture and development will be discussed below. Quantitative and qualitative results will be presented together.

## **Results**

### **The Nature of the Afterlife**

Belief in an afterlife was quite common among the present participants. As Table 1 shows, evangelicals were virtually unanimous in the belief that people go either to heaven or hell. Mainline Protestants, who differed significantly from evangelicals, were more varied in their afterlife conceptions. A little over one-third of mainliners believed that after death, everyone experiences heaven (36%). A little less than one-third believed in heaven and hell (29%). Among mainline Protestants, however, this belief

was most pronounced among children. Half of the mainline children believed in heaven and hell, compared to only 19% of mainline adolescents and adults. This age group difference within the mainline groups may have accounted for the trend reported in Table 1. (This trend related to age almost certainly pertained to mainline groups since evangelicals were virtually unanimous.) The trend may also be due to about a quarter of mainline adolescents and adults indicating that they did not know what happens after death (26%), whereas few mainline children expressed uncertainty (6%). As to other notable afterlife conceptions among mainline Protestants, some mainline adolescents believed in reincarnation (21%), and some mainline adults indicated that there is no afterlife (11%).

A belief in heaven, either solely or along with hell, was common among participants (as seen in Table 1). But how did they envision heaven? Heaven held many and diverse meanings to participants. As Table 2 illustrates, analyses generated seven different ways of thinking and talking about heaven (with the 8<sup>th</sup> coding category being “Don’t Know”). The conceptions of heaven included descriptions that were physical, mental, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and moral. While some descriptions were analogous to life in this world (“our families will be there”), other descriptions were better than what might be expected in this life (“complete contentedness”) or altogether different from this-worldly experiences (“our soul lives with God”).

Among evangelicals, 50% described heaven as being with God. This entailed being in the presence of God as well as worshiping God. One child said, “If we are Christians, we live with Jesus in heaven.” An adolescent stated, “it’s a place where we can glorify God all the time.” Close to half of evangelicals also described heaven as an ideal world. Some spoke of “perfection,” “paradise,” and “like in all your greatest dreams,” while others used terms with moral meanings such as “sinless,” “no evil,” and “no racism.”

Three other categories were quite common among evangelicals (used by 21% - 27%): a physical place, a mental state, and eternal life. Most evangelical descriptions of heaven as a physical place derived from the bible, including streets of gold, pearly gates, and mansions. A non-biblical idea was proposed by one child who anticipated heaven as a place to “drink Coca-Cola.” Some evangelicals, especially adults



(44%), described heaven as a mental refuge, both as a place of “no tears” and of “joy and happiness unlike any other.” Evangelicals also quite frequently emphasized that heaven is “the gift of eternal life” (21%) where one is “eternally with God and has an “eternal soul.”

Among mainline participants, common conceptions of heaven involved a physical place, reunion with others, and being with God (used by 26% - 36%). Few mainline adults (9%) spoke of heaven in terms of physical descriptors, but mainline children and adolescents (50%) repeatedly mentioned physical descriptors such as “you can float on clouds,” “it’s being above the clouds,” and “it’s always sunny.” Mainline participants also looked forward to being reunited with family, as well as “people that I know.” Like evangelicals, mainliners also described heaven as being with God and “being in a good relationship with God.”

Most evangelicals, unlike mainline participants, believed in the existence of hell (see Table 1). How did they envision hell? Table 3 shows that four kinds of conceptions were common. Well over half of evangelicals spoke of mental anguish (60%), for example, “you’re in torment” and “eternal aloneness.” A fifth gave physical depictions (20%), with most of these involving fire. Finally, evangelicals also described hell as both the absence of God (18%) and the presence of the Devil (11%).

### **Who and What Determines a Person’s Afterlife?**

Asked if people go to different places when they die, Table 4 shows that evangelicals unanimously answered in the affirmative. As described above, they almost all believed that people experience either heaven or hell. Mainline Protestant participants differed significantly from evangelicals. Just over half answered “yes” to the question while close to 40% answered “no.”

The evangelical and mainline Protestant groups also differed significantly in their answers to the set of questions pertaining to who decides what kind of afterlife a person will experience and how that it is decided. Close to two-thirds of evangelicals (62%) held that God decides, and that the decision is made on the basis of a person’s faith. In the words of one evangelical adult: “I believe that, you know, the deciding factor is whether we embrace the grace of God. You know, that Christ did come and died for us

and through his grace we become new creatures.” In contrast, close to two-thirds of mainliners (65%) believed that God makes the decision based on a person’s behaviors. For example, a mainline adult said that a person’s afterlife is determined by: “Pure merit. God decides on the basis of how you have lived your life, how you have learned, how you have evolved.... But I think it’s almost decided more by natural law rather than a personified being.”

With respect to how the nature of one’s afterlife is decided, age groups comparisons showed a trend with children differing from adolescents and adults combined. An inspection of Table 4 suggests that children in both religious groups may have been most inclined to believe that God makes the decision based on a person’s behavior (46% of children versus 32% of adolescents and adults). There was also a significant difference between adolescents and adults. Here, the frequencies suggest that it was adolescents within the evangelical group who stood out from their evangelical elders. Evangelical adolescents (74%) seemed even more likely than evangelical adults (58%) to express the traditional Protestant view that one’s afterlife is determined solely by faith in God. Also, just over a fifth of evangelical adolescents (21%) asserted the traditional belief proposed by John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that one’s afterlife is predestined, whereas no evangelical adults believed in predestination. (Presbyterians descend from Scottish Calvinists.)

### **The Importance of the Afterlife**

Asked whether this world or the afterlife is the most important part of existence, there was again a significant difference between the two religious groups. As Table 5 shows, almost all mainline Protestants (90%) indicated that this world is most important. In contrast, the majority of evangelicals (57%) regarded the afterlife as most important. The two groups also differed significantly on the question of which they anticipated being their favorite. Almost all evangelicals (91%) expected the afterlife to be their favorite. Among mainline protestants, a majority (55%) spoke of this world as their favorite.

Children also differed significantly from adolescents and adults on the two questions pertaining to this world versus the afterlife. Children never indicated that both this world and the afterlife are most

important whereas some adolescents and adults in both religious groups gave this twofold answer (16%). Evangelical adults, in particular, favored this answer (41%). As to which would be their favorite, children (63%) seemed more likely than adolescents and adults (51%) to pick the afterlife. Strikingly, a full 100% of evangelical children expected the afterlife to be their favorite.

### **Discussion**

Belief in an afterlife is common across the world and may be part of a longstanding human evolutionary history (International Social Survey Programme, 2018; Peoples et al., 2016). Searching for one psychological mechanism—cognitive or emotional—that underlies such beliefs is unlikely to be the most fruitful. The present results, along with findings from other studies, indicate that beliefs in an afterlife constitute a nexus for many psychological conceptions. The results also show that religious culture had a significant and pervasive influence on afterlife beliefs. The influence of age, on its own and in conjunction with culture, was more sporadic.

#### **The Many Meanings of Afterlife Beliefs**

Researcher: “What happens to us when we die?” Participant: “That’s the \$64 million dollar question! I hope [we] go to another plane.” Most participants in this study believed in an afterlife. Some spoke with conviction about the nature of the afterlife, while others expressed some degree of uncertainty. But hope, desire, or expectation for an afterlife was palpable among most participants.

Participants’ afterlife beliefs were highly varied. Researchers have tended to propose one psychological mechanism or motive to explain belief in an afterlife, including a cognitive predisposition to differentiate material and immaterial states (Bering et al., 2005), the ability to project the continuity of the self in this world beyond death (Pereira et al., 2012), and the use of an “offline social reasoning process” to imagine the continued embodied existence of deceased “loved ones” (Hodge, 2011, pp. 368, 369). The sheer number and breadth of the present participants’ conceptions of the afterlife, however, suggests that multiple mechanisms and motives are likely to be involved. Participants, for example, spoke of their desire for the continuation of both the self and others. They described how individuals who have died continue to exist in physical, psychological, and spiritual ways (cf., Astuti & Harris, 2008). Indeed,

some participants provided vivid descriptions of the afterlife as a place full of sensory and social experiences. Participants' afterlife descriptions also invoked belief in the eternal existence of a transcendent being or principle (God). Furthermore, afterlife beliefs reflected participants' concern with ultimate justice and an ideal moral order. From a psychological vantage point, the list of mechanisms and motives involved in the belief in an afterlife appears to be quite long. This manifold psychology of afterlife beliefs aligns with research that recently has emphasized multidimensional definitions of religiosity and spirituality (Hardy et al., 2019; King et al., 2020).

It is worth pointing out that the numerous afterlife conceptions in this study emerged from the study of two groups of Presbyterians from the United States. While these groups are different in important ways, as will be discussed below, it would be reasonable to expect that in-depth research with cultural groups across the world would yield still more diversity of psychological mechanisms and motives involved in afterlife beliefs.

### **The Afterlife Through a Cultural Lens**

The evangelical and mainline Presbyterian groups differed significantly on every analysis, providing support for claims that culture shapes afterlife beliefs (e.g., Harris, 2011; Hodge, 2011; Rosengren et al., 2014; Sebestény & Emmons, 2017; Watson-Jones et al., 2017). Here, religious culture influenced beliefs about what happens to us when we die, whether and why people experience different afterlives, and the importance and desirability of the afterlife. Participants' descriptions of the afterlife reflect the different approaches to epistemology, metaphysics, and morality that exist between evangelical and mainline Protestants as well as in American society more broadly, as described in the Introduction. Evangelical participants were largely united in the beliefs that people go either to heaven or hell based on whether they believe in Jesus or God, and that faith and entry into heaven is of utmost importance. Mainline participants were more varied in their afterlife beliefs, including expressing more uncertainty about the existence and nature of an afterlife. They emphasized the importance of this life over an afterlife, and generally emphasized that it is a person's behavior in this life that impacts the nature of their afterlife.

Afterlife conceptions, then, not only appear to involve numerous psychological mechanisms and motives, but these mechanisms and motives are also culturally patterned. Different cultural groups, in the present case religious cultures, envision the afterlife and its importance in varied ways. Since afterlife beliefs appear to be a deep and common part of human psychology, it is probably not surprising that such beliefs become culturally shaped. After all, humans have evolved to be a uniquely cultural species (Jensen, 2012; Tomasello, 2011). We have a highly flexible set of cognitive and emotional skills that have allowed us to adapt to vastly different environments, from equatorial Africa to the Arctic. Also, we have evolved not only to adapt to different environments but to alter our environments. Thus, it is no longer natural selection alone but also the cultures we create that determine our lives. Cultural groups create distinct beliefs pertaining to this world. Evidently, cultural groups also subscribe to distinct beliefs about the afterlife.

### **The Intersection of Culture with Development**

There were a few significant findings in the present study that appeared to pertain to age alone, whereas most other findings involving age intersected with religious culture. With respect to age alone, children more than adolescents and adults thought that God decides on the nature of people's afterlife based on their behaviors. Children, more than adolescents and adults, indicated that the afterlife would be their favorite. Also, children were less likely than adolescents and adults to say that both this world and the afterlife are the most important parts of existence. These significant age group differences do not lend themselves to any clear or overarching explanation. They do, however, suggest that contrasting children to adolescents and adults is a promising approach for future developmental research.

There were a number of findings that suggested the intersection of age and culture. For example, mainline children appeared to be more likely than mainline adolescents and adults to believe in both heaven and hell. Evangelical adolescents seemed more likely than evangelical adults to say that a person's entry into heaven depends solely on the affirmation of faith in Jesus, or that it is predestined. One possibility is that these beliefs described by the mainline children and the evangelical adolescents had relatively recently been taught to them in a church context. The beliefs align with traditional Protestant

and Calvinist dogma that might well have been recounted by religious leaders or teachers. Adult participants within each of the two religious cultures undoubtedly were also aware of these dogmas, but they nonetheless expressed different beliefs. Mainline adults, for example, were more likely than mainline children to say that they did not know if there is an afterlife. Evangelical adults seemed more likely than evangelical adolescents to believe that entry into heaven depends both on faith and something else, such as behaviors or having knowledge of Jesus in the first place. To better understand how age and culture intersect with respect to afterlife beliefs, future research might fruitfully probe the sources of research participants' beliefs (cf., Rosengren et al., 2014), and the extent to which participants deliberately have decided to question or depart from traditional or common beliefs within their cultural and religious community.

### **Future Directions**

The present results point to additional future research directions. Research has typically focused on psychological mechanisms and motives in regard to one kind of afterlife. But how might these psychological mechanisms and motives vary when people believe in more than one kind of afterlife? Evangelical participants believed in both heaven and hell. The two categories for descriptions of heaven used by more than 40% of evangelicals were "Being with God" and an "Ideal World". For hell, however, the only category that was used by more than 40% was a "Mental State." In fact, it was used by 60%. Mental State was also a category for heaven, but it was used by only about a quarter of evangelical participants. Across cultures and religions, beliefs in more than one kind of afterlife is quite common. Future research might fruitfully probe their different meanings and their different psychologies within individuals and cultural groups.

It would also be useful and timely for future research to focus on people who express uncertainty about an afterlife and who regard death as final. For a sample of mainline Protestant participants who were recruited through church and reported frequent church attendance (an average of more than 3 times per month), it is noteworthy that more than a quarter of adolescents and adult said that they do not know if there is an afterlife, and 11% of mainline adults regarded death as the definitive end. To what extent

might a lack of clear belief in an afterlife be rising across populations along with secularism and globalization (e.g., McKenzie et al., 2019; Singleton, 2015, 2016)? To what extent is it patterned by culture and development?

Globalization may also contribute to the emergence of new or hybrid afterlife belief within particular cultures and age groups. Here, a rather striking one-fifth of mainline adolescents believed in reincarnation. Singleton (2012) also found that many Australian adolescents and emerging adults (ages 13 to 24) believed in reincarnation. Yet, their conceptions of reincarnation did not match those in Asian religions but were more individualistic interpretations. In general, adolescents and emerging adults are often at the forefront of globalization (Jensen, 2019). Future research could fruitfully address the extent to which they are particularly likely to create afterlife beliefs that cut across cultures. Such new or hybrid belief are probably also particularly likely to flourish within cultures that allow for or welcome openness to diverse worldviews.

The present study was cross-sectional. Future sequential research would be able to provide a stronger examination of the cultural-developmental nature of afterlife beliefs. Even as significant findings were numerous for the present study, larger sample sizes would also be helpful in future research—perhaps especially for showing age-related patterns.

## **Conclusion**

As far as we know, humans are unique in knowing that we will die. This realization makes it exigent to find meaning and purpose in life. It also makes it inevitable that we will ponder what happens when we die, and how life in this world may have a bearing on death. We contemplate these questions as individuals. We also share afterlife beliefs as members of cultural groups. Children, by virtue of their developmental characteristics, may have some distinctive afterlife beliefs but most of their beliefs are likely to be influenced by the culture in which they grow up as well as by historical changes such as the rise in secularism and globalization.

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Table 1: Frequencies and Chi-Square Results for “What Happens to Us When We Die?”

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Evangelical (%)</u>				<u>Mainline (%)</u>				<u>Religious (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u> E vs. M	<u>Age (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u>	
	Child	Adolescent	Adult	All	Child	Adolescent	Adult	All		Ch vs. A&A	A vs. A
Heaven or Hell	100	90	89	93	50	21	16	29	52.88***	7.71†	4.26
Heaven Only	0	0	0	0	33	32	42	36			
Don't Know	0	10	11	7	6	26	26	20			
Reincarnation	0	0	0	0	6	21	5	11			
Death is Final	0	0	0	0	6	0	11	5			

Note.  $N = 114$ ,  $df = 4$ . E vs. M = evangelical compared to mainline Protestant, Ch vs. A&A = children compared to adolescents and adults combined, A vs. A = adolescents compared to adults.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ . † $p < .10$ .

Table 2: Descriptions of Heaven: Categories, Examples, and Frequencies

<u>Categories for Heaven</u>	<u>Qualitative Examples</u>	<u>Evangelical (%)</u>				<u>Mainline (%)</u>			
		Child	Adolescent	Adult	All	Child	Adolescent	Adult	All
Being with God	“Our soul lives with God” “You’re with your creator”	35	39	75	50	20	20	36	26
Physical Place	“Paved with streets of gold” “I picture heaven as a big city”	35	22	19	25	40	60	9	36
Ideal World	“No pain, no hate, no racism” “It’s just utopia, perfection”	55	50	31	45	7	30	0	7
Mental State	“Complete joy and contentedness” “You feel liberated from burdens”	10	28	44	27	13	20	27	20
Eternal Life	“You get an eternal life” “An eternal part of the soul”	20	11	31	21	7	10	27	15
Reunion with Others	“Our families will be there” “You meet people a lot like yourself”	0	0	0	0	27	20	36	28
Everything You Want	“Whatever you want it to be” “You can do anything, except sin”	5	0	0	2	13	0	0	4
Don’t Know	“I have no idea” “I don’t know”	0	0	0	0	0	0	18	6

*Note.*  $N = 90$ . Only participants who believe in heaven are included in this table. A participant could provide descriptions that fit within more than one category.

Table 3: Descriptions of Hell: Categories, Examples, and Frequencies

<u>Categories for Hell</u>	<u>Qualitative Examples</u>	<u>Evangelical (%)</u>			
		Child	Adolescent	Adult	All
Mental State	“It’s really lonely and sad” “Your spirit—you’re in torment”	45	78	56	60
Physical Place	“A dry ground and fire all around” “Total darkness”	20	28	13	20
Absence of God	“A state of being away from God” “Out of a good relationship with God”	5	6	44	18
Presence of Devil	“Hell is where Satan is” “We go down with the Devil”	15	11	6	11

*Note.*  $N = 54$ . Since only 29% of mainline Protestants believed in hell, they are not included in this table. Only Evangelical participants who believe in hell are included. A participant could provide descriptions that fit within more than one category.

Table 4: Frequencies and Chi-Square Results for “Different Places” & “Who Decides” Questions

<u>Question &amp; Categories</u>	<u>Evangelical (%)</u>				<u>Mainline (%)</u>				<u>Religious (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u> E vs. M	<u>Age (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u>	
	Child	Adol.	Adult	All	Child	Adol.	Adult	All		Ch vs. A&A	A vs. A
<u>Do different people go to different places after they die?</u>											
Yes	100	100	100	100	63	41	56	53	35.00***	0.99	0.44
No	0	0	0	0	31	47	33	37			
Don't Know	0	0	0	0	6	12	11	10			
<u>Who decides? How is that decided?</u>											
God's Decision: Person's Behavior	20	5	0	8	73	63	60	65	46.19***	8.38†	12.98*
God's Decision: Person's Faith	55	74	58	62	0	0	20	7			
God's Decision: Person's Faith & Other	20	0	37	19	0	0	10	3			
Person's Decision	5	0	0	2	18	13	0	10			
God's Decision: Predestination	0	21	0	7	9	0	0	3			
Other	0	0	5	2	0	25	10	12			

Note. First question:  $N = 109$ ,  $df = 2$ . Second question:  $N = 87$ ,  $df = 5$  Adol. = adolescents, E vs. M = evangelical compared to mainline Protestant, Ch vs. A&A = children compared to adolescents and adults combined, A vs. A = adolescents compared to adults.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ . \* $p < .05$ . † $p < .10$ .



Table 5: Frequencies and Chi-Square Results for “This World or Afterlife” Questions

<u>Question &amp; Categories</u>	<u>Evangelical (%)</u>				<u>Mainline (%)</u>				<u>Religious (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u> E vs. M	<u>Age (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u>	
	Child	Adol.	Adult	All	Child	Adol.	Adult	All		Ch vs. A&A	A vs. A
<u>What do you think is the most important part of existence: This world or the afterlife?</u>											
This World	37	39	0	26	87	93	89	90	56.42***	6.41*	3.14
Afterlife	63	50	59	57	7	0	6	4			
Both This World & Afterlife	0	11	41	17	0	7	6	4			
Don't Know	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	2			
<u>Which one do you think would be your favorite: This world or the afterlife?</u>											
This World	0	5	16	9	33	57	77	55	45.50***	8.12*	3.09
Afterlife	100	95	79	91	27	13	18	19			
Both This World & Afterlife	0	0	0	0	13	6	0	7			
Don't Know	0	0	5	2	27	25	6	19			

Note. First question:  $N = 105$ ,  $df = 3$ . Second question:  $N = 102$ ,  $df = 3$ . Adol. = adolescents, E vs. M = evangelical compared to mainline Protestant, Ch vs. A&A = children compared to adolescents and adults combined, A vs. A = adolescents compared to adults.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ . \* $p < .05$ .