

QUESTION 2

What Are the Most Common Views of Life after Death?

Recent Surveys of American Religious Belief, Including the Afterlife

The last ten years have seen several significant projects seeking to quantify and clarify American religious beliefs. Some of the results may be surprising, granting the conventional wisdom that our postmodern culture has become increasingly “secular,” materialistic, and non- (or even anti-) religious. While some data do bear out certain secularist trends, the picture is not nearly as straightforward as one might expect. Other findings of these surveys, though, should not surprise us, such as the diversity of opinion that they highlight. This diversity is entirely consistent with the pluralistic ethos of American culture.

The General Social Survey (GSS), 1972–2014

Let us begin with one of the most current and large-scale surveys that provide a window into American religious opinion: The General Social Survey (GSS), conducted between 1972 and 2014. Researchers Twenge, Sherman, Exline, and Grubbs recently have analyzed this data, placing special emphasis on the most current trends between 2006 and 2014 in comparison to earlier decades.¹ On the one hand, the data from this survey show that a solid majority of American adults retain at least some commitment to such core issues as belief in God (78 percent) and prayer (85 percent). At the same time, the movement away from these is noteworthy, especially in the last eight years or so.

It is true that earlier studies have documented a growing decline in outward forms of religiosity and affiliation, such as identifying with a particular

1. See Jean M. Twenge, et al., “Declines in American Adults’ Religious Participation and Beliefs, 1972–2014,” *SAGE Open* 6, no. 1 (January–March 2016): 1–13.

church denomination, even as they showed that personal spirituality remained more or less resistant to such defections. The most recent data, however, reveal Americans' personal and private convictions and behaviors decreasing in a way commensurate with their diminished public practice, particularly among younger adults. For example, "eight times more 18- to 29-year-olds never prayed in 2014 versus the early 1980s."² Although this age group shows the most pronounced change, one finds this decrease in religious conviction among all adult Americans.³

The authors of this analysis summarize these trends as follows:

American adults in the 2010s were less religious than those in previous decades, based on religious service attendance and more private religious expressions such as belief in God, praying, identifying as a religious person, and believing the Bible is the word of God. . . .

While religious affiliation and service attendance have been declining since the 1990s, the decrease in more private religious expressions began fairly recently, becoming pronounced only after 2006. . . .

Americans in 2014 were less likely to say they believed in God. In the late 1980s, only 13% of U.S. adults expressed serious doubts about the existence of God. . . . By 2014, however, 22% expressed doubts, a 69% increase. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, 30% had serious doubts by 2014, more than twice as many as in the late 1980s (12%).⁴

Again, we must note that a solid majority of Americans still profess belief in God and pray. What we are talking about here are trends, and it is clear that the tendency is away from traditional religious conviction and practice.

These developments may not surprise us, given the increasing secularization that we see in American culture generally. One trend, however, is surprising, and the authors of the study identify it as such: Despite a decreasing belief in God, prayer, and religious doctrine overall, Americans now register a slight *increase* in affirming the existence of an afterlife! "Thus, more Americans believe in life after death even as fewer belong to a religion, fewer attend religious services, and fewer pray."⁵ Specifically, belief in the afterlife

2. Ibid., 1.

3. Ibid., 5 (Table 1), 7 (Table 2).

4. Ibid., 4, 6.

5. Ibid., 8.

continues to hover around 80 percent overall, and this number includes an increasing share of individuals who are otherwise nonreligious. This unusual phenomenon holds just as true for the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old demographic as it does for adult Americans generally. Moreover, compared to the 1970s, belief in the afterlife is greater in absolute terms.

The writers of this study admit that this finding about Americans' readiness to embrace a belief in the afterlife "might seem paradoxical" in light of their general defection from conventional religious belief and practice. Though they cannot offer a definitive reason for this anomaly, they speculate that the increasingly friendly posture toward the afterlife may correlate with the growing "entitlement mentality" of many Americans, who expect "special privileges without effort." Such entitlement "appears in religious and spiritual domains when people see themselves as deserving spiritual rewards or blessings due to their special status."⁶ However, the study's authors caution that this hypothesis, though suggested by other research on contemporary American attitudes, is only speculative and cannot be answered by the data the GSS itself furnishes.

The Pew and Baylor Studies

Other recent investigations present a picture in many respects consistent with the above. Consider a study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.⁷ Updated in 2014, this survey attempted to outline the varieties of religious belief and affiliation in the United States by polling more than 35,000 Americans, age eighteen and older. It found that a strong majority of Americans (72 percent) believe in an afterlife, specifically heaven. A lesser number, but still a solid majority (58 percent), likewise affirm belief in hell, understood as a place "where people who have led bad lives and die without repenting are eternally punished."⁸

The findings of the second "wave" or phase of the Baylor Religion Survey (2006–2007) turned in numbers consistent with this. According to this study, 82 percent of Americans believe in heaven, while 73 percent believe that hell either "absolutely" or "probably" exists.⁹ Observe that in both studies, belief in heaven is slightly more common than a belief in hell, though the strong belief in hell is still "much higher than most commentators on American religion seem to have assumed."¹⁰

6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study: Belief in Heaven," Pew Forum, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-heaven/>.

8. Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study: Belief in Hell," Pew Forum, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-hell/>.

9. Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 73.

10. *Ibid.*

What do people think about their own postmortem fate? Rodney Stark, summarizing “wave two” of the aforementioned 2006–2007 Baylor study, concluded, “Americans overwhelmingly believe in an afterlife, in heaven, and equally in hell,” but “most of them expect to go to heaven.”¹¹ Specifically, fully 66 percent of Americans are either “somewhat certain” or “quite certain” that they will go to heaven when they die. Though this particular survey did not explicitly broach the question of whether anyone thought he or she was going to hell, the Barna Group conducted one three years earlier that did just that and concluded, “Most Americans do not expect to experience Hell first-hand: just one-half of 1 percent expect to go to Hell upon their death.”¹²

The widespread affirmation of heaven and hell in our culture might seem at first glance to be an endorsement of traditional Christian belief, at least when it comes to the afterlife. However, one significant departure is a widespread denial of a future bodily resurrection, a key component of orthodox Christian theology.¹³ In other words, while there is general belief in an afterlife, people tend to conceive of it in spiritualized terms—namely, as the ongoing existence of the soul in a disembodied state. A 2006 study performed by Scripps Howard News Service and Ohio University bears this out. As reported by Thomas Hargrove and Guido H. Stempel III, “Most Americans don’t believe they will experience a resurrection of their bodies when they die, putting them at odds with a core teaching of Christianity.”¹⁴ The researchers found that “only 36 percent of the 1,007 adults interviewed . . . said ‘yes’ to the question: ‘Do you believe that, after you die, your physical body will be resurrected someday?’ Fifty-four percent said they do not believe and 10 percent were undecided.” Consistent with a denial of one’s own bodily resurrection is a declining belief in Christ’s own literal resurrection from the grave. A 2012 Rasmussen poll showed that 64 percent of Americans believe in Christ’s literal resurrection as a historical fact. Though still a majority opinion, it reflects a marked drop from a poll asking the identical question only one year earlier, which then registered 77 percent agreement.¹⁵

11. Ibid., 74.

12. Barna Research Group, “Americans Describe Their Views about Life after Death,” October 21, 2003, <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-describe-their-views-about-life-after-death/>. Just like the later 2006–2007 Baylor study, the Barna study gives an almost identical percentage of people who believe that they will go to heaven upon death (i.e., 64 percent).

13. We shall discuss the bodily resurrection in considerable detail in Question 19, “What Will the Resurrection Body Be Like?”

14. Thomas Hargrove and Guido H. Stempel III, “People Doubt Physical Resurrection,” *Casper Star Tribune*, April 6, 2006, http://trib.com/news/national/article_0c4bbda9-194a-5abd-a3ca-01c31c89269e.html.

15. Dan Joseph, “Percent of Americans Believing in the Resurrection Drops to 64% from 77% Last Easter,” *CNSnews.com*, April 1, 2013, http://trib.com/news/national/article_0c4bbda9-194a-5abd-a3ca-01c31c89269e.html.

What Is Heaven Like?

Granting the large number of Americans who embrace the existence of heaven and see it as their own ultimate destiny, what do they think heaven will be like?

We find a confusing picture at best. As we have just observed, most conceive of it as a disembodied state. At the same time, people often describe it using a variety of concrete, physical terms. Lisa Miller, citing a *Newsweek* poll, tells us: “Nineteen percent think heaven looks like a garden, 13 percent say it looks like a city—and 17 percent don’t know.”¹⁶ Miller continues:

In the peaceful, prosperous West, visions of heaven are increasingly individualistic; a best-selling novel, *The Lovely Bones*, is narrated by a 14-year-old girl who has gone to heaven, and her paradise contains puppies, big fields and Victorian cupolas.¹⁷

Maria Shriver, former wife of former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, paints a similarly fanciful portrait of heaven in her children’s book, *What’s Heaven?* British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, commenting on this book, provides this description:

The book . . . is aimed at children, with lots of large pictures of fluffy clouds in blue skies. . . . Heaven, says Shriver, is . . . “a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe. . . . If you’re good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven. . . . When your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down to take you up to Heaven to be with him.”¹⁸

American Views of the Afterlife in Non-Christian-based Traditions

Until now, I have framed our discussion of American views of the here-after in the broadly Christian categories of heaven and hell. This is appropriate, granting that the United States is in a very generic sense a “Christian” nation, given its Christian roots and heritage. At the same time, one finds other views of the afterlife among the non-Christian, minority religious traditions in this country. For example, based on a 2008 study, about six in ten American

16. Lisa Miller, “Why We Need Heaven,” *Newsweek*, August 11, 2002, <http://www.newsweek.com/why-we-need-heaven-143873>.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 17; citing Maria Shriver, *What’s Heaven?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

Hindus believe in reincarnation.¹⁹ The so-called New Age Movement also popularly embraces this tenet.²⁰ What is especially surprising, however, is that close to 20 percent of all adult Americans claim to believe in reincarnation, with 10 percent of self-described “born-again Christians” holding this view.²¹

Among Americans who identify with the Buddhist faith, about six in ten profess belief in the attainment of “nirvana” at death, understood as “the ultimate state transcending pain and desire in which individual consciousness ends.”²²

Islam is another minority religion in the US that has garnered increasing attention, particularly since the events of 9/11. The Pew study shows that American Muslims believe in heaven and hell in greater numbers than the population as a whole, registering 85 percent and 80 percent belief respectively.²³ Indeed, one of the commonly identified motivations of so-called Islamic fundamentalism around the globe is the belief “that if killed fighting in the name of Islam, [the jihadist] will go straight to the seventh level of heaven and delight in the company of beautiful virgins.” Lisa Miller quotes Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab as touting the power of this belief, which, he claims, “gives Palestinians the advantage over the Israelis.”²⁴

Contacting the Dead

Many think it possible to contact those who have passed “to the other side.” As the Barna study notes, one third of Americans “believe that it is possible to communicate with others after their death.” In proof that this idea is “gaining traction,” Barna shows that, demographically, the idea is more prevalent among 48 percent of the so-called Busters (i.e., those born from 1965 to 1983) vs. just 35 percent of “Boomers” (born 1946 through 1964), with only 15 percent of “Elders” (born 1927–1945) registering agreement.²⁵ Especially surprising is that this same study shows nearly one third of those who identify as born-again Christians believe it is possible to contact the dead.

Modern-day movements and groups that practice communication with the dead include members of the National Spiritualist Association of the

19. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” June 2008, 10, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2008/06/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>. What I find a bit surprising about this is that the percentage is so low, given that reincarnation is a core belief in the Hindu tradition. But then, as noted in this section, some serious discrepancies exist between orthodox Christian doctrine and what self-professed Christians claim to hold.

20. Ron Rhodes, *New Age Movement*, Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements, ed. Alan W. Gomes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 16–17, 64, 66.

21. Barna, “Americans Describe Their Views about Life after Death.”

22. Pew Forum, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” 10.

23. *Ibid.*, 11.

24. Miller, “Why We Need Heaven.”

25. Barna, “Americans Describe Their Views about Life after Death.”

United States, the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC), and New Age trance “channelers.”²⁶

Concluding Thoughts

American opinion on the afterlife is not especially friendly to a biblical view. If we are to believe the surveys—and I see no reason to doubt them—the main threat may not arise from militant secularism, anti-supernaturalism, nor atheism. While there are trends in that direction that we cannot ignore, such views do not yet reflect the thinking of the culture at large. Rather, the biggest departures seem to be an overly spiritualized depiction of the eternal state, the conviction that nearly everybody will make it into heaven, and a corresponding belief in hell as merely theoretical, practically speaking. Underlying these ideas and attitudes, in turn, is either an ignorance or a rejection of the Bible’s teaching on heaven, hell, salvation, and the bodily resurrection.

This raises for us the critical issue of authority. On what source or sources *should* we rely for accurate information about the afterlife?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Did you find surprising any of the survey results discussed in this chapter? Which ones?
2. Why do you suppose people continue to retain a belief in the afterlife even as they abandon other traditional religious beliefs?
3. Consider the surveys that show that Americans tend to see the afterlife purely in spiritualized terms, over and against a future bodily resurrection. What has your own thinking been on this?
4. Reflect on memorial or funeral services that you may have attended recently. What sort of picture of this afterlife did these services present?
5. Consider the picture of “heaven” that one finds in popular presentations of it. How does this compare to your own thoughts about the matter?

26. See Question 12, “Is It Possible for Us to Communicate with the Dead?”