Life After Death Today in the United States, Japan, and China

Gordon MATHEWS, Yang YANG, and Miu Ying KWONG

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This book is about contemporary senses of life after death in the United States, Japan, and China.

By collecting and examining hundreds of interviews with people from all walks of life in these three societies, this book presents and compares personally held beliefs, experiences, and interactions with the concept of life after death. Three major aspects covered by the book include, but are certainly not limited to, the enduring tradition of Japanese ancestor veneration, China's transition from state-sponsored materialism to the increasing belief in some form of afterlife, and the diversity in senses of, or disbelief in, life after death in the United States. Through these diverse first-hand testimonies, the book reveals that underlying these changes in each society there is a shift from collective to individual belief, with people developing their own visions of what may, or may not, happen after death.

This book will be valuable reading for students of Anthropology as well as Religious, Cultural, Asian, and American Studies. It will also be an impactful resource for professionals such as doctors, nurses, and hospice workers.

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Miu Ying Kwong has an M.Phil. degree in Anthropology from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and has written her thesis on senses of life after death in south China.

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To the late Yoshida Shigeru, who brought Mathews to Japan in 1980, and, of course, to Yoko, to whom he owes everything.

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AUTHORS

Gordon Mathews is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has written *What Makes Life Worth Living? How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds* (1996), *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* (2001), *Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation* (with Eric Ma and Tai-lok Lui, 2008), *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong* (2011), and *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace* (with Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang, 2017).

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Miu Ying Kwong has an M.Phil. degree in Anthropology from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and has written her thesis on senses of life after death in south China. She has written, with Gordon Mathews, the chapter "Life After Death/Life Before Death and Their Linkages in The United States, Japan, and China," in Sébastien Penmellen Boret, Susan Orpett Long and Sergei Kan, eds., *Death in the Early 21st Century: Authority, Innovation and Mortuary Rites* (2017).

1

SENSES OF LIFE AFTER DEATH PAST AND PRESENT

Chapter One: Senses of Life After Death Past and Present

What This Book is About

What happens to us after we die? And how does what we think happens to us after we die relate to this world before we die?

According to the 2000 World Values Survey, 64% of respondents around the world think that there is life after death; a somewhat more limited 2017 survey reveals that 54% of respondents globally believe in life after death.[1] In the historical past it was clearly the case that most people believed in an afterlife, but "even today, billions worldwide continue to organize their lives around the principle that a higher, more satisfying reality lies just beyond our last breath."[2] Many of these believers in an afterlife follow one of the major religions and think of life after death in terms of Islam or Christianity's heaven, or Buddhism and Hinduism's reincarnation. But today, for many people, particularly in the developed world, senses of life after death have become a matter of personal conviction rather than collective engagement: senses of life after death have become individualized, if not abandoned.

This book explores senses of life after death in the United States, Japan, and China. These three societies, the world's three largest economies, each have their own historical traditions of life after death, whether the American Christian God and heaven, Japanese realms of reincarnation and of ancestors, or Chinese worlds of deities, reincarnation, and ghosts. However, in all three societies, these religious traditions have at least to some extent given way to skepticism, agnosticism, and private speculation: you probably don't know what your friend or colleague or neighbor thinks may happen to them after they die. At the same time, in all three societies, there is massive interest in what happens after we die. American

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bestselling books discuss God and heaven and their proof or denial, Japanese bookstores abound in tomes wondering "what happens after we die?" and even in China, the least religious of these societies due to communism's suppression of religion, there is a great interest in such matters, with, by some accounts, more Christians today than Communist Party members.[3]

Unlike in earlier eras, many people in these three societies today don't profess to know what happens after we die, and many believe or suspect that this life is all there is. But then, if we think we may only live once, a lifetime that is relatively brief, why do we live as we do? Why do we study so hard, work so hard, and put off gratification so readily if, at the end of our lives, we simply die? There are practical reasons—you work hard because you have to earn a living: what else can you do? There are societal reasons: you want to meet the expectations of the society around you and have other people view you with respect rather than disdain or contempt. There are familial reasons: you want to make your parents proud, your spouse appreciative, and your children free of needs. And there are individual reasons: you desire to show yourself that you've made something of your life. Still, without a firm sense of what life means beyond one's limited lifespan, the power of these reasons seems limited. Why, again, do we live as we do?

Three decades ago, Mathews wrote a book about *ikigai*, a Japanese term meaning "that which makes life worth living"—typically one's family, work, religion, or dream—and how it resonates in Japanese and in American lives.[4] As that book emphasized, *ikigai* may make life seem worth living in an immediate sense—for example, "When I'm climbing mountains/playing my guitar/lying in bed with my lover, that's when I truly feel that life is worth living!" or "I have to work at this job I hate/put up with this awful marriage because my little daughter means everything to me and if I didn't, she'd suffer"—but it often links only indirectly to the larger question of what our lives might ultimately mean. After all, your work will eventually end, your children will eventually leave home to live their own lives, and you and your lover will eventually die—so what? If everything vanishes in the end, what worth is it for the time being? If life is simply worth living in its own right, then perhaps this question isn't worth pondering. To quote the philosopher Thomas Nagel, "Even if life as a whole is meaningless, perhaps that's nothing to worry about. Perhaps we can recognize it and just go on as before."[5] This is good advice; but for many of us, life is more travail than joy. If there is no larger redeeming meaning to life, then why bother?

In this book we return to this question of larger meaning by looking at senses of life after death: if life continues beyond the grave, whether in terms of heaven/hell, reincarnation, or some other form, then life in this world presumably does have a meaning beyond itself. We investigate senses of life after death through interviews with several hundred people in the United States, Japan, and China, as well as an examination of popular books and mass media in these three societies. In all three societies, for some people, how they live in this world is directly

linked to how they envision a world beyond, but for others, there seems to be little or no linkage. Religious believers may feel that their ultimate salvation in a world beyond depends upon their faith and behavior in this world. Atheists may sometimes formulate their ideas of how to live in this world based on the premise that there is nothing beyond this world. Others are in the middle and may have a vague sense of what might lie beyond this life, but one with little linkage to how they live now; some devote little thought to what happens after they die. And still others think of life after death in terms of what in this world may continue after they die: their children and descendants continuing the family line, or their art or scholarship or contribution to a cause extending beyond their own lifetimes. These people are often skeptical of literal life after death but may to some extent live to further their metaphorical hopes of extending their lives beyond death.

We chose the United States, Japan, and China to investigate because they are so important in the world today, and also because they offer quite different depictions of life after death and its relation to life before death. We also choose them because we are personally well suited to investigate them, given our own life experiences: Mathews has been ethnographically investigating life meanings in Japan and the United States for decades, and Kwong wrote her graduate thesis based on her ethnographic investigation of senses of life after death in south China; Yang has much added to Kwong's investigation with her own additional research. We might have also investigated Western Europe, some of whose societies are among the most secular on earth, with most people expressing no belief in life after death. Alternatively, we might have investigated societies in Africa or Asia, or Latin America, from Nigeria to Kenya to Pakistan to India to Chile to Mexico, where a large majority of people express belief in life after death in terms of Christianity or Islam or Hinduism. But as we will demonstrate, the United States, Japan, and China can give us fascinatingly similar yet fundamentally contrasting readings of senses of life after death. Life after death is a window into life before death in these societies, and this book seeks to enable you to gaze into this window.

Here is how this book proceeds. In the remainder of this chapter, we explore the concept of life after death in its past and present in human history, particularly in its different religious expressions; and we discuss contemporary secularization and the rise of individualism, leading to a subjectification of senses of life after death in the contemporary world. We then turn to the social and political meanings of life after death, and consider how fear of what may come after death has served rulers over the millennia in helping to maintain social order; and finally, we discuss how we conducted this book's ethnographic interviews in the United States, Japan, and China, the societies examined in the three following chapters.

In chapter two we consider the power that Christianity still holds over many Americans, in their senses of God in heaven, despite the fact that Christianity seems to be in decline in the United States today. We interviewed evangelical

Christians, but also many who embrace a less literal version of Christianity, and others who adhere to Buddhism, or to a sense of life after death apart from any religion, and also many Americans who don't think much about life after death or proclaim that life after death is a fiction; we examine all these different groups in turn. In the United States today, the influence of Christianity, and the idea that God in heaven is a moral guide remains culturally inescapable, even if many wholly reject these ideas. Even American non-believers in any life after death may wonder, "Without a common religious belief, what can serve as a moral basis for American life?"

In chapter three, we examine senses of life after death in Japan based not in belief or non-belief, but rather in hope. The Japanese equivalent of American Christianity is ancestor veneration: praying at the family altar and visiting the family grave. But many of the people who do these things, we find from our interviews, don't actually believe that they can communicate with the dead. Instead, informed by the array of Japanese mass-media discussions of life after death, they hope that just maybe they can again meet their lost loved ones after they die. Japan continues to put great social pressure on people in this world in how they live, and so senses of life after death need not provide moral guidance. Instead, these senses serve as moral escape: "In this world, I have to live as society tells me to live, but as for the next world, I can dream whatever I want."

In chapter four, we explore how in China, unlike the United States and Japan, the state has played a large role in instilling in its citizens a sense of non-belief in life after death. We see how many older Chinese proudly call themselves atheists, adhering to the scientific materialism taught in China's educational system. But more recently many Chinese, especially younger Chinese, have turned to religious beliefs and adherence to senses of life after death. Some have in effect turned to religion as a substitute for the quasi-religious belief that was communism in the 1950s and 1960s. Many Chinese lament the loss of morality that they may believe existed in an earlier communist China. For them, life after death or its lack may be linked to a sense of moral loss.

Finally, in chapter five, we first compare senses of life after death in these three societies, considering both their global commonalities in the modern world and their distinct societal differences. We then consider the social and existential questions raised by this book's interviews, exploring such questions as "Why do we live as we do if many feel there is no life beyond this one?" "Why do some people believe in life after death while others don't?" "Why are we so afraid of death?" "Are people happier if they believe in life after death? Would societies be better if their members so believed?" We also explore existential questions such as "Is there life after death?" "Why do we exist?" "Does death conquer all?", questions which we cannot answer but which we can in any case critically consider on the basis of our interviews.

But let us now begin with an even more basic question: do human beings need a larger sense of meaning in their lives, or is this unnecessary?

The Need for Meaning

Is a sense of life after death, or, more broadly, a sense of a larger life meaning, necessary in order to live a fulfilled life? Or can people be perfectly happy and fulfilled without any sense of larger meaning? Put differently, if we believe or suspect that our lives have no more meaning than the lives of animals or bacteria, that we live and then die and that's that, that we are really no different from the mosquitos that we unthinkingly crush except that we happen to have longer lifespans and bigger brains, can we still be perfectly happy in our lives?

Maybe we can be perfectly happy without a larger meaning. Phil Zuckerman has discussed "societies without God." He writes, based on his ethnographic research, that "in Denmark and Sweden, death is widely accepted as natural and inevitable, and most people don't think there is some grand meaning to life, other than what you make of it. Death and the meaning of life may thus not be such eternal, universal human problems after all." One of his interviewees elaborated on this: "I think 90% of all sane people don't worry about what happens when they die. They worry about how to pay their bills…"[6]

Denmark and Sweden are two of the most prosperous and happy societies on earth. As Zuckerman puts it, "A widespread lack of belief in life after death does *not* manifest itself in high levels of despair among contemporary Scandinavians. Rather, the Danes and Swedes I interviewed were, for the most part, a happy, satisfied lot."[7] This indicates that senses of life after death—the historical legacy of human beings up until recently—may not be necessary in order to live fulfilled lives. Zuckerman has continued this line of argument in more recent books, focusing on secularism in the United States and other societies, maintaining that secular individuals and societies are on average happier and more stable than religious individuals and societies.[8]

However, others argue that death cannot be so easily bypassed. Zygmunt Bauman maintains that "there would probably be no culture were humans unaware of their mortality; culture is an elaborate…device to forget what they are aware of. Culture would be useless if not for the devouring need of forgetting."[9] Societies have long offered religion as a hedge against death, a way to deny the finality of death. As Peter Berger has noted,

> Every human society is, in the last resort…[humans] banded together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of…[humans] as they stand before death, or, more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it.[10]

Stephen Cave describes the cross-cultural denial of death throughout history by creating myths of rebirth and searching for life extension methods so that we can always "keep on."[11] Today, if religion is fading within much of the developed world, can we so easily accept death?

In the absence of readily believable ideologies of larger meanings providing life after death, some thinkers have argued, we subconsciously adhere to "immortality ideologies"—ways that our lives might transcend extinction and ultimate insignificance. One scholar who has made this claim is Ernest Becker:

> Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.…Everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness—agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same.[12]

Becker's argument is backed by experimental evidence set forth by the psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski in *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. Solomon et al. offer intriguing experimental evidence, typically based on asking subjects to make judgments about various matters, then giving them indirect reminders of their mortality, and then asking them to make those judgments once again to see how they have changed, as often they indeed have changed in their views in ways that fortify their psychological armor against the terror of death.[13] However, it remains unclear the extent to which this terror of death is largely true for everyone (with those who deny it having repressed it) or is true for some people much more than for others, for whom it may not be true at all.

Certainly, many people across the globe are terrified of death. Some of Kwong's and Yang's prospective interviewees in China refused to speak to them when told that we were researching views of life after death. This was more the case for Chinese than for Japanese and Americans, due in part to the contemporary suppression of religion in China,[14] but was to some extent true in all three societies. Still, many people have no such fear and speak readily of such matters. This may be a characterological distinction, such as that which the philosopher William James posited between "the tender-minded" and "the tough-minded"—between the idealistic and the materialistic, and those who need a belief in life after death and those who don't.[15] Becker and Solomon et al., in their discussions of the denial of death and of "terror management theory," imply that many of those who claim no fear of death are hiding their terror behind sublimations and symbols promising that their religion or money or fame or country will protect them from ultimate annihilation and insignificance. On the other hand, Tony Walter cites various psychological studies suggesting that "though awareness of finitude is universal, this does not universally cause terror; terror becomes prevalent in certain social or psychological conditions."[16]

This matter is not for us, as non-psychologists, to judge, although we think it is likely that Walter is correct; the subconscious is largely beyond our purview

in this book's interviews. We've interviewed some people in all three societies who seem matter-of-factly to accept their coming annihilation, and others who do indeed seem to live, so far as we can tell, within an array of protective symbols, including the ultimate protection of religion itself. The distinction between those who accept with a shrug that they will die and those who consciously or semi-consciously protect themselves against this realization is a distinction that will appear throughout this book, in all three of the societies we consider. Zuckerman, for his part, admits that, as a secular humanist envisioning no life beyond this one, he himself fears death.[17]

Beyond this, and despite the fact that various people around the world feel terror at the thought of death, it is not clear how much the denial and terror of death explored by Becker and by Solomon et al. are particularly Western, reflecting the enormous role that Christianity has played in Western life, and the fading of that influence in recent centuries. Characters in Dostoyevsky's famous late-19th-century novel *The Brothers Karamazov* argue that if God is dead, everything is permitted.[18] Much of Western thought over the past 250 years, from Voltaire to Nietzsche to Camus to Tillich, has addressed the question of how human beings should live in a post-Christian world—even though the large majority of Americans today continue to claim to believe in God and in life after death. The discussion of how to live in a post-religious world is less apparent in East Asia. Robert J. Smith has written of Japan that

> it is difficult to find much evidence that the Japanese really think of their ancestors as ever being in hell—or in paradise either, for that matter. Perhaps it is that they simply have never been deeply concerned about the worlds beyond this one.[19]

Other scholars disagree with this characterization of Japan, but it may indeed be the case that, broadly speaking, Japanese, if not so much Chinese, have historically been somewhat less concerned with the world beyond this one than Westerners, in part because they have lacked the influence of Christianity, a religion based on the promise of life after death. The question of life after death that this book explores has historically been of more meaning to Americans and Europeans than to people in some East Asian societies.

However, today the locus of religious comparison has shifted. Today, it is not so much "Western" versus "Eastern" as the Global North versus Global South, the developed world versus the developing world. Surveys show that religious belief and belief in life after death are on average considerably more prevalent in the developing world than in the developed world,[20] whether in terms of Allah, God, or reincarnation. In research among African and Arab traders in China, the Middle East, and Africa, we have only rarely met a non-believer. A Kenyan Christian evangelist explained why, when most Europeans and Japanese, and Chinese are not religious, almost every African is a deeply religious Muslim or Christian:

> The developed world is comfortable. Your heaven is here in this world, and so you think you don't need God. But it's a big fallacy to imagine that you don't need God. People have to remember that life is very short—we are not here only.[21]

A Nigerian trader said, in echo of Dostoyevsky,

> Yes, when Chinese cheat me [in business], I think it's because they don't believe in life after death….If you don't have any faith, if you don't think that any authority will come and check on you, then the door is open to do anything.[22]

This trader was specifically speaking of Chinese, but he might as well have been speaking of people throughout the developed world, from Western Europeans to Japanese, many of whom have no belief in any higher being watching over them.

For most people in the developed world—with the partial exception of Americans—moral behavior is not explicitly linked to religious belief, as it often was in the past. It is clear, statistically, that religious belief does not necessarily make societies more moral in their behavior (although it may make individuals more moral). If anything, it may be the reverse. As Zuckerman states, on the basis of extensive statistical evidence, "the poorer, more chaotic, more troubled countries tend to be among the most religious, while the wealthier, more stable, more well-functioning countries tend to be among the most secular."[23] What is cause and what is effect is complicated—perhaps there is a high rate of religious belief in some societies largely because there is so much poverty and social disorder, from which people seek religious protection because no other protection is available. As a broad general rule, as societies become more affluent, they become less religious, and also have less crime, with affluence apparently being the most essential causal variable, although this is debatable.

However, maybe the key question is not the Dostoyevskian one, of "without religious belief, why not do anything you want? Why not cheat, pillage, rape, and murder if you can get away with it?" The vast majority of people in any contemporary society don't do these things not because of religious belief but because of moral values instilled through education and training: we are taught to live according to values that affirm that we should treat others the way that we ourselves want to be treated, and mostly we more or less live this way.[24] Instead, what's key is a more mundane question: If you only live once, why live as you do? Why labor at work that you don't feel much attachment to? Why put up with life's ongoing struggles and indignities if, at the end of your life, you merely die and it will soon enough be as if you never had existed?

The African trader quoted above is accurate when he speaks of how comfortable life in the developed world is; even in the fairly recent past, humans lived in a world without anesthesia, flush toilets, or electricity. And yet, unlike in that past, if we believe now that we only live once—more if we believe that nothing

ultimately matters beyond the limited time frame of our lifespan—then why live as we do? YOLO, "You Only Live Once," may have been a prominent internet meme, but it seems that many of us don't live as if it were true.

The question "Why live as we do?" has had a religious answer for societies throughout history, for the Christian West, for the Islamic world, and for Japan and China: "Live in the right way and you will go to heaven/be reborn as a human or a god; don't live the right way and you will go to hell/be reborn as an insect." Not everyone believed this, and of course, not everyone lived accordingly, but this was the common sense of the past, as we now explore, in looking at senses of life after death through history.

Life After Death in History

The standard narrative of life after death goes like this: "Human beings used to believe in life after death in earlier ages, but now believe less and less, because of the advancement of science." This has a degree of truth to it, but the reality is of course more complex.

There are some traditional societies that have not had a sense of life after death. "The Hadza [of today's Tanzania] do not have a clear belief in an afterlife. They believe that the corpse rots in the ground and that is the end of the person."[25] The Karen [of today's Burma], once they died, conceived of themselves as becoming "vegetative….bursting over the fields, they fertilize the rice"[26]—a view not dissimilar to that of contemporary secularists contemplating returning to nature after death. Overall, the Human Relations Area Files, a compendium of anthropological data from societies the world over, shows that some 2% of societies do not adhere to any sense of an afterlife, with the other 98% indeed adhering.[27]

But it does appear that most societies in history up until recently have adhered to a sense of life after death whose reality they have largely taken for granted, simply because there has been no reason to think otherwise, no reason to doubt that life after death exists. As Davies writes,

> The history of death is very largely one in which people have shared a belief in some sort of life after death. While individuals may have completely disbelieved in any such thing, it has been exceptional for any society not to have held to such a view.[28]

But this does not mean that most people were particularly spiritual or religious. In most societies historically, belief in life after death was apparently akin to belief in science today, something that most people gave little thought to, at least until death intruded into their lives. Some people were no doubt fervent in their senses of life after death, and some people were probably disbelievers in any life after death; but it seems likely that most people simply took it for granted. They more or less believed what their society presented for them to believe, without

giving the matter much thought, at least until grief or their own impending demise focused their minds on death and the beyond.

Senses of life after death have generally corresponded to how societies have developed materially, from societies based on hunting-gathering, where human beings have spent almost all of their history, to agricultural societies, to the era of empires, to the capitalist world of today. Hunter-gatherers are well-known for being animists, following the doctrine that everything in nature is alive and has spirituality and perhaps consciousness. "The oldest trait of religion, present in the most recent common ancestor of present-day hunter-gatherers, was animism….Belief in an afterlife [subsequently] emerged."[29] Solomon and his coauthors argue that

> our ancestors ingeniously conspired to 'Just Say No' to reality by creating a supernatural universe that afforded a sense of control over life and death…. Our ancestors made a supremely adaptive, ingenious, and imaginative leap: they created a supernatural world, one in which death was not inevitable or irrevocable.[30]

Not all did; but facing death, why not invent myths of a world beyond, since there would be little reason to question such myths?

Archaeological findings from 40,000 years ago, of bodies elaborately decorated after death, as if preparing for a journey, perhaps imply a conception of a world beyond this one, as do cave paintings from 30,000 years ago in their depictions of the natural and supernatural worlds. This seems particularly apparent at the Turkish site of Göbekli Tepe, dating from 12,000 years ago, with its elaborate sculpted limestone pillars depicting vultures and other animals, but with no sign of human habitation; the construction of these pillars, each weighing between ten and twenty tons, predated the wheel and agriculture, and involved extraordinary human effort. Archaeologists have concluded that Göbekli Tepe was the center of a death cult, one that predated the emergence of Göbekli Tepe as a city. As Solomon and his coauthors write,

> Scientists had previously assumed the march of human progress was based on procuring food; we evolved from hunter-gatherers into farmers, domesticating plants and animals along the way and then building towns and cities around our collective farms. The discovery of Göbekli Tepe cast doubt on this assumption, suggesting that the problem of death motivated architectural advances that had nothing to do with practical concerns. These religious monuments predated agriculture, and may have even helped stimulate its development.[31]

Of course we cannot know what those who built and used Göbekli Tepe actually believed about life after death; archeological remains cannot unequivocally tell us. Robert Bellah cautions about interpretive overreach:

> I would…question the usual interpretation of graves of early humans, sometimes with elaborate grave goods, as indicative of "a belief in the afterlife." Such graves could be simply an expression of grief and the need to remember. Strong feelings of grief are widespread among intelligent animals, who almost surely don't believe in the afterlife. Giving physical expression to such grief should not be overinterpreted without good evidence.[32]

In any case, it does seem that human beings were focused on death early in human history, and this may have been a major factor shaping cultural evolution.

Human societies turned to agriculture as their primary mode of production some 6,000–12,000 years ago, in different areas of the world. Because agriculture enabled the storage of grain and thus greater concentrations of the population as well as inequalities of wealth, it led, over millennia, to the emergence of complex societies and eventually, to vast empires in China, India, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere, along with the invention of the wheel and writing. It also led to new imaginings of life after death.

The earliest-known significant work of literature in history, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* dating from some 4,000 years ago, is about its hero's quest for immortality. He is told by the barmaid Siduri that human beings should simply rejoice about life before we die and not vainly pursue life after death: "The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find. When the gods created mankind, death for mankind they set aside."[33] Gilgamesh rejects this advice, seeking immortality in a range of distant realms and struggles, and in this effort ultimately fails. This first epic poem in world literature has, underlying its depictions of heroic struggles with mythical beings, much in common with 20th-century existential writings: we die, and thus so what? What is life worth if we only die?

The ancient Egyptians too were "haunted by an awareness of their own mortality…Fascination with death is credited to no nation more widely than it is to Egypt of the pharaohs."[34] Mummification was a process of encasing the corpse against decay and preparing it for eternity. Egyptian tombs of this era included jars of food and drink and personal property, with the Egyptian pyramids, the tombs of emperors, being by far the most elaborately prepared, including wooden boats for transport in the other world. Later in history, the hundreds of terracotta warriors that accompanied the first emperor of a unified China to his tomb were created to protect him in the world beyond this one, in a Chinese imperial parallel to the pharaonic tombs.

With the rise of the religiously based civilizations of ancient Israel, classical Greece, Confucian China, and Buddhist India 2,000–3,000 years ago, the pursuit of life after death and one's well-being within it became not just for emperors and heroes. "In the development of Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife there was a sort of gradual democratization,"[35] whereby the possibility of a blissful afterlife became extended from that of the pharaoh and his family alone, to court officials, to, eventually, a broad range of people. This happened far beyond Egypt. Around the world,

> to better police and reward adherents, the gods of emerging complex societies need more knowledge of mortal behavior…and more power to reward and punish (thus, an afterlife in heaven or hell). This allows gods to monitor people in ephemeral or anonymous situations, and to provide potent incentives, if they can instill deep commitment. Along these lines, beliefs in an eternal, blissful afterlife for the faithful emerged likely only after 500 B.C. in Eurasia, with the rise of cosmopolitan religions such as Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Christianity.[36]

Heaven and hell and reincarnation emerged because complex societies had a need to offer afterlife rewards and punishments to scare and reassure a large-scale population, as was not the case when human beings lived in small face-to-face groups. Although the religions that emerged in this period and thereafter had varying degrees of emphasis on life after death, with Confucianism emphasizing life after death less than Hinduism and Buddhism and far less than Christianity and Islam, Scott Atran's definition of religion fits to a degree all of these religions: "Roughly, religion is (1) a community's costly and hard-to-fake commitment (2) to a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents (3) who master people's existential anxieties, such as death and deception."[37] As Jared Diamond has written,

> Most religions provide comfort by in effect denying death's reality, and by postulating some sort of afterlife for a soul postulated as associated with the body. One's soul together with a replica of one's body may go to a supernatural place called heaven or some other name; or one's soul may be transformed into a bird or another person here on Earth. Religions that proclaim an afterlife often go further and use it not just to deny death but also to hold out hope for something even better awaiting us after death, such as eternal life, reunion with one's loved ones, freedom from care, nectar, and beautiful virgins.[38]

One reason for the emergence of this belief in heaven and its equivalents, as noted above, is the need for social control in complex societies where individuals no longer know one another. A second reason is that "archaeological and ethnographic evidence shows that life really did become harder as hunter-gatherers became farmers and assembled in larger societies."[39] Standards of living were higher and senses of community were greater in earlier hunting-gathering eras; complex societies entailed states forcibly taking much of what their inhabitants produced, as did not happen in earlier eras. Senses of a bright afterlife, as promised in different ways by the world's different religions if one properly believed and behaved, may have become necessary because life in this world seemed unfulfilling for many.

For the past two millennia, senses of life after death have typically followed the teachings of the major world religions: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism,

Christianity, and Islam. These have had very different emphases; "No more powerful argument against the conception that, basically, religions say the same thing comes to hand than the actualities of religions' discussions of death and the afterlife."[40] One marked difference concerns belief in heaven and hell, on the one hand, associated with the monotheistic God of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and adherence to reincarnation, on the other hand, as associated with Hinduism and Buddhism. Christianity and Islam have been directly concerned with life after death since this involves God's judgment as to the individual's salvation or damnation. Hinduism and Buddhism have instead emphasized reincarnation as a way of cleansing the self, to the point where one eventually reaches *nirvana* and becomes nothing (or, in some variants, goes to a place resembling heaven). If we have lived a life of faith in this world, do we go to heaven after we die, whereby we may be forever united with God, as Islam and Christianity maintain? Or is a better afterlife to be obtained through good deeds in this world, as the Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of karma seems to indicate?

As for Judaism and life after death,

> A broad range of opinions makes its way in the written and oral parts of the Torah, but three points emerge as authoritative: (1) we are judged; (2) we are rewarded or penalized for our life on earth by being sent to either the Garden of Eden or Gehenna [hell]; and (3) when the Messiah comes, we will all be raised from the dead.[41]

It is often maintained that Judaism is not so concerned with life after death, as several of the people we interviewed in the United States told us. One authority counters this:

> Ordinary devoted Jews…will insist that Christianity believes in Heaven and Hell, whereas Judaism does not, and will justify their insistence by reporting that their own rabbi has told them so. In fact, classic Jewish sources are full of references to the fate that awaits us after we die.[42]

For Christianity, with its message of Christ, the Son of God, who died and was resurrected, as our redeemer, life after death is the central tenet of its message: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). As Paul states in the Bible (Corinthians 15:13–14), "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has Christ been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is empty and your faith is empty!"[43] Christian belief strips away earthly divisions: "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith….There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28).[44] This eternal life is attained not through works but through faith, according to the Pauline interpretation of salvation, which holds that "'justification by faith'…[is] the single

most important teaching of the Bible."[45] Those who did not have such faith would burn in hell—"a bottomless pit of darkness…a furnace of fire…a dark and tormenting prison."[46]

Phillip Almond explores what he terms "the two foundational narratives within Western thought about the afterlife": on the one hand, the idea that "our lives will continue *immediately* after the death of each of us," and on the other hand, the narrative that our ultimate fates will be decided only when history ends, and Christ returns to render judgment as to whether we wind up in heaven or hell, bliss or eternal torment. He also emphasizes "the tension between an eternal life centred on the love and worship of God" to "one focused on human relationships to the virtual exclusion of God," with the historical trajectory broadly moving from the former to the latter.[47] There is also the split in Christianity between Catholicism and Protestantism. In terms of life after death, Catholicism has had the doctrine of purgatory, an intermediate state where one could atone for one's sins before going to heaven, something that Protestantism has vigorously disallowed—for Protestants there is only heaven and hell, with nothing in between.[48]

Islam resembles Christianity in its monotheism but differs from Christianity in its depiction of Christ. To Islam, Christ was a prophet, but no Son of God; the ultimate prophet was Muhammad, who was dictated the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, by the archangel Gabriel as the word of Allah. Christianity believes in original sin as Islam does not; beyond this, Christianity holds that a sincere conversion on one's deathbed can lead to God's grace and to heaven, but Islam requires instead a lifetime of piety and of good actions. As the Qur'an states, "God shall not turn towards those who do evil deeds until, when one of them is visited by death, he says, 'Indeed, now I repent'" (4:22).[49]

> Of the three great monotheistic scriptures, none is more explicit than the Qur'an in detailing the joy and suffering of the world to come. Just as the… description of heaven recalls the pleasure of a shady garden on a warm summer's day, the most vivid representations of hell in the Qu'ran depict sinners languishing in the desert.[50]

Christians sometimes have criticized Islam for the sensual pleasures its heaven offers, unlike the spiritual pleasures offered by Christianity. But these religions have remarkably much in common, despite their historical antipathy. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all hold that there is bodily resurrection, with body and soul united. And these all promise, for those who have led properly devoted lives, an "eternal life beyond the grave."[51]

Buddhism and Hinduism fundamentally differ from this. They offer reincarnation, but this is not the end but only a way stage—as said by the Buddha, "Misery is birth again and again."[52] "Hinduism and Buddhism concur that breaking the cycle of existence…overcoming this world, and finding ultimate egress from it—these represent the goal of life."[53] Buddhism denies the

continuity of the soul from rebirth to rebirth; there is no permanent identity. The basis of judgment is karma, the moral law of cause and effect, which determines the situation of one's rebirth. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* particularly emphasizes the *bardo* state between death and rebirth, whereby the individual may become fused with absolute oneness, or may, because of ongoing cravings for existence, be reborn.[54] Many Buddhist doctrines hold to six realms of rebirth, including animals, human beings, and gods; but the aim is to transcend all this through enlightenment, although what one's enlightened fate actually consists of is an open question, with some authorities portraying it as nothingness and others as a state of bliss. Today, some Buddhists in Japan and the United States as well, hold to no belief in reincarnation[55]; without reincarnation, Buddhist practices such as meditation become, most essentially, this-world therapy.

Hinduism holds a similar depiction as Buddhism. "Death…is certainly not final; birth, life, death, and rebirth are stages in the endless cycle of existence called *samsara*"; Hindu heavens and hells "are not permanent states but function as transient and intermediate way stations as one moves along one's way towards the next rebirth."[56] The status of one's next birth is shaped not by faith but by deeds: the good deeds one has performed in one's previous life. But as in Buddhism, the ultimate aim is not rebirth but transcendence of rebirth:

> For most Hindus…the goal of life is to live virtuously and to obtain, as a result, a better rebirth. But a few…strive to obtain the highest religious end posited by the Hindu tradition, freedom or liberation from rebirth…[held in Hinduism to be] the highest (and hardest) goal of human existence.[57]

All of these different religious traditions and their depictions of life after death are distinct, but there is often overlap. In Buddhism and Hinduism, there often appears a personal God. Rennyo, a 15th-century Japanese Buddhist priest, wrote of how, because life is transient, "as fragile as the beads of morning dew," one should find permanence through "deep and total reliance upon Amida Buddha."[58] Buddha, in this context, resembles Christ, as the bringer of salvation through faith. Hinduism too has this; its three *mārgas*, or paths, are those of ritual practice, of knowledge, and also of devotion, a "personally rewarding union with the Lord"[59]—this is a path of faith. On the other hand, Meister Eckhart, the renowned Christian mystic, wrote that "the knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge."[60] God and oneself are thus not separate, Eckhart is saying, as in standard Christian and Muslim belief, but are one and the same, as in the Hindu pronouncement "Thou Art That." The difference between Judaic, Christian, and Muslim monotheism and their separation between self and God, and Hindu and Buddhist senses of oneness between self and the ultimate are in these contexts blurred. Today, with religious believers increasingly turning to their own particular interpretations of their faith and prospective life after death, this blurring is all the more the case.

Whether the ultimate is personal or impersonal is largely a matter of one's own individual interpretation.

Life After Death in our Present Era

Today, collectively-held religious beliefs no longer provide meaning for many of us. This has happened in large part because of secularization in the West and throughout the developed world—although not yet so much in the developing world, as we've seen. The most noted authority describing this shift, Charles Taylor, has analyzed how "the shift to secularity…consists…of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace." In more direct terms he asks, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[61] Taylor's explication is comprehensive, involving, among many other factors, the shift from God as "an agent interacting with humans and intervening in human history" to becoming instead an "architect of a universe operating by unchanging laws," and thus, by stages, unnecessary, and along with this, the loss of an enchanted world, and the loss of the ability to experience spirits and powers.[62] Peter Berger too has analyzed this transformation: "Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies."[63] This was true in the 1960s, when Berger wrote, and is all the truer today.

Perhaps the most basic underlying explanation for why collectively held religious beliefs have lost their power transcends religions, to implicate society at large and its transformations. Emile Durkheim, observing the massive changes taking place in European life in the late 19th century, believed that "individual judgment has been freed from collective judgment,"[64] with the danger of anomie, and the breakdown of social and moral bonds between the individual and the collective. In the late 20th century, Anthony Giddens continued this mode of analysis in a much more individualistic world. "The idea that each person has a unique character and special potentialities that may or may not be fulfilled is alien to pre-modern culture," but is endemic in modernity, largely because the collective bonds of society have eroded away. "By definition, tradition or established habit orders life within relatively set channels. Modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices…We have no choice but to choose," and little basis upon which to choose.[65] "Personal meaninglessness—the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer—becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity"; the threat of meaninglessness and death is held at bay by routinized activities and thoughts, but always lurks in the background.[66]

This individualism has had a clear influence on death and how it is experienced and memorialized in the contemporary world, as Tony Walter has discussed in his

exploration of the transformation of death in the modern Western world. Perhaps the most influential book concerning death written over the past 60 years is Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, in its delineation of the individual's stages of psychological reactions to dying. As Walter notes, "the book clearly places the self—rather than medicine or the church—centre stage. Kübler-Ross is the prophetess of the new religion of self."[67]

This extends to senses of life after death. Books on life after death sometimes claim that it has meaning only as a collective: "Why don't we believe we become butterflies when we die?....[Because]...an individual fantasy...lacks the credibility structures that beliefs present in a society necessarily achieve."[68] But this view no longer describes the individuated world in which many of us live. Our beliefs in life after death, for a large number of people in the developed world today, do not derive their credibility from the authority of scriptures, ministers, or priests. Traditional collective beliefs about life after death, whether in heaven/paradise or in reincarnation, have given way; people throughout the developed world hold to an array of different senses as to what may happen after death that is often far removed from the traditional religious orientations of their societies. In today's world, as Steve Bruce has written, "Religion is no longer a matter of necessity; it is a question of preference....Religion becomes privatized, and is pushed to the margins and interstices of the social order"; "the supernatural... has been psychologized or subjectified."[69] Throughout the developed world, the ultimate fate of human beings has become a matter of individual speculation rather than of collective religious doctrine. This is the case, in different ways, for all three of the societies analyzed in this book.

As more and more people become aware of multiple religious beliefs and multiple beliefs in life after death, these beliefs become relativized. If, for example, among my friends, one is a Christian, another a Tibetan Buddhist, and another a Muslim, then if I am seeking a spiritual path, how can I choose between them as to the ultimate validity of their concerns? How can I possibly know who might be "right"? Choices of ultimate belief in this situation, as well as senses of life after death, become no more than matters of personal preference, little different from one person's liking for Bach and another's for reggae, or one person's liking for cafe latte and another's for mint tea. Pluralism leads to relativism, with "ultimate truths" rendered invalid since no one can possibly know truth beyond individual taste. One outcome of this stance may be the complete subjectification of life after death. Alan Segal has written of the United States that "a relatively new American possibility [of the afterlife] is that we each get what we think we will get."[70] Several Japanese as well as Chinese and Americans we interviewed spoke very much in these terms.

The subjectification of the afterlife enables some people to continue to believe that there is literal life after death since it is simply one's own private belief, more or less unexpressed to others. Other people may choose an alternative path to immortality: what we might term metaphorical immortality since it promises not an actual life after death—not heaven or reincarnation—but rather a

subtler sense of transcending death. Solomon and his co-authors discuss this in terms of family: "the promise of living beyond our bodies through our offspring as well as through their memories of us,"[71] citing Japanese ancestor veneration as one obvious case of this. There is also fame, as shown by examples such as YouTube celebrities living on after their earthly demise through their videos. Lincoln and Shakespeare, as, in an infinitely more minor sense, every departed scholar who has their name in footnotes, are dead but live on. There is also wealth: "If you can't pray your way into heaven, wait until science conquers death, feel sufficiently fortified by your place in an ongoing ancestral line, or become famous, money and stuff offer another gateway to immortality."[72] There is also nationalism, and the thrall cast by charismatic leaders: at its bluntest this means that although you yourself will die, you believe that the country you die for will live on forever.

Zygmunt Bauman emphasizes the difference in power between those who can attain various forms of metaphorical immortality and those who cannot. Immortality has long been an unequal affair. Earlier in human history, the promise of immortality was "the lot of the rulers, and rulers alone"[73]—for example, the Egyptian pharaohs and Chinese emperors. The universal religions democratized the promise of immortality, in that anyone with faith in God or Allah, or anyone who practiced good deeds, could, it was believed, get to heaven or experience a good reincarnation. Nonetheless, wealth still intruded in some times and places, with Catholic priests selling indulgences to the wealthy in the decades before Luther, and *kaimyō*, Buddhist posthumous names, bought by their families for the dead in Japan even today, perhaps providing better prospects in the world beyond, although many Japanese find this possibility to be ridiculous.[74] By and large, religious faiths today are democratic in what they offer in terms of life after death; and in an individuated world of life after death, individuals, rich or poor, can imagine what they like. But metaphorical immortality is, in many of its forms, a privilege of the elite.

Fame, as Bauman discusses, is an individual bid for immortality as structured by society that makes some people "less mortal" than others since they have many more opportunities to attain fame. Individual immortality projects such as fame or renown have long been the privilege of the few; for the masses, group immortality such as that promised through nationalism may be the only immortality strategy available—but this too is of course in the service of the elites, with patriotism being, in one cynical but largely accurate view, how rich old men get poor young men to die for them. For those who seek to stand out from the group,

> a new profession…of immortality-brokers, armed with skills geared to new, mundane forms of immortality, has emerged….With immortality deconstructed into fame and immortality-earning virtue into the quantity of tied public attention, Madison Avenue has taken the place of the Papal See.[75]

In fact, since everybody will be dead anyway, this is a weak form of immortality: as Woody Allen said, when asked if he wanted to live on forever through his movies, "I'd rather live on in my apartment….I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying."[76] It is also true that some forms of non-literal immortality are both open to anyone and indisputably true: we do indeed live on genetically through our offspring, at least for a few generations as our own genetic legacy progressively halves with each new generation; the matter in our bodies does indeed return once we die to the nature from which we have emerged. But for many people, these forms of immortality mean little or nothing compared to the lure of fame and celebrity. A number of mass murderers in the United States and elsewhere in recent decades have indicated that they did what they did to see their names in newspaper headlines—and thus to become (at least temporarily) immortal.

Ernest Becker implies in a number of his writings that this type of immortality motivates us all. "Probably for a half-million years…[humankind] has believed that there were two worlds, a visible one in which everyday action took place; and a greater, much more powerful world—the invisible one, upon which the visible one depended and from which it drew its powers"[77]: that invisible world was a world with a larger meaning beyond this visible world, within which human beings located their senses of ultimate meaning. Today that world is gone, at least within much of the developed world:

> People no longer draw their power from the individual dimension, but from the intensive manipulation of very visible Ferraris, and other material gadgets. They try to find their whole fulfillment in a sex partner, or in an endless succession of partners, or in their children; their sense of duty extends to the corporation, or to a branch of science, to a party, the nation, or at most the success of humanity on this planet.[78]

These meanings are fictional, Becker maintains, but realizing their fictitiousness is terrifying:

> One of life's most shattering and self-revealing experiences is to have divulged to oneself the unconscious sources of his power: mother, the boss, money, the Pentagon, the heroes of the free-enterprise system, Marx and Lenin, Humanity, the church, one's spouse, his Guru, or his guns.[79]

But while these words may be stirring, are they true? Phil Zuckerman, as we earlier discussed, maintains that people can live happily in a secular world, without any such unconscious sources of power; people can accept, with more or less equanimity, the fact that their lives bear no meaning beyond this world. In this book, as we will explore in the following chapters, we've found that while some of the non-religious people we interviewed in the United States, Japan, and China do indeed express their hopes for metaphorical immortality through

their art, their fame, or their children, or simply being remembered after they die, many do not. It may be that we are a part of a broad societal evolution, proceeding from death as largely accepted because religious belief enables its transcendence, to death as terrifying because of the loss of such belief and the turn to metaphorical immortality to lessen its terror, to, eventually, death as again accepted, as Zuckerman seems to describe—maybe more and more people in the world will become, over time, the more-or-less equanimous secularists he depicts in his 2008 book.

But today, many of us accept death less with equanimity than with resignation. As W. M. Spellman comments, quoting the poet Phillip Larkin, "Very few of us look forward to dying and increasing numbers of us have concluded…that at death we…simply 'break up', our bits 'speeding away' to myriad destinations in a great impersonal recycling project."[80] This is hardly something that we desire, but we see it as our unavoidable fate. We may not hide from it in terror, but nonetheless, face it with resignation as the price we must pay for having lived.

These themes will be explored throughout this book's ethnographic chapters, in their accounts of how a range of people envision what happens to them after they die. At this point, we who write this book can only emphasize the extent to which all three of this book's ethnographic chapters reveal the individuation of senses of life after death—it is remarkable how, for many people in these three societies in this current age, senses of life after death or their lack are private, not much discussed with others and not much related to an established socially-practiced religion. But although our senses of life after death have indeed become individuated as never before, they are not only individual but profoundly social as well.

The Social and Political Meanings of Life After Death

Senses of what happens to us after we die inevitably come from the world beyond our individual selves. For organized religions, this is clearly the case—individuals within a given religion typically more or less adhere to its doctrines as to what happens after death—but even with today's more pluralized and individualized senses of life after death, this is the case. The senses of life after death we adhere to do not arise in a vacuum, but come from an array of sources, from parents to self-help books to religious teachings to movies. It is hardly surprising that most of the senses of life after death portrayed in this book fit a relatively narrow range: heaven, reincarnation, or nothingness. This is partly because of the limits of the human imagination, but even more, it is because we are so profoundly shaped by our social worlds: these are the predominant senses of life after death our social worlds have offered, and this is what almost all of us adhere to.

Our social worlds shape us, but we also shape our social worlds, to at least a small extent. Everything we do in our lives, in such activities as stopping at stoplights, going to work at certain set times, or going to the grocery store, we have learned from our social world as to how we are to behave. We in turn,

through these activities, collectively recreate our social worlds. We don't do these as automatons, but as something more like jazz musicians: we improvise, on the basis of all that we have learned and internalized. Based on our psychological and familial background, we take on cultural ideas that seem suitable to us, recreate them, reshape them in our own ways, and behave more or less accordingly. This is the insight into what is known in anthropology as practice theory.[81] As Berger and Luckmann write, "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product."[82] These statements are contradictory, but all logically interweave: we are each a product of our social world, a world that is, as far as each of us is concerned, an objective reality; but we ourselves subtly shape and reshape that reality in the course of our daily lives, in accordance with our circumstances and interests. This process of being shaped by and in turn reshaping our social world applies to our daily lives, our views and opinions, and also to our senses of life after death.

In the three societies depicted in this book, people gain their senses of life after death or its lack in part from how they were raised as children—whether being sent to church, engaging in ancestor worship, or being taught that all such beliefs are merely superstition—but also from all of their experiences in their lives, from encountering a new religion, to having a loved one die, to reading a magazine story about extraterrestrials. For many people, senses of life after death have little importance in their lives, at least until they are sick or old, and do not have any influence on how they live. For many others, however, they do indeed have significant influence. For many people in the United States, Japan, and China, what they imagine about life after death significantly shapes how they think and live before death, and how they create the social world around them.

Tony Walter writes in the concluding pages of his book on senses of life after death in the United Kingdom and elsewhere that "while many individuals continue to believe in life after death, and while some feel this belief transforms their lives, there is no evidence that such personal beliefs affect society as a whole. The afterlife is…personally meaningful but socially irrelevant."[83] Walter is saying that because senses of life after death are now held by individuals rather than collectively, they have no relevance to the ongoing structuring of society. In an obvious sense, Walter is right, but in a subtler sense, this is not necessarily the case. What people think about a world after death is often directly linked to how they live their lives and shape their societies in the world before death: individual imaginings of life after death take place within, through, and against the various sociocultural forms of the societies in which people live.

Consider, for example, the committed Christian in China, believing that Christ is more important than the state regardless of what the latter might maintain, and convinced that after she dies, her destination will be heaven for an eternity: she lives her life on this earth with Christ a constant presence, and she frequently proselytizes and occasionally converts her fellow Chinese. Consider the Japanese woman who has tragically lost her husband at an early age, and communicates with his spirit, she believes; although she has had a number of suitors,

she has no interest in relationships with anyone else, because for her, her husband, although dead, remains alive. Consider the American atheist, scornful of what he sees as the naïve believers in his midst, who quits his less-than-fulfilling job because "if I don't experience life more fully now, I never will!" Senses of life after death or its lack may indeed be linked to one's views and life in this world before death and may thus have a social impact; they do not exist only within a vacuum of individual minds, but impact the world in small but sometimes socially significant ways.

For some people, life after death means little, whereas for others it is a central part of their life's meaning. For Christians or Muslims dreaming of heaven, it may be the essence of who they are; for some atheists too, their lack of belief in life after death may be linked to their entire life philosophy. For others—most typically agnostics, in our interviews—any imagined life after death may bear no relation to how they live. "I don't know what happens after I die. But maybe I go to another dimension. How the hell would I know?" People are also not necessarily consistent, so a given sense of life after death or its lack may bear only a remote relationship to other aspects of their lives. As Walter has written, "There need be no coherence between a person's intuitions about an afterlife and the rest of their religious or non-religious belief system."[84] Often, however, there are indeed various kinds of linkages to be found between senses of what may happen after death, and attitudes towards living in this world.

These linkages may exist within the subtle social sense we have just described, but also in a more overt political sense. Philosophers throughout history have discussed the importance of a belief in life after death in order to encourage citizens to live "properly." A range of political theorists throughout history have written of the need for religion in a well-functioning civic order and society:

> In the fifth century BCE, Athenian historians asserted that fear of the gods and belief in divine reward and punishment kept humans close to the word of the law, while the absence of such fear and such beliefs led to lawlessness. Later, it was the Roman Cicero…who wondered whether, without fear of the gods, trust and cooperation among humans will be lost….John Locke stated that nonbelievers should not be trusted because "promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist"….Voltaire stated…"I want my attorney, my tailor, my servants, even my wife to believe in God; and I think that I shall then be robbed and cuckolded less often."[85]

As for life after death, to take another Western example, Thomas More, the 16th-century imaginer of *Utopia*, wrote of its inhabitants that they believed that human beings have an immortal soul given to them by God's goodness, and that after this life, "rewards are appointed for our virtues and good deeds, punishment for our sins." Utopia's inhabitants believe this because "if these beliefs were rejected, no man would be so stupid as not to realize that he should seek

pleasure regardless of right and wrong"[86]—without the promise of reward after death, life in this world would appear so miserable that there would be no reason not to behave in any way that one might desire. A Song Dynasty Chinese document, *The Book of Rewards and Punishments* (*Kan Ying Pien*) more directly exhorts: "People who want to achieve immortality…must recognize the path of righteousness and enter upon it,"[87] by being loyal to their ruler, obedient to their parents, and kind to widows and orphans and to the young. This is the standard view that members of different societies need religion and a sense of life after death in order to behave well.

This may not actually be the case in the world today, as we earlier discussed, but this has certainly been a prominent historical trope. Rulers throughout history generally have not been able to rely upon force alone to get their subjects to behave in certain ways. Force is inefficient: there can't be police everywhere. Instead, they have relied upon education and persuasion, but education too may be inefficient, especially if there is limited schooling for much of the population. Supernatural sanctions can be remarkably efficient if they are widely believed, and if there are institutions such as churches or temples, or mosques where this persuasion may be regularly promulgated. Rulers themselves may or may not personally believe in these religious creeds, but it hardly matters, for the effects of the creeds will be, at least in theory, to produce better, more law-abiding, and more obedient subjects and citizens. Plato wrote in the *Republic* of "The Noble Lie," whereby the masses are made to believe that "the social order has supernatural sanction," something not needed by his Republic's rulers, who know better; in our age, Freud "was among those who thought that the elite does not need external authority, whereas the masses will deteriorate into lawlessness without the promises of divine judgment and retribution."[88]

As against this, others have theorized—particularly from the 18th century onward, as skepticism towards religion and towards society itself increasingly emerged—that belief in life after death was not an impetus to virtue but a force of oppression. This is what Karl Marx meant when he described religion as "the opium of the people."[89] Because of the proletariat's belief in a paradisal next world, Marx argued, this world's oppression is made tolerable. If the ruling class can set forth a convincing other world, then they can easily exploit the laborers of this world since those laborers will set their sights on the world beyond, and not on this one—they will be focused on salvation rather than on reform or revolution. This view has been a standard criticism of those who adhere to life after death: if one believes in life after death, then why make any effort to improve this world before death? If this world is not one's destination, but only a temporary way station, then why bother worrying about this world? Simply accept the injustices to which one is subject in this world, for they will be rectified in the next. Marx's call for revolution—"Workers of the world unite: you have nothing to lose but your chains"—was a call to dream of no other world, but to overcome injustice in this world.

However, despite More and Marx—the one claiming that belief in life after death is a source of virtue, the other that it is a delusion—the actual effects of belief in life after death in shaping the worldviews and behavior of believers is much more convoluted. The opium of life after death, if that is what it is, often works in strange ways. This is shown in Max Weber's classic book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.[90] Weber wrote of how for Calvinists in Western Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, economic success—working hard and making money—was seen as the only means by which one could ascertain that one might be among the chosen few destined for heaven after this life. But if one in any way enjoyed one's wealth on this earth, or spent it on luxuries of any kind, this would indicate one's pride in oneself apart from God, and thus one's unworthiness for heaven and probable destiny in hell. For this reason, as Weber portrayed, Calvinists labored, reinvested, and labored, living out a joyless earthly life for the sake of ascertaining their future salvation. Most Western Europeans of that era were not Calvinists, but because of the particular tenets of their faith, the Calvinists and Puritans were spectacularly successful in their economic endeavors, leading others to eventually follow suit in engaging in relentless work.

The Calvinists and Puritans had no interest in making money for its own sake; their only interest was in obtaining assurance as to their ultimate fate in heaven—this was what drove them. But as an entirely unintended consequence, Weber argued, they served as a catalyst for the emergence of the capitalistic world order. At the close of his book, Weber writes of how we, unlike our Calvinist forebears, are trapped in the "iron cage" of contemporary capitalism.[91] The Calvinists and Puritans worked so hard because this was directly related to how they imagined the ultimate meaning of their lives and their destination after they died. Today, that's gone—many of us believe that what we do in our work in this world has no relation to where we may wind up once we die. And yet we are entrapped in the world that Weber describes, in that we are forced to devote our lives to an economic order that controls us. What Weber eloquently reveals is that belief in particular forms of life after death may have extraordinary and wholly unforeseeable this-world side effects, beyond the imaginations of those who actually believe in them. The Calvinists and Puritans Weber describes in the 16th and 17th centuries largely vanished by the 18th and 19th centuries. But if belief in God and life after death changed, hard work did not—in today's world, in our attitudes towards work, we are Calvinists because we have no choice: many of us feel compelled to devote our lives to our jobs. Sixteenth-century Calvinists' senses of life after death, according to Weber (and his view has been much disputed in the century since he wrote) thus helped to create the world of work before death that we live and labor in today.

Today, life after death is less adhered to, at least in the developed world, than in the age described by Weber. And yet just as in the Puritan era described by Weber, the imagined world beyond death today may have a powerful impact upon the affairs of this world. Have some of Al-Qaeda's or ISIS's minions truly believed that 72 virgins await them in heaven, motivating them to die as

terrorists? Or at least, have they believed that paradise awaits those who kill and die in the name of *jihad*? And did George W. Bush indeed speak with God before he authorized the invasion of Iraq in 2003?[92] These claims may or may not be accurate, but they do indicate that senses of life after death may continue to have a powerful political effect on our lives before death. Your own sense of life after death and others' senses of life after death can easily get you killed today just as in the past.

Nonetheless, these senses may be lessening in their impact. Much more than in the past, we're on our own in our senses of life after death. In this individualized situation, some adhere all the more fervently to traditional religious senses of life after death; others come up with their own conceptions; others pay no mind at all to life after death, living for this world instead; and still others seek a sense of life after death through their fame or artistic creation or societal contribution or nationalism or children. Our ethnographic portraits of the United States, Japan, and China in the next three chapters very much show these patterns in these societies, but also show striking contrasts, as we will see.

How We Did This Book's Research

To understand senses of life after death today, the best procedure is simply to talk at length with as many people as possible in these three societies, to find out about their sense of life after death and how it may link to their lives before death. Theorizing about life after death may be of limited use in understanding what people actually think about life after death in a given society: you've got to talk to a range of different people. For many other kinds of investigations, this might not be so necessary—you could investigate weddings or funerals largely by going to many of these events and carefully noting what you see; you could investigate voting patterns or employment data by analyzing statistics; you could investigate memes by studying social media. But because senses of life after death are so private and individual today, these kinds of investigation are insufficient—instead, you must talk to a wide range of people about their lives and envisioned lives after death. One might ask, why not use statistical measures in investigating life after death? Why talk to a small number of people when questionnaires given to a larger number might give a broader answer? We do indeed make use of statistical surveys in this book whenever such measures are available. But senses of life after death are so private and amorphous today that the only way to fully get at them is to talk with people at length. You can't get at these subtleties through questionnaires but only by probing individual people in in-depth face-to-face conversations.

We interviewed at length several hundred people as to how they live their lives and what they think happens to them after they die. Over the past decade, Mathews has stuck his recorder into the faces of numerous Americans and Japanese he has met, asking "what do you think happens after you die?" In this book, he focuses most fully on the 52 interviews he conducted with Americans

in the summer of 2017, but also uses at points the 60 interviews he conducted in the preceding 8 years. In Japan he focuses primarily on the 57 interviews he conducted in the summer of 2018, but also uses at points the 66 interviews he conducted over the preceding nine years. Chinese interviews were conducted by Kwong and Yang and by students from Mathews' class "Meanings of Life": Kwong did the initial Chinese research for her M.Phil. thesis at the Chinese University of Hong Kong with 41 interviews conducted in 2014–2015; when she could no longer do research due to familial responsibilities, Yang took her place, conducting 32 interviews in 2018; we also use 24 interviews conducted by students over the past 9 years, with their permission.

American interviews were conducted primarily in the Denver area; Japanese interviews were conducted primarily in the Sapporo area; and Chinese interviews were conducted primarily in the Guangzhou area. Interviews in the Denver area were conducted by Mathews in English; interviews in the Sapporo area were conducted by Mathews in Japanese; interviews in the Guangzhou area were conducted by Kwong, Yang, and students, in Cantonese. These cities are inevitably idiosyncratic; but since senses of life after death have become so individualized, the particular characteristics of these cities do not greatly matter in this book's analysis, we maintain.

We found the people we interviewed through snowball sampling, asking those we interviewed if they knew of anyone else we might interview. This may lead to a lack of representativeness of the people portrayed in this book—our interviewees typically recommended to us people whom they felt would have something to say to us—but probably also makes this book more interesting in the vividness of what people told us. We worked to find a mix of people who would broadly reflect the religious mix of these three societies, but we did not seek a group that exactly mirrored statistically the larger population in these cities and societies—we were doing individual interviews rather than surveys, and that seemed unnecessary. Interviewees came from an array of different social-class backgrounds, and ages in these three societies, although we tended to focus somewhat more on those who were middle-aged or older because they had had more chances to think about matters of life after death, and thus had more to tell us, we found over the course of interviews. Interviewees ranged from teenagers to those in their nineties and were evenly divided between men and women. Among Americans, we interviewed a number of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos as well as Caucasians. Our interviewees in Japan were ethnic Japanese except for one of Korean background, and the Chinese interviews were all Han Chinese.

In the United States, it was relatively easy for Mathews to find evangelical Christians or spiritual seekers to speak with at length—this was a topic about which they were often eager to talk. Some atheists too were eager to discuss their value systems. But other atheists or agnostics, those who didn't have any sense of life after death and often didn't think about it at all, were more difficult; a few, in the course of an interview, shrugged or rolled their eyes, as if to say

"why on earth are we talking about this?" In Japan, the topic of life after death typically evoked a great deal of interest—as Mathews relates in chapter three, he was sometimes stopped by people at parties and at restaurants who, after overhearing an interview, wanted to talk about this topic with him. The fact that Mathews is an older white male probably shaped what he was told in the United States to some extent—with some men perhaps unwilling to fully admit vulnerabilities such as fear of death to him—and particularly in Japan, where an older, Japanese-speaking foreigner remains a novelty and speaking to such a person may be a minor status symbol. Probably a few of Mathews' Japanese interviewees later commented to family members or friends something like, "You know, I was talking to this foreign professor the other day about life after death, and he was asking me…"

Yang and Kwong found that in China, a significant number of potential interviewees refused to talk to them because death and what might lie thereafter were such disturbing topics. Death has long been a matter of taboo and avoidance in China. Yang and Kwong are young Chinese women, and older Chinese men, as reported in chapter four, would occasionally lecture them: "You shouldn't be asking about this. You should do research on a more positive topic!" But it also seems that many of the older Chinese felt a sense of endearment towards these young women and were eager to speak with them. A number of Mathews' interviews were with people he has known for decades in Japan and the United States; a few of Yang and Kwong's interviews were with relatives or family friends, but the majority were with people they were meeting for the first time. This too no doubt shaped the content of interviews to a degree, but not enough to significantly skew this book's analysis, we think.

Our interviews, typically ranging 90–120 minutes in length, have followed the same basic pattern. We began by asking, "If you died right now, what do you think would happen to you? What do you think happens after you die?…. How certain are you of this—what percent chance is there that this will actually happen to you?….How often do you think about what might happen to you after you die?….If you believe that there's no life after death, what do you think will be left of your existence after you die? What, if anything, do you think may last beyond your time on earth?"

Then we asked about people's lives—their work and family—and queried, "How does your sense of life after death relate to how you see and live your life now? Is there any relation?" Then we asked about our interviewees' views of their society: "What do most people in your society think about life after death? How your own views differ from theirs? If more people in your society held your view of life after death, would your society be a better place?"

Broad common patterns have been apparent in our interviews. In all three societies, women more than men adhere to senses of life after death, in our interviews and in accordance with statistical surveys[93]; this was true among our American, Japanese, and Chinese interviewees in common. As Walter notes, "all the evidence points toward more women than men in the Western

world believing in life after death,"[94] and this seems true beyond the West. He attributes this to women being more religious on average than men, and also more family-oriented, and more likely to have experienced loss, and also because women globally on average live on average up to a decade longer than men.[95] This is important: to a significant degree, in the three societies in which we interviewed, it is men who die earlier and women who grieve for them afterwards.

To a lesser degree than gender, age also seems to have an effect—those who were older in the United States and Japan were somewhat more likely to believe in life after death than those who were younger. This may be largely because those who are older have lost loved ones they seek to encounter once more, as well as because they may sense that they are coming closer to their own deaths. China, however, is an exception to this: many of those who were educated in the 1950s through 1970s have continued to be non-adherents to senses of life after death, due to their Marxist education in that era, whereas those educated in the 1990s and 2000s were somewhat more likely to think that there is life after death.

Social class and political orientation were a factor in the United States and China in their influence on senses of life after death but were not apparent in Japan. Many of those who believe most fervently in life after death in American interviews were evangelical Christians and often had politically conservative views; some, although certainly not all, were working-class. Many of those who believed most fervently in no life after death in China were members of the Communist Party, were heavily influenced by Marxist doctrines, and played more or less important governmental and political roles in society. In China, one's sense of life after death can be regarded as an expression of one's political stance, but at the individual level, this linkage is sometimes complicated, as we will see. In Japan, no such overt political or social differentiation between those who believed in life after death and those who did not was apparent; individuals were more idiosyncratic in their senses of life after death.

In this book, we have used our interviews extensively; a significant proportion of our ethnographic chapters consists of the words of the people we have interviewed. We have done this because we believe that, as much as possible, the people we've interviewed should speak for themselves—why should we speak for them when they can speak so earnestly and so eloquently about their lives and coming deaths, and what may lie thereafter? In an initial version of the manuscript, we offered a number of individuals' lengthy personal accounts in each chapter, but for the sake of readability, we have jettisoned that, to instead simply quote different individuals as to what they think happens to them after they die. We identify those we interviewed as, for example, "a retired business executive in her seventies," or "an evangelical Christian mother in her forties," in order to provide minimal crucial information concerning religion, gender, age, family status and occupation, factors that may influence their views of life after death; we leave out other information because it seemed extraneous to those views.

Aside from interviews, we have also used academic literature and mass media in each of these societies, as portrayed in the chapters to come. People in these societies live in a world of omnipresent media that undoubtedly more or less influences them in their senses of life after death; we have explored this both by investigating all we can find and also by following all influences and leads that our interviewees told us. We also use statistical surveys of life after death where available and contemporary scholarly analysis. This book's chapters have been written primarily by Mathews with Yang's and Kwong's input, except for chapter four, which was written by Yang and Kwong with Mathews' input. We use the pronoun "we" as our authorial voice for simplicity's sake, but the interviews in chapters two and three were conducted by Mathews and in chapter four by Yang and Kwong.

A comment on the terms we used in our questioning. When we asked our informants about life after death, we generally did not ask in terms of belief. In all three societies, we asked instead, "Do you think there's any life after death?" We did this because of anthropologists' skepticism concerning the relation of belief to actual experience. As Rodney Needham has written, "If…an ethnographer said that people believed something when he did not actually know what was going on inside them…then surely his account of them must…be very defective."[96] "Belief" is all the more questionable because, for Japanese and Chinese, religion has long been less a matter of faith than of practice: one need not "believe," but rather must practice the appropriate rituals at family graves or altars. "Belief" in a Western context is associated with Christianity and other monotheistic religions, rather than in China and Japan, where practice, what people actually do in ritual performance, has long been more important than statements of faith.[97] Despite this, however, in the individuated world of today, in which collective beliefs and practices have to a significant extent lost their power in these three societies, we need to return to individuals' own thoughts as to what happens after they die. While we generally avoided the terms "belief" or "believe" in our questioning, many interviewees in these three societies had little compunction about saying "I believe," whether to affirm their sense of life after death or to proclaim a lack of any such sense: "I believe that life after death is total nonsense!" We often use the term "believe" in our accounts of all three societies because this is the term our interviewees generally used.

Finally, let us offer a brief comment as to our own senses of life after death or its lack. Yang is a convert to the Bahá'í faith and believes that every human being will enter the same next world or afterlife regardless of whatever they may believe or not believe about life after death. Kwong is an agnostic but she is inclined to think that there just might be an afterlife in the form of spirits. Mathews thinks that in all likelihood there is nothing after death, but bearing in mind historical relativism, the fact that we are trapped within the dominant assumptions of our own age, he retains a sense that there may just possibly be more. As the reader has no doubt realized by now, unlike many books on life after death, we are not arguing about whether or not life after death actually exists; we stay away from

that issue except for very briefly in this book's closing pages. We ourselves think, along with so many Japanese in particular in this book, "Who knows? No one has ever come back from there to tell us!" We seek to understand senses of life after death in this extraordinary historical era and how they are linked to a life lived before death in the three societies we portray. At the same time, as human beings, we have often wondered ourselves what might ultimately happen to us after we die, as we collected this book's interviews, and wrote its chapters. After all, who knows?

Notes

1 See Inglehart et al. 2004: 353; see, for 2017 data, https://www.gallup-international.bg/en/36009/religion-prevails-in-the-world/.
2 Spellman 2014, 205.
3 See http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21629218-rapid-spread-christianity-forcing-official-rethink-religion-cracks.
4 Mathews 1996.
5 Nagel 1987, 100.
6 Zuckerman 2008, 57, 61.
7 Zuckerman 2008, 66, italics in original.
8 Zuckerman 2011, 2014, Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale 2016.
9 Bauman 1992, 31.
10 Berger 1969, 51.
11 Cave 2012.
12 Becker 1974, 26–27
13 Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 2015.
14 See https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002031/dealing-with-death%2C-chinas-biggest-taboo.
15 James [1907] 1981: 10.
16 Walter 2017: 13.
17 Zuckerman 2014, 193–196.
18 Dostoyevsky 2002 [1879–1880]; see Lewy 2008.
19 Smith 1974: 51.
20 Inglehart et al. 2004: 353.
21 Mathews, Lin and Yang 2017, 192.
22 Mathews, Lin and Yang 2017, 165.
23 Zuckerman 2014, 42.
24 See Zuckerman 2014, 34–36.
25 Bond 1992, 6.
26 Swanson 1968, 110.
27 Janes 2018, 6.
28 Davies 2005, 13.
29 Peoples et al. 2016.
30 Solomon et al. 2015, 64, 67.
31 Solomon et al. 2015, 77.
32 Bellah 2011, 102.
33 As quoted in Cooper 1992: 22, 30.
34 Murnane 1992, 45, 35.
35 Casey 2009, 31.
36 Atran and Henrich 2010, 8.
37 Atran 2002: 4.
38 Diamond 2012, 351–352.

39 Diamond 2012, 353.
40 Neusner 2000a, xiii.
41 Neusner 2000b, 43–44.
42 Goldenberg 1992, 98.
43 As quoted in Chilton 2000, 84–85.
44 As quoted in Segal 2004, 432t.
45 Obayashi 1992, 119.
46 Almond 2016, 134–135.
47 Almond 2016, 2, 4.
48 See Casey 2009, 225–242; Almond 2016, 129–130.
49 As quoted in Brockopp 2000: 60.
50 Brockopp 2000, 69.
51 Neusner 2000a, xvii.
52 Hallisey 2000, 6.
53 Neusner 2000a, xvii.
54 Trungpa and Freemantle 2000.
55 See Batchelor 1998, 2017.
56 Smith 2000, 98, 109.
57 Smith 2000, 114–115.
58 As quoted in Hallisey 2000, 1, 2.
59 Hopkins 1992, 154.
60 As quoted in Haught 1990, 98.
61 Taylor 2007: 3, 25.
62 Taylor 2007: 270, 374–76.
63 Berger 1969: 124.
64 Durkheim 1973: 145.
65 Giddens 1991: 74, 80–81.
66 Giddens 1991, 9, 201.
67 Kübler-Ross 1969; Walter 1994: 30.
68 Segal: 2004: 697–698.
69 Bruce 1996: 46–47, 144.
70 Segal 2004: 714.
71 Solomon et al. 2015, 103.
72 Solomon et al. 2015, 109.
73 Bauman 1992, 63.
74 See Covell 2008.
75 Bauman 1992, 172.
76 As quoted in Harari 2015, 33.
77 Becker 1971, 119–120.
78 Becker 1971: 125.
79 Becker 1971, 119.
80 Spellman 2014, 167, 168.
81 See Berger and Luckmann 1966, Bourdieu 1977, Strauss and Quinn 1994, Ortner 2006.
82 Berger and Luckman 1966: 61.
83 Walter 1996: 192.
84 Walter 1996: 27.
85 Beit-Hallahmi 2010 113, 114.
86 More 1975: 54–55.
87 In Ebrey 1993: 142–143.
88 Both these quotations are from Beit-Hallahmi 2010, 120.
89 Tucker 1978: 54.
90 Weber 1958 [1920–1921].
91 Weber 1958 [1920–1921]: 181.
92 See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/07/iraq.usa.

93 Walter 1996: 37–39.
94 Walter 1996, 37.
95 See https://ourworldindata.org/why-do-women-live-longer-than-men.
96 Needham 1972, 2.
97 See for Japan, Reader 1991, and for China, Watson 1988

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2

THE UNITED STATES

Life After Death in a Christian/ Post-Christian Nation

The American Panorama

The United States is an outlier among developed-world countries in its religiosity and in its adherence to belief in life after death. Over 81% of Americans claimed in the 2004 World Values Survey to believe in life after death, a higher figure than can be found in almost any other developed country in the world.[1] More recently, a Pew Research Center survey showed that, as of 2021, 73% of Americans believed in heaven, broadly defined as an afterlife of any kind.[2] Islamic and Christian nations such as Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Nigeria have rates of belief in life after death of 85% or above; but in European societies such as France and Germany, and in Japan as well, half or less of respondents say they believe in life after death.[3] The broad global trend, with the United States as a great exception, is that the more affluent a society is, the less its belief in life after death.

The United States has become less religious in recent years, surveys show. The number of religiously unaffiliated Americans increased from 16.1% to 22.8% and the number of Christians declined from 78.4% to 70.6% between 2007 to 2014.[4] A 2018–2019 survey shows that just 65% of Americans identify themselves as Christians, and 26% describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular"[5]; a 2021 survey showed that 63% of Americans self-identified as Christians, while 29% described themselves as "nones."[6] There has thus been a quite rapid decline in Christianity in the United States, but there are still only small percentages of non-believers in religion as compared to other developed-world societies. Many educated Americans don't fully realize the extent of American religiosity, since they live within secular lifestyle and occupational worlds, but most Americans are indeed still religious and do indeed believe in life after death. Key to understanding the United States in senses of life

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after death is that (1) the United States remains remarkably religious compared to most other developed-world societies, and (2) the United States has been moving away from a predominant belief in Christianity to an array of more varied beliefs in life after death, or no beliefs at all in life after death.

The United States was founded by religious settlers: the Massachusetts Bay Colony was created in the 17th century by Puritans, Pennsylvania by Quakers, and Maryland by Catholics. The United States has been characterized by the belief that it is "a divinely appointed 'redeemer nation'" from the Puritans onward and that God had singled out Americans with a divine mission.[7] Americans have often seen themselves as offering the promise of redemption and salvation to all the world, a belief that has long colored American attitudes towards the world at large.

American religion has been most essentially a matter of the individual's personal relation to God. This is most apparent in the revivalism that has been so much a part of American history. As Harold Bloom has written, "Revivalism, in America, tends to be the perpetual shock of the individual discovering yet again what she and he always have known, which is that God loves her and him on an absolutely personal and indeed intimate basis"[8]: a personal basis that we will see in the pages that follow, with some Americans having direct encounters with God.

There has long been a diversity of views as to who exactly this God may be, a God that may or may not be the same for all Americans. The government in the United States has attempted to shape senses of life after death among its citizens only to a minimal degree, with its civil religion's invocation of God,[9] but this has been a very broad conception of God. The founders of the United States, by most accounts, were not advocates of a particular Christian God but rather of a broader Enlightenment God—the Treaty of Tripoli in 1797 stated that "the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."[10] The modern official motto, established in a 1956 law, is "In God We Trust"; but whether an evangelical Christian and a Unitarian—not to mention a Buddhist, a Muslim and an agnostic—would agree that this is one and the same God remains an open question.

This fervent sense of American religiosity has historically lessened over the past 150 years. Darwinism led to agnosticism and atheism becoming viable options for Americans by the late 19th century.[11] But despite the growth of secularism—among intellectuals in the U.S. today, religious belief seems far more the exception than the rule—the United States does indeed remain a remarkably religious nation. As Timothy Beal wrote in 2008,

> Beholding the religious landscape of America today, most of us—and nearly all the rest of the world—are struck by…the prevalence of a rather uniquely American evangelical consciousness that privileges conversion, religious emotion, and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and which

> links religious faith to particular moral and political values to be promoted in the larger society.[12]

American evangelicalism and its resurgence, particularly following the sense held by many commentators in the 1950s and 1960s that the advance of secularism was inevitable in the United States, has been remarkable; but this seems to be receding in the United States of late, although whether this is momentary or permanent remains to be seen. At the same time, a range of other beliefs have entered into the American pantheon, such as Buddhism and Islam as well as an array of beliefs known as New Age, derived from various Eastern religions and other sources, first emerging in the United States and elsewhere in the 1970s. One survey in the 1990s reported that 28% of American baby-boomers "say they 'believe' in reincarnation,"[13] a finding that seems quite remarkable within the context of earlier American eras in all their focus on Christianity.

We conducted research in Denver, Colorado, one of the more multi-religious and secular cities in the United States; had these interviews been done in Dallas or even in nearby Colorado Springs, evangelical Christian voices might have been more predominant. Denver and especially its neighboring city Boulder (at which a few of the interviews in this chapter were conducted) have been regarded as American centers for the practice of Buddhism. Nonetheless, Denver is hardly an American outlier—the array of American voices found in this chapter can be found across the United States. We have sought in this chapter to offer not so much a representative sample than a diversity of Americans speaking about their senses of life after death. This chapter focuses not only on 52 interviews Mathews conducted in the summer of 2017 but also makes use of 60 interviews he conducted in eight preceding years. Interviewees were found through snowball sampling. We interviewed people of different social classes and ethnicities, including Latinos, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans, and equal numbers of men and women. In terms of religious beliefs, we interviewed Christians as well as Jews and Buddhists, and of course agnostics and atheists. We interviewed people in their twenties up to their nineties. In interviews with younger Americans, thoughts of life after death sometimes seemed removed from what they thought about in their actual lives; among those who were older, this was much less likely to be the case, and so we focus more on them in the pages that follow.

The people we interviewed can be divided into four groups of equal size, broadly fitting into American ranges of religious beliefs and senses of life after death. The first group is American evangelical Christians. The second group consists of more liberal Christians, typically belonging to or having once belonged to mainstream American Christian denominations, in their reshaping of the Christian message to make it attuned to their own experience. The third group consists of adherents to other conceptions of life after death, whether those linked to Buddhism, to New Age ideas, or their own individual conceptions. The fourth group comprises non-adherents to any sense of life after death, some

of whom simply gave no thought at all to matters of life after death, and others who strongly believed that life after death was an illusion. In the pages that follow, we explore each of these groups in turn.

Evangelical Christian Believers in Heaven

A relatively large proportion of Americans say that they believe in the Christian promise of eternal salvation, but there are varying interpretations of what this may entail. Evangelical Christians—those who believe that the essence of being Christian is salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ—were remarkable among the people we interviewed in often maintaining that their path was the only true path (only atheists among those we interviewed in the United States were similarly convinced as to the universal validity of their views). The evangelical Christians we interviewed believed to a greater or lesser degree that the only path towards salvation and eternal life in heaven is faith in God through His Son Jesus Christ, as specified in Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." As one evangelical believer, a salesman in his forties, told us, "In the Bible it says that there is only one sin that's not forgiven, and that is not acknowledging Jesus as our Lord and Savior. If you haven't done that, you will not go to heaven." A person might live an extraordinarily altruistic life, but that would not be enough to get her into heaven, according to believers like this man: all that matters is surrendering oneself to God through Jesus Christ.

Almost all the Christians we interviewed maintained that the truth of the Christian message was obvious to them through their own personal experience. As a librarian in her seventies told us, echoing others, "I've had some miraculous things happen to me that are only because of God working in my life; this is why I have faith in God's presence." Some of the evangelical Christians we interviewed were born into their faith, while others were saved at critical points in their lives. As an automobile mechanic in his sixties said, "I accepted Christ in the garage of a friend of mine one evening, after my first divorce." Even then, however, he was not truly saved:

> I went to a church that wasn't right. Lots of stuff done in the name of Christ is like a carnival act—it's blasphemy. Christ has been so lowered—the average Christian doesn't have a clue. Yes, they *might* be able to get to heaven despite their church, but I don't know…

Several of the evangelical Christians we interviewed did not even go to church, one because the pastor had been caught in a sex scandal, another because she felt that the music was too loud—"It's hard to tell if that brings in more people for Christ or for the entertainment"—and another simply because the family had moved to a different locale than the church they had earlier attended. What was key for these believers was not the church but their faith, which they found

continually replenished through their readings of the Bible. This was lonely, they acknowledged, but entirely legitimate—their personal relationship with God and Christ was all that truly mattered, they felt, with church attendance more the trappings of their faith than its essence.

But most of the evangelical Christians we interviewed did indeed regularly attend a church, which they found to be an essential social forum not just for probing more deeply into their faith through the teachings of their minister and other church figures but also for being with their fellow Christians—something they felt to be indispensable in a world all too secular and alien. Despite the fact that 60-some percent of Americans claim themselves to be Christian, as we earlier saw, to invoke Jesus Christ and eternal salvation in many American social settings would mark a person as "strange." One Christian proselytizer we interviewed noted that when he mentioned his beliefs, his friends would dismiss him: "Uh-oh, Bill's going to preach again!" The American social world is secular and relativistic—in most social contexts one cannot say, "I know the truth, and I want you to know it too" without being disdained or ridiculed. As a Christian mother in her fifties said,

> I believe that as our country has become more secular, people's ideas about an afterlife have changed. Religions that say, 'if you don't believe this, you're not going to heaven,' are seen as judgmental. Young people today want to be anything but judgmental.

This seems true not just for young people but for Americans in general, at least in terms of religion.

Indeed, dealings with non-evangelicals were fraught for these evangelical Christians because their most fundamental belief about reality was not shared by their non-believing fellows. A fervent believer in her seventies, a retired accountant, told us,

> I have a lot of friends who aren't believers. I have good times with my friends who don't believe, but we just don't have much to talk about once we've talked about the weather, work, "what did you do today?" You reach a limit, because they're dead spiritually….Yes, if my friends don't accept what the Bible says, they're going to hell. This is what the Bible says: it's an absolute….There's always a minority of true believers in every era: that's the way it's always been. At the flood, in Noah's time, just eight righteous people were found and saved. Yes, I'm 100% sure that I will be among the saved….I don't think it's possible that I'll find out that nothing happens after I die, because what He wrote in the Bible doesn't agree with that.

While this certainty of the inerrant truth of the Bible and of her own Christian salvation gives her great spiritual comfort, it also makes it difficult for this woman in her daily life because many of the people around her are not believers.

She is going to heaven for an eternity, she believes, while they are going to hell for an eternity; in this very brief earthly sojourn, they can pass their time with one another with pleasantries, but that's all.

In the United States today, a land of multiple beliefs and non-beliefs, should evangelical Christians attempt to save non-believers and risk social ridicule, or should they keep quiet about their beliefs? How much should a Christian stick her neck out to try to save her secular fellows, and how much should she keep quiet, keeping her secular friends in this world but also perhaps dooming them to the eternal misery of hell? This woman told us that she has sometimes discussed the Word of God with her secular friends; without her intervention, they might forever burn in hell, she contends. "Yes, if they're interested, I'll tell them—tell them that if they recognize that they're sinners, there's an answer for that. But I can't save everybody, or even half the people I know." The automobile mechanic said after our interview, "I want to share eternal life in heaven with everyone I know: We're here to share the Gospel. I pray that this will touch your heart. I don't think you've made a firm decision on where you want to be. I pray that you'll really think about this!" He was one of several evangelical Christians over the years who attempted to convert Mathews to evangelical Christianity in the course of our interviews.

However, other evangelical Christians we interviewed were more reluctant about attempting to convert others to their views. As a former corporate employee in her fifties said,

> I believe in Jesus Christ as my savior; that's what decides where I go after this life. I'm not judging anyone else badly because they don't believe that. Maybe they have a different path to reach an afterlife. But this is key for me. I don't get to earn my way to heaven through good deeds. My faith says that people who believe in Jesus Christ will go to heaven; but it would be foolish for me to say that the person who has been following Buddha has no opportunity for an afterlife. We're all God's children!

She believes strongly in her own spiritual path, but also senses that she shouldn't interfere with those of other paths. This woman has many friends who are non-believers, some of whom have told us how much they value her friendship. This may be largely because she does not attempt to convert them. As she tells us, "maybe they have a different path"—who can judge others for their own spiritual journeys?—and "we're all God's children": a loving God will in any case forgive and welcome us all, she implies.

Similarly, a Christian real estate agent in her forties said,

> I don't understand the mentality of, 'You have to be saved! Come to where I am!' I don't feel I have the right to say that. My place is not trying to convert other people. But I don't know how to see that: from God's perspective, that may be a cop-out.

This woman strongly maintains her faith but still hesitates as to how much she should proselytize her friends; around them, she generally keeps quiet, she said. If the Christian spiritual realm is what is ultimately real—the eternity of heaven or hell, as against the brief span of our earthly lives—then of course she should proselytize, as the ultimate kindness she (or more exactly in her view, God working through her) can practice towards her fellow human beings. But if that realm might not be real, or might be only one reality among many potential after-death realities, then it makes the most sense to keep quiet—to respect one's fellows in their own personal paths, and not try to force one's own path upon them.

The internet is replete with a range of views on how evangelical Christians should deal with non-believers. Some websites proclaim the primacy of the Lord:

> Unbelievers…are people who we want to help know the Lord Jesus Christ. Every lost person deserves to know they are lost and how they can receive the mercy of God….We should look for every opportunity to tell the reason we have hope in Christ.[14]

Others advocate more caution and humility:

> So when a believer shouts, "You will go to hell!" to a non-believer, what does one suppose God thinks of that believer? It is not our place to condemn. Only an ignorant person would assume that all those who don't believe in God will be damned….If a believer assumes that a neighbor who doesn't go to church has already booked a ticket to hell, then one ought to know that those we condemn might…be the ones who are actually right in the eyes of God.[15]

The latter view may be increasingly prevalent in an ever-more relativistic and pluralistic American world. A 2015 Pew survey showed that slightly over half of evangelical Christians believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life."[16] But if heaven is seen as being open to those who are not Christian, then why believe in Christianity, since one may go to heaven anyway?

This conflict over ultimate spiritual realities is most difficult when it comes to families. Two generations ago, the large majority of married couples in the United States shared a common religious denomination and attended a common church. Today this is less and less the case; as was reported in 2015, "Among Americans who have gotten married since 2010, nearly four-in-ten (39%) report that they are in religiously mixed marriages, compared with 19% among those who got married before 1960."[17] This seems to indicate not a greater degree of tolerance in general in American marriages but rather the growing irrelevance of religious belief, with numerous surveys showing that politics has supplanted religion as a major point of contention in marriages in the United States; we ourselves heard, "I could marry a Catholic/Buddhist/atheist, but I could never marry a Republican/Democrat!"

In our American interviews, we encountered a number of couples where the husband and wife believed altogether different things about what happened to them after they died. Often this didn't seem to matter much; but among evangelical Christians, this was particularly difficult and painful. We did not directly interview married couples where one spouse was an evangelical Christian and the other a non-believer; such an interview would no doubt have been fraught with tension. Indirectly, however, we often heard about such marriages. As one evangelical Christian woman in her twenties said,

> My mom is a Christian and my dad isn't. And that's hard: the most important thing in her life she can't share with someone she loves. We've been praying for him. I have no doubt in my mind that he won't eventually become a Christian.

Those who are not Christian often have a different take on the spirituality of their spouses. As an atheist in his eighties said of his late Christian wife, "I'm 100% certain that there's no life after death. But I don't say that those who believe, like my late wife, are mistaken—I don't go there." Christians may pray for non-Christians to join their faith and the prospective afterlife, but non-Christians like this man, and many Christians too, avoid discussion of such matters, for it can only lead to discord.

This tension was also apparent in relation to one's children. As the Christian mother in her fifties told us,

> My husband and I attend a Bible church; my kids don't attend as much as I'd like them to. I have a son who thinks he's transgender. He's rejecting Christian faith, and yet he is kind, loving, and caring. I pray that God will put someone in his life who will reopen Christian faith to him. It's hard. He's been communist anarchist atheist transgender, as far from his family as possible. I told him one day, "I know you think that if there's one thing I could change about you, it would be the transgender. But no, the one thing I would change would be the atheist." He was surprised by that. But his relationship with God is his journey. He's eighteen—I'm patient!.... My children think they've been indoctrinated. But I keep the door open. My parents instilled in me a sense of right and wrong, and a sense that faith has a real place in your life, and gratitude for the country that you live in and what it's provided. I've tried very hard to instill that same message in my children, but my kids just aren't there.

This woman is facing the cultural diversity of the United States today through her own children and their refusal to accept the message of God and Christ that she has tried to teach them. The problem she faces is what we earlier saw—in a society increasingly based on the sacrosanct nature of individual choice, a religion such as Christianity offering universal moral judgment may seem unenticing.

All she can do is be patient, she tells us; but in an America that is becoming less and less Christian, her patience may not ever bear fruit.

The evangelical Christians we interviewed often sounded beleaguered, dismayed by the society they lived in. As the earlier-quoted accountant said,

> I'm really sorry when I look at America today. God's been dumped. When that happens, punishment. The scriptures describe a God of love and compassion. But He is also a God of fierce anger. He wants love and obedience, and when it's not given, He's going to judge that.

As the automobile mechanic said, "Our country was founded on JudeoChristian principles. But we've lost touch with that, we're caught up in moral degradation." Other evangelicals were somewhat broader in their views; as the mother in her fifties quoted above told us, "The US wouldn't necessarily be better if everyone was Christian….But the world would be better if everyone believed in God." Evangelical Christians tend to be politically conservative in the United States, as is well-known. The reasons for this are complex, as scholars and critics have depicted.[18] But our interviews depicted one key aspect of this conservatism: the despair that many of the evangelical Christians we spoke with felt towards a society they saw as growing increasingly secular—increasingly ignoring the spiritual and moral message they have based their lives upon.

Their despair towards the society they lived in was leavened by the sense that they would be going to heaven; but heaven was a vague concept for the evangelical Christians we spoke with. As the accountant in her seventies told us,

> There aren't too many scriptures that tell us about heaven. It's going to be wonderful, that's all we know. We don't know much about heaven, but we know Him and He says 'Trust Me.' Heaven means being face to face with the Lord.

As the mother in her fifties said,

> As for heaven, I don't think that we can even begin to comprehend, because we can't comprehend God's love to begin with. We simply know that it will be beautiful. Heaven is where there's no sin, no fear, just glory and prayer forever more. It's indescribable.

As a teacher in her forties said, "My soul in the presence of God is heaven…If I close my eyes and think about heaven, what I think of is peace of mind, peace of my soul—being in step with God." An evangelical businesswoman in her fifties expanded on this:

> What we were taught in Sunday-school class, angels with wings in white clouds and the devil with a pitchfork—I don't believe it's that. As a

> Christian, hell means separation from God permanently. Heaven, for me, is to be free of our worldly struggles and strife; it's being one with God. One description I've read is beauty—colors we've never seen, music of the kind you've never heard on earth, and an extraordinary sense of peacefulness.

An evangelical real estate agent in her forties brought in an element of subjectivity to her vision of heaven:

> I think heaven is the environment each person would be best in. I can't imagine that with the differences in people, that heaven would be the same for everyone. Each person has a different heaven; but each person's heaven might be with other people.

Do we each, then, imagine our own heaven, in our own private, even solipsistic worlds? She could not answer: "This is all up to God."

Clearly, there are problems understanding what heaven might actually be. This is partly because God is impossible for we humans to imagine except in human terms: Can we be "face to face with the Lord" or "in step with God"? Does God walk? Does the Lord have a face? It is also because we human beings are compelled to think in terms of time, and of events taking place within time. "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens," proclaimed a Talking Heads song from 1979: we humans living within time cannot possibly comprehend a world presumably beyond time. Philosophers such as Shelly Kagan have speculated that immortality would be unbearable[19]; but Christians such as those we interviewed responded that we humans cannot possibly imagine what heavenly immortality would be like, and so we cannot make such a judgment.

In 2021, as was earlier mentioned, 73% of Americans said that they believed in heaven,[20] however they may imagine such a state. Evangelical Christian writers have worked hard to portray heaven in an appealing way. Particularly remarkable is Randy Alcorn's bestselling book *Heaven*, which goes on at enormous length about what exactly heaven will be like. It is a place, Alcorn argues on the basis of very large extrapolations from biblical scripture, where you can pursue sports, eat food, and have sex, albeit only with your spouse, in a world infinitely better than this one. He begins his book by quoting an English vicar who says, when asked about what will happen to him after he dies, replies, "Well, if it comes to that, I suppose I shall enter into eternal bliss, but I really wish you wouldn't bring up such depressing subjects."[21] Then Alcorn goes on to an elaborate portrait of heaven:

> The Grand Canyon, the Alps, the Amazon rain forests, the Serengeti Plains—these are rough sketches of the New Earth [eternal heaven]…We will find rock formations more spectacular than Yosemite's, peaks higher than the Himalayas, forests deeper and richer than anything we see in the Pacific Northwest.[22]

"I expect our bodies will be good-looking, but not with a weight-lifting, artificial-implant, skin-tuck, tanning-booth sort of beauty.…Our new bodies, I expect, will have a natural beauty that won't need cosmetics or touch-ups."[23] "Those who for reasons of allergies, weight problems, or addictions can't regularly consume peanuts, chocolate, coffee, and wine…may look forward to enjoying them on the New Earth [heaven]."[24] "We'll maintain distinct genders in our resurrection bodies.…If human marriage existed on the New Earth, by all means I would expect it to include sex.…But our romance with Christ will far exceed any earthly romance."[25] Alcorn's vision also extends beyond a heaven resembling the world we now enjoy: "If we will travel to other galaxies, will we also be able to travel in time? Even though I believe we'll live in time, God is certainly capable of bending time and opening doors in time's fabric for us."[26]

Most books by evangelical Christian writers, such as Billy Graham's *The Heaven Answer Book*, are less florid than Alcorn's, arguing, as does Graham, that without the meaning given by heaven and eternal life, we are all hopeless and lost:

> The main difference between earth and Heaven is that this world has been corrupted by sin—but Heaven has not.…The difference between Heaven and earth is that Jesus Christ left Heaven's glory and came to this sin-infested earth for one reason: to make our eternal salvation possible.[27]

But we cannot know what Heaven is like: "It is part of our human nature to want to satisfy our imaginations about Heaven, but God has His reasons for giving us only a taste of His eternal dwelling."[28] Alcorn and Graham, although strikingly contrasting in how far they are willing to go in depicting heaven for their readers, together describe a universe utterly different from that in which American secularists live. Mathews happened, on a long airplane flight, to have read alternately Billy Graham's book and Neil DeGrasse Tyson's *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*,[29] and was struck by the radical disjuncture of the different realities they depict, with absolutely nothing in common: an unimaginable heaven depicted by Biblical scripture, as opposed to an unimaginable universe created by physical forces. It is extraordinary that Americans living in more or less common professional and social worlds can inhabit such different cosmological realities. The person sitting in the cubicle next to you at work may live in a different universe than you, even though you may say hello to her every morning.

Some of the more fervent evangelical Christians we interviewed believed not just in heaven but in hell. The automobile mechanic said,

> What is hell? I believe that there's definitely burning. The spirit never dies, so this will go on through eternity. I believe that God did this because He so cares about humans that he wants the fear of hell in their hearts so that they wouldn't even think about denying Him.

But most Christians we interviewed did not believe in hell as a place of fire and brimstone; rather, hell, to them, was simply the absence of God. As the real estate agent told us, "As for hell, I don't believe in it. The teachings of the Bible say there's a hell, but I just have a really hard time visualizing that God would do that."

Her dismissal of hell is based on her sense that a loving God would never do such a thing to human beings, however much they may have erred in their lives. We pressed her, asking if someone like Hitler might be in hell, but even then she demurred, saying that God would bring such a person to see the awful error of their ways. Her skepticism about hell echoes the findings of some scholars surveying contemporary religious belief. Tony Walter writes that today, "Hell is…a statistically deviant belief,"[30] in that many Christians in the developed world no longer adhere to it, even though they do continue to believe in heaven. Some 62% of Americans, according to the 2021 Pew Survey cited earlier, do claim to believe in hell, but a majority of younger Americans disbelieve. As Steve Bruce has noted, if hell is not believed in, there is much less need to proselytize.[31] With no literal hell, non-believers cannot easily be convinced to become Christian, since they may say, "I live without God in my life now and I'm perfectly happy. Why should I worry about no God in any afterlife?"

Indeed, if there is no hell, the need to convert others largely evaporates and the *raison d'etre* for adhering to evangelical Christianity is shaken as well. Non-evangelical Americans might well ask, "why believe in Christianity if heaven is unimaginable and hell is unbelievable?" But for some of the evangelical Christians we interviewed, this dismissive attitude would merely echo what they already felt—that they were a minority of true believers destined for heaven in a secular and sinful America bound for hell. This is what the accountant quoted above eloquently maintained. Other evangelical Christians we interviewed leave more room for alternative paths—their own path to heaven was through Jesus Christ, they felt, but there may, perhaps, be other paths: a view which may perhaps have to some degree diluted their evangelical faith in heaven, but which better enabled them to live within a pluralistic American society.

Liberal JudeoChristians Beyond Heaven

In this section we consider those who continue to believe in God and follow a JudeoChristian path in some sense, but who do not unquestionably believe in salvation through Christ, or even, necessarily, that Christ was the son of God; nor do they necessarily believe in heaven or hell as their fate after death.

Many considered themselves Christian on the basis of the religious world in which they had grown up, a world to which they have more or less stayed connected. Several older Christians we interviewed continued to attend church—not evangelical churches but more mainstream Christian denominations. In one Lutheran's words, a former designer in her seventies,

> I go to church because the Christian message means a lot to me. So does the community: I really like the minister.…I don't believe in every word of the Bible, but I believe in God.…I believe that I will probably go to heaven when I die.

Her views were probably representative of many of the Americans—albeit an aging and somewhat diminishing percentage of the population—who continue to attend mainline Protestant American churches. But more of the liberal Christians we interviewed were no longer regular churchgoers. A retired financial planner in her seventies said:

> I was raised an Episcopalian, went to church every Sunday for big chunks of my life. I like the liturgy. I don't go to church regularly now. Organized religion has gotten too political.…Yes, I can say that I don't believe that Christ is the Son of God. But I believe in God, I strongly believe in God. God is in all of us, and all of us are in God. God is Nature. But God is also personal. Yes, I pray a lot. The prayer I pray the most is thank you, thank you for letting me have the life I have had.

She believes in life after death "over half…I'll say 63%!" as did most of the liberal Christians we interviewed, although most paid little heed to Christian conceptions of heaven. A college professor in his fifties maintained that "everyone who senses from time to time a shiver down their spine" at the world's wonder will go to heaven. Like many in this group, he was heavily invested in religious faith as a youth—he was once in training to be a Catholic priest—but today his religiosity is personal rather than institutional.

Some of the people we interviewed had as children attended Sunday School—Christian teaching provided to children in the United States while their parents are in church or at home—but they had left the Christian faith as adults. As a former Christian in her sixties said,

> I remember my Sunday School class when I was eight years old. My teacher said, "You have to believe in Jesus Christ as your personal savior if you want to go to heaven. Otherwise you will go to hell." And I asked her about those people who didn't know about Jesus, and she said that was too bad. And that seemed so unfair, so I began to question all this.

A non-believer in her eighties discussed how her now-adult son questioned his Sunday School teacher:

> We sent my son to Sunday School when he was little, and were told that he was interrupting the teacher, saying, "How can that be?" They asked me to speak to him. We did: "Your teacher wants to tell you about the Bible, and it would be polite of you to not challenge her." He said, "Do you believe

> that Jesus was the son of God?" I said, "No.…And you don't have to go to Sunday School anymore." That was the end of it.

A retired psychotherapist in her seventies told us,

> When I was a child, my parents both taught Sunday School and fought nonstop as soon as we left the building. I thought: "These people don't make sense"….Because of the insanity in my growing-up years, I knew that there had to be more.

A writer in her forties told us, "When I was a kid, I was evangelical—I went through that. I entered when I was 12: I was done with it by the time I was 20. I don't see the holy in American Christianity." A lapsed Catholic in his sixties, a secondary-school teacher, told us of how, even when he was a child, the church seemed separate from his own spirituality:

> I grew up in the Catholic Church community, but it seemed strange—my private relationship with God was better than what it was in church. I could always feel God outside the church, but you couldn't talk about that at confession: the priest wouldn't know how to respond.

A number of the Christian questioners we interviewed have found havens of institutional Christian religiosity that can encompass and embrace their expanded spiritual searching. We asked the writer in her forties whether she considered herself a Christian. She responded,

> Am I a Christian? That's a difficult question. My son, when he was little, would ask me, "Do you believe in God?" I'd tell him, "It kind of depends on what you mean by belief. And it depends on what you mean by God." Finally, I learned to say "yes," just to give a contrast with my husband. I am a Christian; I've been a member of an Episcopalian congregation for many years. It's an enormously important part of my life….To be an Episcopalian, you may not need to believe that Christ is the son of God. Episcopalians are united around something called the Book of Common Prayer—if you can pray from this book, you're an Episcopalian. I tell my priest that I have no problem with the creed, except for the first two words, "We believe." She laughs.

This woman is fortunate to have found an accepting Christian haven, as she readily acknowledges. Similarly, the retired psychotherapist, after much familial trauma in her youth, spent ten years in a Jesuit spiritual direction program in order to find her own path to God, a program that welcomed her in her spiritual searching. Now she too attends a liberal Christian church, but most important to her is her experience of God in her daily life:

> Why do most people not experience God? Well, I wanted that experience so badly, because of the craziness all around me in my earlier life. But for most people, why pursue this? This is not an easy path—it scared the crap out of me for the longest time. God isn't as clear as the evangelicals make it. I've been allergic to churches because I've seen too much. I do believe in the Bible, the spirit of it. It's just the literal I have trouble with. Yes, I am Christian, but to me it's not about religion, it's about the experience of God. God—He, She, It—talks to me, it's so clear, about what I should do in my life.

Her experience of God and other beings is the basis of her belief: not faith in scripture, but what she herself has seen and heard in what she feels to be communication with the divine. Evangelical Christians too talk to God, of course, as the anthropologist Tanya Lurhmann has intensively explored,[32] but this is generally within the bounds of the Bible and its teachings; for liberal Christians such as this women, on the other hand, God is a matter of one's own personal experience apart from Biblical guidance.

For the secondary-school teacher quoted earlier, the crisis in the Catholic Church caused him to altogether lose his faith in the Christian message. He continued going to Catholic Mass into his adulthood but eventually left. As he told us,

> One of my buddies when I was a kid ended up killing himself: he'd been sexually abused by one of the priests in our parish. I'm still trying to reconcile the church as an institution that is completely corrupt, versus the reality of people who are suffering and trying to find redemption, salvation, and forgiveness.

He left the church in the wake of his friend's suicide. As he told us, "Yes, I believe in what Jesus represented. But is he the son of God? I don't know. Did he rise from the dead? I don't know. I'm following a spiritual path on my own now." Like a number of the lapsed Christians we interviewed, he expressed regret at the lost religious community he had once experienced but felt that at present there was no going back.

Almost all of the liberal Christians we interviewed felt that there was life after death, but they had different views as to whether it involved a God and heaven, as several liberal Christians we interviewed maintained, or rather something more impersonal. As the retired psychotherapist said,

> After we die, I think we have eternal life. But what form it takes, I don't know. I know tons of people who've had experiences with people on the other side. As to whether it's heaven or reincarnation—I don't want to go there. It seems there's a choice we get to make….If I was on my deathbed, and I realized that nothing happens after I die, would it make a difference

> to me in my life? Yes and no. No because I have to keep doing what I'm doing. But yes, profoundly, because it is so deep in me to feel a connection to God, whatever God is. If there's nothing beyond, no vastness, it would be painful. But maybe God has nothing to do with life after death; we can't know. So I croak: so what! But if you ask me what percent chance I will survive after this life in some form, I think the chances are 100%.

With the view that we may choose between heaven and reincarnation, she is moving well beyond standard Christian conceptions of life after death, to depict a life after death that seems closer to some strands of New Age thought; but her certainty that there will indeed be a life after death may echo her Christian background. Others we interviewed were less certain but still felt that something remains, whether individual or collective. As the Episcopalian writer said,

> If I died now, I have no idea what might happen. How would I know? We are the grass, we are stardust recycled. Is there a coherent me that continues? Who knows? But if there is, it will be different than I expect, much different and stranger. I do believe in an ongoing love. It is a love in the universe: we would not exist without love. I feel very strongly that something goes on—above 50%—for some period of time, maybe not eternally. But I have no grasp of what it may be. Wouldn't it be cool if our consciousness breaks up but still goes on? All the time I'm sensing there is more than this. And I'm trying all the time to integrate this into my life. My ability to interact with the divine has an enormous impact on how I live my life day to day.

As for life after death, she says what many American non-evangelical Christians say: "How would I know?" To her, life after death seems less important than the universe's ongoing love, which she thinks of as the divine. This love is not, for her, the love of Christ redeeming human beings, but the fact of existence itself. Her views lead to a truly ultimate question: Why do we exist? Is it because of cosmic love: the ultimate goodness of the universe? Or are we alive and conscious because of sheer dumb chance? This is probably the deepest, most mysterious question of all, a question to which we will return in this book's last chapter.

The former-Catholic teacher took on a similarly hopeful but uncertain tone in expressing his views to us. Unlike most others in this section, he had, by the time we interviewed him, wholly left the Catholicism to which he had been devoted through much of his life, both as a child and as an adult. But he continued to search:

> Our beliefs are so narrow, when you open them up in terms of what could possibly be! I was recently reading a magazine article about how "we are not alone," saying that there are other beings out there in the universe.

> If that's true, then that really shakes up the whole story! If I died now, what would happen to me? I don't know. I hope for consciousness, something on the other side; part of me just intuitively hopes there's more.

Another former Catholic, a retired teacher in her seventies, said,

> Yes, I do believe in an afterlife—you go back into the oneness of life. But to describe it beyond that: I don't know! I'll have a strong sense of a person, whom I haven't thought of for a long time, then, a few days later get word that they've died. I've had that too often not to realize that that was the person's spirit trying to contact me before they go on. Do they then cease to exist? I don't think so. I truly think that we go to something higher. But I'm just guessing! In a way it doesn't make any difference. But there must be a purpose for why we're here; otherwise we'd be like animals, just living our lives.

The believers in the Christian heaven earlier discussed, although they could hardly envision heaven, nonetheless knew that it was there waiting for them. However, the people in this section believe that while there is probably something beyond the grave, what that may be is profoundly unclear. Still, the dominant view of the liberal Christians we interviewed was that there must be a life after death in order to make sense of this world, even if what it is remains oblique. For these liberal Christians, life after death was not a matter of following an established doctrine but rather of speculation—using one's limited mind to try to somehow grasp an unlimited God and cosmos.

In our interviews, we were quite surprised by the number of liberal Christians we interviewed who reported that they personally encountered God in their lives. Mathews vividly remembers driving home from interviews with his mind spinning from the Christian mystics he had just spoken with, those who saw God in the trees and in the sky, and wondering if he himself from his perch on the interstate highway might somehow see the same (it is perhaps fortunate that he didn't, for the sake of traffic safety). On reflection, our snowball sampling method no doubt led to a degree of overemphasis on individuality. By asking the people we interviewed, "Do you know of anyone who might have something interesting to tell us about life after death?" we have probably wound up interviewing a relatively smaller number of what might be considered to be ordinary mainstream Christians, and a larger number of Christians following their own individual paths. Some of the people quoted above are somewhat unusual in an American context, but they do reflect a larger trend. The departure of American Christians from mainline Protestant denominations is a major and dramatic development in contemporary American religion, as is often noted[33]; this has more recently been happening not just among mainstream denominations but among evangelical Christians as well.[34] But as our interviews have vividly reflected, some of those who have left Christianity continue to have deep spiritual longings.

One effect and further cause of distrust towards the Christian message in the United States has been the various bestselling books that have come out heaping scorn on belief in God. Books such as Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*,[35] among a number of other books, seek to erode and destroy belief in God, a belief they view not simply as irrational but as profoundly pernicious in its denial of reason and discouragement of human beings' own efforts to improve their world. Dawkins argues from an evolutionary perspective that belief in life after death, while perhaps useful in earlier eras as a religious meme, no longer makes sense. He quotes the comedian George Carlin, in a remarkably vitriolic statement of the silliness of belief in the JudeoChristian God:

> Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man—living in the sky—who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time….But He loves you![36]

Other, opposing books, such as Dinesh D'Souza's *Life After Death: The Evidence* as well as Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven*, make the argument for life after death.[37] D'Souza's book, although written by a Christian, does not use Biblical scriptures as the basis of its argument, but secular evidence instead, discussing near-death experiences and evidence of reincarnation and multiple universes: more-or-less scientific accounting of evidence for life after death in the contemporary world until, in its closing chapter, it returns to a Christian message for why one should believe in life after death. Another book written around the same time, David Lester's *Is There Life After Death? An Examination of the Empirical Evidence* concludes that "there is no conclusive evidence that there is life after death."[38] Clearly, whether one finds the evidence for life after death convincing or not depends in large part on the beliefs with which one begins such an investigation.

No doubt few people read these books with open minds and decide their beliefs on the basis of these books' arguments. The issue in the United States of whether the Christian God is real is too contentious for gentle, sympathetic debate because of the all-encompassing claims of Christianity and the equally all-encompassing claims of atheism, both maintaining that they alone understand what is real. (Such gentle debate does indeed happen in Japan, as we will see next chapter.) Because their arguments are over the nature of ultimate reality—either the proclamation of God and heaven or the proclamation that such beliefs are nonsense, without room for compromise—the two cannot co-exist in a common pragmatic reality; their arguments are unyielding. However, they don't have to be unyielding. We earlier touched upon evangelical Christian/non-Christian

couples, for whom these differences were sometimes seen as grave and potentially tragic, but we never could find any such couples willing to openly discuss their different beliefs. We did, however, find more liberal believers married to non-believers willing to discuss their different beliefs in life after death, for example, the following couple, she an observant Jew in her seventies and he an atheist in his eighties, married for over 50 years:

SHE: Life after death—do I believe in it? Oh, yeah, sure. I doubt it, but I believe it. Of course I believe it.

HE: Excuse me, this is a conversation that's so ridiculous that I can hardly tolerate it. I don't believe there is anything that remains after death. This is it. Anyone who believes differently I can't even encompass. Yes, I believe that if people were more rational and didn't believe in religion, the world would be a better place.

SHE: My happiness comes from having a vivid sense of the Creator. Religion is like an ability to taste flavors or see colors. Some people have it and some don't. He doesn't have it, that's all. The people who don't get it say it isn't there. The people who get it say, "You idiot! It's obvious!" Now, life after death is God's headache, not yours, let Him worry. But if there is heaven, my husband will be there—of course he'll be there! We'll all be there!

HE: She couldn't tolerate my not being there! Who would she have to argue with?….Even if she's in ignorance, she's my wife, and I love her very much.

SHE: He doesn't hold my beliefs but he respects my beliefs. But if he's not going to heaven, I'm not going to heaven. If he ain't going, I ain't going!

This couple can reconcile their large religious differences because they love each other more than they love their conceptions of any afterlife or its lack. This is made apparent by the wife's concluding comment. She offers as her argument for belief in life after death simply that religion is a taste that some people have and others don't—her husband lacks this taste, which is hardly a cause for damnation. Senses of life after death are matters of personal experience and conviction, and in this sense beyond argumentation, much as this couple may enjoy arguing about such things. This interview shows that even if love may not conquer all in the United States today, it can definitely conquer different senses of life after death, at least among couples such as this one.

Non-Christian Believers in Life after Death

Thus far, the people whose words we've considered have more or less remained within the JudeoChristian penumbra. This is not the case for those we now discuss. A marketing researcher in his thirties said,

> I've almost never gone to church in my life, but I know there's a God; I think He's the same for Christianity, for Judaism, for Muslims, for Buddhists…

> If I died right now, I'd go to a life after death, I'm 100% sure—unless I've been such a horrible person that I'm not allowed to do that. But I think I'm a good person at heart.

A community activist in her forties said, "Of course we go on after we die! Life would make no sense if we didn't. But what that may actually be, I just don't know." A retired businessman in his seventies said, "I didn't even think about life after death until I retired. I think that there's some kind of immortal soul…. The commonality of near-death experiences—I think there's a 50% chance, anyway, that it describes something that is real." Our interviews imply that there are many Americans today who do not believe in the life after death proffered by Christianity, and who might not have been influenced much by Christianity in their lives, but who feel that there is a life after death, whatever such a thing may consist of.

There are widely-read books in the United States that describe life after death through the lens and justification of near-death experiences. Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* brought the term "near-death experience" to public consciousness and has sold 13 million copies since its 1975 initial publication[39]; there is also Alexander's aforementioned *Proof of Heaven*, an account of a neurosurgeon's experience of heaven while in a coma. These authors argue that near-death experiences point to the existence of the afterlife; but others argue that a near-death experience can prove no such thing since those who undergo it are by definition not yet dead. In any case, these experiences—often involving an awareness of being dead, a sense of well-being, and sometimes a movement through a tunnel towards a light—make life after death seem rationally plausible to some of the people we interviewed, in the United States, and in Japan and China as well, lifting the hopes of someone looking for evidence of a world beyond this one such as the retired businessman quoted above. Near-death experiences were mentioned half-a-dozen times by Americans we interviewed, ranging from those who wholly adhered to a sense of life after death to those who were quite skeptical; but the majority were like the man quoted above, saying, to quote another hopeful interviewee in her seventies, "Yes, near-death experiences don't prove anything. But they do show there *could* be something."[40]

American popular culture, and particularly movies, have depicted life after death in a variety of ways, often well outside Christian scriptural descriptions of such states. Films over the decades ranging from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *Beetlejuice* to *Defending Your Life*, to *What Dreams May Come,* to *Heaven is for Real,* to *A Ghost Story*, to *Flatliners*, among many other films, deal in a variety of ways with life after death.[41] While few viewers would use movies such as these as evidence of life after death, these movies nonetheless may play a significant role in shaping viewers' imaginations. The fact that so many movies explore life after death in different ways shows not just that it is a handy plot device, but more, that it is an ongoing American concern, for religious believers and non-believers alike. These films use their depictions of life after death as a means of making moral

points about life before death, but their portrayal of worlds beyond this one gives those worlds a distinct tangibility: "Oh, so that's what it might be like…"

Most of those we interviewed did not mention movies that had influenced their envisionings of life after death, but a few did. A rabbi we interviewed mentioned *Defending Your Life* as what he saw as a quite accurate portrayal of Jewish conceptions of how one is judged beyond this life; and a meditator mentioned the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, the story of a man repeating the same day over and over again until he learns to be a better person. as a parable of reincarnation (some scholars have also stressed this interpretation of the film[42]). Reincarnation is a common theme in American popular writings on life after death, such as, perhaps most notably, Deepak Chopra's *Life After Death: The Burden of Proof.*[43] The book offers a modified Hindu/Buddhist version of life after death, of souls passing through different lives, growing in accordance with their karma, backed by discussion of contemporary science, particularly quantum mechanics—the book is based on the idea that through repeated lives we grow out of selfishness into compassion, towards eventual wisdom, very much like *Groundhog Day*. Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* is another widely-read book exploring what happens after we die, a book that can be compared to the Alcorn book on heaven discussed earlier. Sogyal's book is dark in its portrayal of the agonizing states one must go through after death, but like Alcorn's book, it has passages that state in various ways, "you think there's no life after death, but there is!"[44] The West is afraid of death, Sogyal argues; but death and rebirth is what is ultimately real.

We earlier mentioned how in 1993, 28% of American baby-boomers surveyed—Americans born between 1946 and 1964—claimed to believe in reincarnation, according to one survey. A number of the Americans we interviewed, of all different religious or spiritual backgrounds, said that reincarnation was what they felt would happen to them after they died. We asked them why and received various answers, sometimes from the same person. Some said that they adhered to reincarnation because they disliked the absolutism of heaven and hell, with people sent to one destination or the other for an eternity, with no possibility of recourse. Rather than permanent and unchanging salvation or damnation, reincarnation offers the chance to redeem oneself over different lifetimes: "I like the idea of being reborn because I can have the chance to learn rather than being only rewarded or punished," an office worker in her fifties told us. A teacher in his forties said, "This life, we make lots of mistakes—that's where reincarnation makes sense to me, coming back again: we get the chance to figure some things out." Still others seemed to adhere to reincarnation because they felt that life was basically good—they felt that they would be reborn as humans, and sought to live life again in this human realm. There was also a belief in reincarnation as a response to grief. A lapsed-Catholic woman in her fifties told us that she believed in reincarnation largely because of the losses in her life; she is certain that she will see her mother and father and brother again in a different life, as she can no longer see them in this life. The rabbi mentioned earlier, a man in his

early seventies—a Hasidic Jew, who practices strict orthodoxy, but who is also a student of Buddhism and Taoism—said that Judaism in fact taught reincarnation in the Hebrew texts, and that he himself remembered having been a child who had died in the Holocaust.

Many of the adherents to reincarnation we interviewed were Buddhists. Reincarnation, as we saw last chapter, is the life after death envisioned by most forms of Buddhism as well as Hinduism; but beyond their adherence to doctrine, some of the Buddhists we interviewed, like the rabbi mentioned above, maintained that they have personally experienced earlier lives. An American in his sixties told us, "When I travelled to Hong Kong, I remember aching with every bone in my body to go up the river into China: I wanted to go home. I've realized that I've had several lives in China." But most of the Buddhists we interviewed who adhered to reincarnation as their fate after death had no memories of past lives and adhered to reincarnation as a tenet of their religious group. The Buddhist sect Soka Gakkai adheres to reincarnation; as an American Soka Gakkai adherent said, "I believe in reincarnation because without it my life in this lifetime alone wouldn't make sense." Other Americans we spoke with anticipated reincarnation apart from any religion, but rather from their experience of a higher being. We saw in the last section various people who claimed a direct experience of God, but those who say this are not only Christians. A business consultant and mother in her sixties, a woman from a Christian background as a child, but influenced by New Age thought in her adulthood, discussed how she regularly spoke with God, who tells her about her ultimate fate:

> Yes, I talk to God. But when I say I talk to God, that's my interpretation of a particular vibration. What vibration you hear depends on what vibration you're in. To me most religion is bullshit. They're viewing God as it works for them—they're at a lower vibrational level. It's not a hierarchy, though, but a continuum. After I die, my guess is that we're here until our vibrations are high enough for us to leave. We then just hang here without a body, until we're ready to go about on our next journey. No, God doesn't talk to me about what happens beyond this existence. I've never asked. Let me ask God now… (pauses for several minutes). God just said to me, "you're showing off!" (laughs). Then He said, "you'll go into your life and review what's happened to you. You'll decide whether you come back or not." (Sorry to be crying like this: I always cry when God talks to me.) We human beings are here to learn. We can come back as anything that has vibrations—trees and us and everything. I might learn more as a tree. Everything lives and dies, comes and goes.

Among all the people we interviewed, this woman is the only person who not only spoke to God in our presence but also brought back God's reply: a direct report of what God told her about life after death—even though, as she admits,

this may be no more than her interpretation of "vibrations." She holds the concept of reincarnation as growth into higher vibrations, but unlike the people we earlier saw, she believes this because God has very directly told her so.

Mystical apprehension of reality—the direct experience of God or of transcendence, and the sense that one is united with God or the cosmos—has long been frowned upon by monotheistic organized religion, although there have been mystics throughout history. In the Christian and Muslim monotheistic traditions, mystics have reported becoming one with God, which has historically gotten some of them in theological difficulty: "You and God can't be one! That's blasphemy!" On the other hand, one purpose of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism is transformative mystical experience as attained through meditation, although its pursuit may sometimes become simply one more egotistic desire.[45] Today, such mysticism does not seem all that unusual in an American context. A number of widely read books in the United States have discussed this, such as Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* describing leaving the ego behind to experience the essence of being, whether that be called God or any other label.[46]

We spoke with several Americans who claim to have had similar experiences, although not necessarily with the flamboyance of the business consultant quoted above. The retired psychotherapist quoted earlier spoke of her direct experience of God, as did a number of other Christians; this was what led her to believe completely in life after death. Several of the American Buddhists we spoke with mentioned that they had had at least "tastes" or foreshadowings of mystical experience—of transcending the ego and limited self, to experience a oneness with the cosmos at large. This gave them a sense that the limited self we experience in daily life is an illusion. No Japanese or Chinese we interviewed ever quite spoke this way, as will be apparent in the chapters to come. Whether this is because of American emphasis on the practice of meditation and the possibility of mystical experience, because of American individualism shaping Americans to perhaps immodestly believe that they can indeed be in direct touch with the ultimate, or because of the particularities of who we happened to have interviewed in these three societies, is unclear; all three explanations may have a degree of truth.

We also interviewed several people who had out-of-body experiences. One man, in his seventies, recalled separating from his body during a near-fatal accident while in the military fifty years earlier, and hearing the words, "You are the love that you seek"—these words transformed his life, although he did not apply them to life after death. Another, while meditating, left his body and floated to the ceiling. He is a religious skeptic but said, on the basis of this experience, "Who knows? Maybe a spirit continues."

Several people we interviewed said that while consciousness might continue after they died, it would not be their separate individual consciousness, but rather a part of something larger. A former minister of a New Age church, in her eighties and living in a nursing home, told us,

> What do I think happens after I die?….There's no individuality, but a merge. It's not the end of everything—it's joining the whole. It's something very, very quiet—you just want to stay there forever….If I die tonight, I have no idea where I would go. But there's something there that would continue. I have this inner sense that awareness never dies.

A high school teacher in his forties said,

> Life after death: It's not individual, but this can't be all there is. I don't believe in the standard reincarnation—what survives is not any part of your ego or personality: all that is accidental. All that survives is the essential part.

Some we interviewed were more skeptical. A man in his nineties, who had been a government employee for many years, as well as an alcoholic and then a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, said this:

> If I die tonight, I doubt that any vestige of me as me will continue. Yes, it would be a very nice thing to die and find myself part of a larger cosmic consciousness, a drop of water in the ocean. But I simply don't know. The longer I live—and it's been quite a while now—the more I realize that I don't know a damn thing. I've come to recognize, maybe in the last year or so, that death is not an enemy, it's a friend. If you've lived as long as I have, you get to the point where you've just lost too damn much—I can't hear worth a damn, I can't drink anymore, I don't have as many marbles as I used to have. But what, if anything, comes after that, I haven't the faintest idea. If I died right now, I would say that it's probably 60–40 that there would be some consciousness, like a drop in the ocean, but this 60% might be my illusion, absolutely. I have no idea what the hell happens after I die, and nobody, absolutely nobody, has ever come back to tell us.

His words show how the meaning of death may differ depending on age. Death, he tells us, is a friend, something that a younger person, one who still felt that there was more life to be lived, might not be able to say—when one is old and tired, contra Becker, death may be something not to be denied but to be welcomed. Beyond this, this man shows a remarkable skepticism towards speculation about life after death—"who the hell knows?"—an attitude fairly rare among our American interviewees, but common among our Japanese interviewees, as we will see next chapter.

The life after death that the people quoted above adhere to, with varying degrees of assurance and doubt, is in a sense a collective halfway point between belief in an individual being that continues beyond the grave and the belief that nothing at all remains. It is a consciousness that transcends the self—although

what this might consist of and whether or not this might take place remains mysterious. A secondary-school teacher in his sixties said, "People ask 'what happens to you after you die?' But I doubt there is a 'me' to have something happen to after I die." Indeed, one contemporary theory of consciousness,[47] echoed by some Buddhists, is that the idea of any unified self is an illusion that we create for ourselves to make sense of consciousness, an illusion with no underlying reality. If the self is an illusion, then it would be odd indeed if that illusion were to continue into a world beyond this one.

Another point that several people we interviewed raised is our perhaps illusory perception of time. Both Christianity and reincarnation bear the assumption of linear time—the idea that time flowing from future to past is how time actually proceeds—but what if this is not the case? We interviewed a consultant in her sixties who said,

> I have the sense that we live in parallel time, rather than in a time frame from here to there. Time is an illusion that we've created for our own comfort. So we really can't know what happens beyond this life—it's all about uncertainty.

She subsequently said, "I do believe 100% that something will continue after I die"—although what this might mean, if time is an illusion, is a paradox she fully acknowledged. The secondary school teacher who questioned the existence of self also questioned the meaning of time:

> The span of our life is located in this space-time continuum, but linear time may be based on a very limited perspective. We can only see things through a limited looking glass. When you ask me what happens after I die, linear time is built into your question.

Indeed, if time is illusory, the question makes no sense—the very idea of a world before death and a world after death becomes absurd. These people seem, from an immediate practical perspective, to be engaged in philosophical speculation far from the impending reality of our own upcoming deaths and what may lie thereafter; but they also may be right, for all we can know.

Some we interviewed argued that life after death, being unknowable, simply doesn't matter. A practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism in his fifties who had long experience working in a hospice and seeing death first-hand, told us,

> If I died now, what would happen? I don't know. We truly don't know what will happen to us after we die; but if we really are engaged in living, then does it matter? Something in me has a strong conviction that there's some kind of continuity, but I have no idea what that may be. But I didn't have any idea what that would be when I was born! I just do my best to live now.

This response, paralleling that of some American scholars of Buddhism,[48] marks a pivotal inflection in this chapter's analysis. For many of the Americans discussed thus far in this chapter, life after death is pivotal to their existence on this earth. However, for many more, those who we will consider from here on, life after death does not much matter because it is unknowable, and thus irrelevant. They maintain, as does this man, that we should live for the sake of our lives in this world, not in anticipation of any other.

Doubters and Disbelievers in Life after Death

Indeed, for a significant number of Americans we spoke with, this world was what mattered to them, with any world beyond this one not worth devoting much thought to. Some were agnostic, saying that they did not and could not know what happens after death and so it was not worth thinking about, while others were atheists, more assertively arguing that there was no life after death, and anyone who believed so was deluded. Among Americans, 17% in a 2014 survey said they had no belief in life after death, a percentage that has been relatively consistent over time (with, for example, 13% believing in no life after death in 1944).[49] More of our own interviewees believed in no life after death: slightly more than a quarter of the people we spoke with. This may largely be an artifact of our snowball sampling—we do not pretend to have a completely representative sample among people we have spoken with—but it may also reflect how people respond to surveys, giving the socially appropriate answers they think that they are expected to give, as we will shortly discuss.

A few of those we interviewed who felt no need to devote thought to life after death were religious. As a real estate developer in his seventies, a man deeply immersed in Judaism, told us,

> If I were to die right now, I have no idea what would happen to me, and that doesn't bother me. What concerns me more is whether I will be able to justify the confidence that is expressed by renewing my soul when I wake up in the morning. I try to picture the moment just before death every night before I go to sleep. I say a prayer from the Jewish tradition—a prayer that says, roughly translated: "Listen! What happens to you is just what you need." Yes, for me, life after death is not so important—the higher meaning is finding meaning in life itself.

A woman in her early seventies who has attended Episcopalian churches for much of her life said,

> I don't know if I believe in life after death, or if I care. I've had a really nice life, so whatever happens after I die doesn't make any difference. If I was born in a poor country and had suffered greatly, say, a nine-year-old boy in an African country who was trained to shoot people, I would want

> an afterlife really badly, the promise of something better than this. But in this pretty good world, we don't need the promise of an afterlife. This is enough.

In the wealthy developed world, this woman is saying, life is not suffering, as religions from Buddhism ("life is suffering") to Christianity (this life is "a vale of tears") have maintained, but is quite comfortable; if one can die at a suitably old age, after living a happy life, then there's no need to wish for anything more. For many people in the United States today, life is pretty good and pretty long, as it was not for their ancestors; and so who needs the promise of life thereafter? Obviously, this may vary greatly for those in different social classes or in different ethnic groups in the United States. An African-American man in his seventies who felt that his talents had never been fully recognized in his career because of his skin color spoke of heaven as a place where there won't be any racism; a woman in her sixties who had suffered from familial chaos and extended unemployment spoke of life after death as a place where she can be free of the sufferings she had experienced in her life before death. There is massive societal inequality and suffering among those who are deprived. Beyond this, there is emotional suffering that even those in the most comfortable circumstances may experience, as novelists and filmmakers so often remind us. But for those who feel that they have led a good life in this world, such as the woman quoted above, no other world needs to beckon. This life is enough.

As noted above, many of the people we interviewed who felt that any world beyond was irrelevant to them were doubtful agnostics: "there might possibly be something after death, but I don't know." A former social worker in her seventies we interviewed told us that while there is a 25% chance that there may be something after death, she can't imagine what that may be, and gives it no thought. So too for a former policeman in his sixties, who had spent a decade engaged in meditation; he said that he meditates in order to make his life better on a day-to-day this-world basis, and refused to speculate about any possible life after death. So too for a salesman in his fifties, the son of an alcoholic whose addiction and demise have shaped his own life. He sees life after death as a matter of beliefs only, and thus not worth taking seriously: what is important is to find happiness in this world. These are people who have gone through much in their lives, and who felt—unlike the people mentioned in the last paragraph—that any striving towards a world beyond this one was simply beside the point. This was also true, in a somewhat less earned sense, for several of the agnostic young people we interviewed, recent university graduates for whom speculation about life after death seemed an intellectual exercise ("That idea reminds me of Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence," one said in the course of our conversation)—these young people were immersed in thought about their careers and futures in this world, with thoughts about life after death generally far away from their lives' concerns. An academic in his fifties said, "I don't really think that anything is going to happen after I die, but if there

was a world after death, it would be awfully nice." This is the attitude that a number of American agnostics we spoke with have. Probably there is nothing after death, they felt, and so they focus on this life. But if there does happen to be a life after death—one not hellish, as almost all we interviewed assumed—then by all means embrace it and enjoy it.

There has not been much written about Americans who do not adhere to any sense of life after death, but there has been significant discussion of those Americans who do not adhere to religion. Leaving aside the diatribes against belief in God of Dawkins and Hitchens, one important portrayal of this attitude is Phil Zuckerman's *Living the Secular Life*.[50] "Over the last twenty-five years, 'no religion' has become the fastest-growing religious preference in the United States; today, 30% of Americans embrace non-religious—or secular—lives," the book's back cover proclaims. (This may seem to contradict what we earlier saw: 17% of Americans think that there is no life after death, but 30% are non-religious. However, the two sets of statistics are not at odds—many non-religious Americans also adhere to senses of life after death, as we have seen in this chapter.) Zuckerman discusses the secular basis for morality from neuropsychology and sociology, in explaining how Americans do not need to believe in God in order to be moral: we are neurologically wired to be moral and are taught to be moral as infants and children, and this, not fear of God's wrath, is what leads the vast majority of people to behave in a moral way, he argues. He also considers the reasons why Americans are becoming more secular than in the past, including

> the reaction against the overt mingling of religion and conservative/right-wing politics, the reaction against the Catholic priest pedophile scandal… the increase of women in the paid labor force…the greater acceptance of homosexuality in American culture, and the ubiquity of the internet.[51]

Existential fear of death is not an inevitable part of the human condition, Zuckerman argues, but can be overcome through having a fundamental appreciation of life: what he calls "aweism": "One need not have God to feel and experience awe. One just needs life."[52]

We interviewed people who felt "aweism," such as an interior designer in his seventies who was recovering from cancer surgery. He is a resolute materialist—"people who believe in religion are deluded….if you want to talk about God, God is the sum total of energy in the universe. When I die, I will die, that's all"—but he also strongly believes in beauty, and his life has been dedicated to its appreciation. Mathews watched a sunset with him one evening at a social gathering at which no one else was paying any attention. He was one of the few people around who could feel awestruck wonder at the setting of the sun for many minutes on end; he said in a quiet voice, as the sun sank below the horizon, "that was amazing." A former minister and professor now in his eighties spoke of lifelong "aweism" as the key to human existence:

> There's no life after death. But the sense that it is here and now and gone makes the here and now so much more significant. We get to be conscious for a while! We still don't know if that happens anywhere else in the universe. We get to *experience* this life!

He is saying that marvel and gratitude at a life lived only transiently in this world should transcend any desire for anything beyond this world: "we get to be alive!"

Zuckerman's arguments about increasing American secularization were affirmed by some of our more intellectually inclined secular interviewees. As a former military officer in his eighties said,

> I question the polls that say that America is so religious: if you ask someone if he's religious, it's easier to answer yes than no. But if you pried, you'd find religion a lot less influential on that person than a lot of the polls indicate.

Surveys may indeed exaggerate the extent of religious belief in the United States, it has been found,[53] and the same may apply to senses of life after death. As a political activist in her seventies maintained, one of the few secularist women we spoke with,

> I think a lot of people who say they believe in life after death are succumbing to social pressure in America now: you can't be an atheist and get elected! But a lot of it too is hedging your bets—who knows what happens after you die? Why not say you believe?

A survey of Americans over 50 found that 80% of women but only 64% of men believed in an afterlife.[54] Our American interviews were even more lopsided, with many more men than women claiming that there is no life after death. This may be due to factors we mentioned last chapter: longer female life expectancy, and thus the experience of loss, and perhaps a greater openness to religious belief or to a world beyond science among women than among men. The political activist added another explanation for this: "If women don't get satisfaction in their life on earth, maybe they want to believe there's a better life later"—women, in an America still oppressing them in many ways, may desire a better next life. Statistical surveys have varying results, but some American surveys do show a significant decline in female happiness as compared to that of males in recent decades.[55] Women may indeed on average suffer more than men in the contemporary United States, and in Japan and China as well, as we will see in the chapters that follow, and in the world as a whole; accordingly, they may feel a greater desire than men for a world beyond this one, one in which the oppression they suffer in this world may be alleviated.

Very few Americans we interviewed—and particularly very few American men—expressed fear of death; only one man, a believer in reincarnation, expressed with admirable honesty that, "I'm still afraid of death. I'm just as

neurotic as the next guy. When I go, it'll be, 'Not now! Not yet!'" Almost all men—perhaps out of masculine pride, or perhaps because they genuinely did not feel fear—spoke as did this former doctor in his seventies: "No, I'm not afraid of death, not at all. I don't believe that there's anything coming after, so why would you fear nothing?" Indeed, several of the non-adherents to life after death whom we interviewed had little patience for talking about a topic that seemed irrelevant and nonsensical to them. One of the more amusing interviews we conducted was with a building contractor in his sixties who spoke animatedly about social media and its future and a range of other subjects, but who, when the conversation returned to life after death, rolled his eyes, as if to say (as he later confirmed), "why are we talking about this?" As he said,

> There should be no reason that we fear death. Why on earth are we all so afraid? How do I feel about the fact that I'm going to die at some point? Resignation. Acceptance. It doesn't make me happy, but it doesn't make me sad either. This is it; there isn't anything beyond this. I don't feel the need to believe in an afterlife. I'm not discounting people who believe in God, or meditation, or other coping mechanisms. I think that anything that someone wants to do to make them feel better about dying is good. If my wife said, "I believe in heaven," I'd think that's fine. We don't have to agree on whether there's an afterlife or not. There are some basic cultural things that we have to agree upon, like saving a little kid who runs into the street in front of a car. But belief in afterlife is not one of those things. Yes, to me life after death is pretty much beside the point. When you're dead and buried, it's over.

He believes in no life after death but speaks about the rights of others to believe whatever they want, a sense shared by many of the agnostics or atheists we spoke with. This includes his spouse—there are basic things they need to agree upon, but not about whether or not there is life after death. Unlike some of the evangelical Christians we earlier saw, for whom a family member's lack of belief in the Christian message of salvation is something that caused them much worry, for him it simply doesn't matter—as he says, it is perfectly fine if his wife believes in heaven because it is a matter of cultural unimportance.

We discussed last chapter the idea of living beyond the grave not through life in any other world but through being remembered in this one. But most of the people we interviewed were skeptical about being remembered. The building contractor told us,

> I'm perfectly content to be forgotten after I die. I have two children; but if I had no children and my name wouldn't be carried on—I don't care. The work I do: no one will remember that! I'm not Frank Lloyd Wright! I couldn't care less about leaving my mark on society. I find value in living life itself. I don't give life after death much thought.

A former surgeon in his seventies said,

> Being remembered in the future? I don't know that I personally want to be remembered. Do I really care if the guy who I did a good job putting in his knee replacement thinks about me sometimes? Not really. I guess I feel some satisfaction knowing that there are a few people out there that are walking a little better because I took care of them, or they're feeling a little better about life because of something I said to them. I want to play my part in helping to make the world a little better. But if I'm forgotten in a hundred years, so what?

This was the view of most of those we interviewed, whether religious believers or secularists, simply because in examining their lives to the extent that they dispassionately could, they found little reason why they would be remembered beyond the memories of those who had known them during their lives. But there were a few interviewees who did indeed entertain the idea that they might be remembered, and have metaphorical immortality at least for a while.

One was an atheist in his early eighties who has been a lawyer, but also a novelist, with a number of notable books that have won praise although not many readers. Posterity matters, he indicated—an editor had told him, unforgettably, that "all writers yearn for immortality," and he feels that yearning, although he is aware that his own work may fall below that standard. He has had a very successful life, and so his desire for immortality through his writing lacks the urgency of someone like the poet John Keats, for whom the lack of recognition of his creative work and the prospect of not being remembered meant utter negation; Keats bitterly requested the epitaph, "Here lies One Whose Name Was writ in Water."[56] For this novelist, the hope of being remembered in the future lacked such desperate passion; it was simply a hope that may or may not come to pass, but probably wouldn't, he honestly seemed to feel.

We also interviewed retired political figures. One spoke of how he helped make the world a better place through his assertion of women's rights:

> The feminist revolution in the United States: it's a big ripple in society, and it's durable. If you define extending yourself beyond your life in that way, then we did that. Historians will look back and say, "look at what these guys did: they let go of their white male-supremacy power structure."

Indeed, this may represent a profound societal transformation, although as he fully recognized, he himself played a relatively small role in this process.

A former state governor we interviewed (whose identity can perhaps be ascertained; we quote him with his consent) spoke as follows:

> Yes, I guess my legacy is important to me, in all honesty. I was named as one of the Colorado one hundred people who have most affected the state.

> Am I happy to be on that list? I'd be lying to you if I didn't say I was. But in future eras, they'll come up with a new list and I won't be on it! I did my best, but there needs to be this constant overturning.

These people, both political figures and writers, could plausibly make a claim that they might be remembered in the future—even though they were modest in their statements to me, being well aware that posterity, even if attained, could only be temporary. However, most people we interviewed could realistically envision no posterity, except through their children and descendants. As one of the few female secularists we interviewed said, "No, I won't leave anything behind….But yes, I have my children: I'm proud of them—they'll carry on with the philosophies I've had." A retired engineer and genealogist added to this, not just in terms of his own children, but of the long line of ancestors and descendants of which he was a part:

> A hundred years from now, will I be remembered? Boy, I don't know!… I don't know by whom, but probably. I've done a lot of study of my ancestors' lives, back for hundreds of years. I remember them! My progeny, in future generations, might look at that and remember me, as well as all the ancestors I've studied. Then there's genetics itself continuing in your progeny. These are all forms of seeing your time in existence extended, perpetuated.

We interviewed a retired lawyer in his seventies who has fathered 15 or more children through the sperm bank he contributed to—his children are now walking around somewhere, although he cannot know them or anything about them. He spoke of memes and genes—the cultural and the biological—as two possible tickets to immortality.[57] Perhaps most movingly, we spoke with a teacher in her forties who had lost her sister:

> Where is my sister's spirit now? I visit her in the cemetery, but I don't think of her as there. I like the idea that the ones who went before you are somewhere out there, and we might meet up again, but I don't know if realistically I can believe that. So instead, I believe it's important to leave something behind of yourself. I make pottery and give it to my children; I see that as leaving something. I want my children to remember: "my mother enjoyed doing this; she did this for me." I guess that's how I want my spirit to continue.

Ernest Becker, as we saw last chapter, wrote of immortality ideologies to which we subconsciously adhere[58]; in an age when religion, for many, does not offer a convincing path to life after death, we live instead for money or country or company or love, desperately seeking a substitute, he maintained. But in our American interviews, it was difficult to find evidence of such all-encompassing

immortality ideologies. What we did see was a degree of yearning and hope that one might be remembered, but it was not a matter of desperation. One may leave one's genetic legacy in one's children, and will remain in their memory as well; one may leave one's creative work; one may leave one's reputation and fame; or one may leave the pottery one has made. But all of these will fade with the passage of time, as the people we interviewed were all well aware; they did not welcome this fact but accepted it as the inevitable way of the world. This is what we see among various Japanese and Chinese interviewees as well in the chapters to come.

A more essential issue for many of the secularists we interviewed was not that of posterity but of morality. If there is no God, then why behave in a moral way? The American atheists we interviewed sometimes spoke of this, to try to justify why they should live their lives morally if the moral guidelines given by God are a fiction. As the retired military officer in his eighties explained at length,

> Why do I behave morally, since I don't believe in religion? Oh, it's your reputation. People who follow a good course rather than a bad course are more highly thought of by future generations. Yes, it takes a certain amount of training and conditioning to know what's good and bad, to know what you should be doing and what you shouldn't. Why did I not, for example, cheat on examinations when I knew that no one was looking down at me, like God? Well, it's sort of like, everybody's got to play the game. If everyone played his own game rather than the game of society, the result would be pretty chaotic. For a good society, you just have to follow certain rules. We've found over the course of time what those rules are. The Ten Commandments aren't a bad start—not the one about not taking the Lord's name in vain, but those about adultery and about not killing your fellow humans. Since we all live in close proximity, you've got to give up certain of your rights for the sake of cooperation with your fellows.

Another secularist, the retired surgeon in his seventies, also assessed this moral code of society in the absence of any sense of life after death.

> Surveys show that 90% of Americans believe in God. Do I think all those people are wrong? Yes. Is believing in God any different from believing in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus? Not at all. The only thing is, it's socially acceptable to believe in God, and it's not socially acceptable to believe in the tooth fairy! Basically, it's human nature to do whatever is in your short-term best interest. Society understands that it's in your long-term best interest not to act always in your short-term best interest. One of the ways we teach people is to give them rewards and punishments: heaven is a reward for good behavior and hell is a punishment for bad behavior.…If everyone in the US thought as I did, would the country be a better place? I don't think so. I'm an egotist; I think I've developed a system of ethics in

> my life that is kind of exemplary, and I'm not sure that everybody is capable of doing that without some guidance.

This man believes that those who believe in God are deluded. However, he also believes that if most Americans were atheists as he is, the United States would be a worse place, simply because most people might not behave well: most people need religion, he maintains, as he himself does not. Some of the secularists we interviewed were more gentle in their dismissal of believers, but their underlying beliefs were the same as that of the man quoted above. As the former minister turned professor in his eighties said,

> Yes, I do think that Christians and other believers are deluded—but it's a kind delusion. My dear friend believes that she will be with her late husband again in heaven. I wouldn't take that away from anybody. But we need to outgrow the illusion of God, so that we can take the human endeavor much more seriously…

He expresses compassion for those who believe in life after death—but still, they are deluded, he maintains, even if it is a "kind delusion." The atheists we interviewed resemble the evangelical Christians in being convinced that they understand the real situation of human beings on the planet, as most of their fellow Americans do not. But whereas the evangelical Christians often sought to convert others to their beliefs, most of the atheists did not, maintaining instead that "it's fine for them to believe whatever they want to believe if it helps them live their lives, even if they're deluding themselves."

Indeed, many of the secularists we interviewed emphasized that most people should not believe as they themselves believed, for it would have a negative effect on society. The social activist in her seventies maintained that the atheism that she adhered to should not necessarily be adhered to by others, and also pointed to a larger problem: without a common moral basis, such as that provided by religion, the United States and the world run the risk of falling into chaos:

> I think it's probably true that the world would be better if most people believed in life after death. The church has been the basis of morals. I don't need that—I think it's my responsibility to be a good person in society. That has to have come from my upbringing. Are we getting wiser in this country? We're getting wiser in not deluding ourselves, but not in choosing how to live. We need to teach morality and ethics, but we don't do that. If we don't have religion, then whether or not it's a good world will depend on what kind of guiding principles we live by. If there was a broad agreement as to what was right and wrong, and people honored that and had compassion and respect for one another without religion, then it would be a better world. If there's no general agreement as to what benefits the community, then it will be a worse world: we would fall into anarchy.

The former governor, himself a firm non-believer in life after death, further emphasized this point:

> Yes, if there's no common sense of life after death, you do wonder what social glue will hold increasingly diverse people together. What do you need for diverse people to live together in peace?….When I was governor, would it have been an easier state to govern if 95% of my constituents believed in heaven and hell? Yes. I guess I really do believe that religion sets a moral standard that helps society.

The need for a moral community to somehow overcome the recession of religious belief and pluralization of values in the United States was most firmly expressed by the former minister turned professor:

> The church has lost influence in American life. Can we be free, civil and democratic without a common cultural reference, whether it's the "In God we trust" God, or whatever? Even if there's no God, we need a social contract that everyone can adhere to. But I don't know that we can go back! We are deeply divided, and part of it is the faith difference, not just in God but in eternity….Things have become remarkably individualized. We need to create institutions where we can evolve, somehow, an authentic community. That's the substitute for heaven, in enabling human survival!

In this man's view, the radical individualism into which American society has fallen can be alleviated not by any return to a common religious belief but rather through a common sense of community, our sense of belonging to a larger human entity. Roy Baumeister has written of how, in the United States,

> the glorification of selfhood has transformed the meaning of death into something far more threatening, as compared with the meaning of death in bygone eras. Because death brings the self to an end, people today find themselves living by a value that is very limited in time.[59]

For secularists particularly, living for self isn't as fulfilling as living for a social value larger than self, whether for family, for profession, for community, for nation, or for the human species as a whole, in that unless a person believes in life after death, then once the self dies it's all over, whereas these larger entities may continue. But can a new sense of community, a new social order actually emerge in a radically individualized and politically and spiritually divided United States?

Conclusion

We began this chapter with depictions of evangelical Christians adhering to their faith in heaven in an increasingly diverse social world that casts doubt

upon their beliefs—a doubt that emanates from their friends and sometimes their families. One way they may respond to this is to be non-judgmental about their non-believing friends; but are they then condemning their friends to hell? How do these believers balance their religious beliefs, telling them that their religion is the one truth, and their social worlds, full of people with multiple beliefs? The Bible that these evangelical Christians adhere to does not tell them much about what heaven may consist of; while some think of heaven quite vividly, others think of heaven as being simply one with God, and conceive of hell as the absence of God—but then, if this is the case, then why bother believing in Christianity at all, some may ask.

Many liberal Christians have little use for the literalism of their evangelical fellows, but in their liberalism, life after death becomes no longer a certainty in heaven but rather a doubt—who knows what may happen?—with religion instead, for most, a matter of their personal experience of God or of the divine. Who, then, needs religion, one may ask; but for these people, the experience of the divine may seem obvious. However, their experience is not an easy one, several emphasized, but sometimes extremely difficult. Non-Christian believers in life after death in the United States may follow alternative religious paths, such as Buddhism (particularly in the Denver/Boulder area of the United States), or more amorphous New Age beliefs stemming from their own experiences. These may coalesce in beliefs in reincarnation; reincarnation may signify for some, an ongoing learning process spreading over many lifetimes, and for others, the ongoing rebirth we experience every time we breathe in this world.

For many Americans today, life after death seems irrelevant to life as lived in this world, and thus hardly worth speculating about. This is the view of many of the doubters and disbelievers in life after death: it is a fiction, a perhaps socially useful fiction, but a fiction nonetheless. Some of these disbelievers created their own justification for morality, to answer the question, why behave well in society if there is no God to maintain the world's justice? And some worried about what, in the absence of senses of life after death, might serve as a common moral basis for American society. Does the absence of a common sense of life after death lead us all the more inexorably into a swirl of individualism bereft of all community?

The United States, by almost all accounts, once had a more or less common belief in life after death. America was a largely Christian country, and while some people were evangelical and others more liberal, and while some were fervent believers while others more skeptical, there was indeed this broad commonality. Today it is increasingly gone. This leads to an array of possible individual beliefs or non-beliefs. Certainly, the freedom to believe whatever one wants to believe about what life ultimately means is greater than ever before, as life after death fades in significance for so many Americans: "Believe whatever you want! Who cares?" several of the more secular accounts in this chapter have indicated. But this also ushers in a problem as to where the cultural and social

unity of the United States may lie. What can tie Americans together? It was once a religious consensus, centered on belief in God and in Christ's promise of eternal life. In the absence of such a consensus, what can bind and unite Americans? In the 1980s, Robert Bellah and his coauthors wrote in *Habits of the Heart* about how Americans, trapped in a language of individualism, sought to find community but could not do so.[60] Today, this is all the more the case. Common senses of religion and life after death once served as a building block for such senses of community and commonality, but this is no more. Although some of the people we interviewed offered eloquent alternatives, nothing has yet fully emerged to take its place in the American imagination.

Notes

1 Inglehart et al. 2004, 353.
2 https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/.
3 Inglehart et al. 2004, 353.
4 http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.
5 https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.
6 https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.
7 Stout 1982, 19, 27.
8 Bloom 1992, 17.
9 Bellah 1967.
10 https://ffrf.org/ftod-cr/item/37585-treaty-of-tripoli.
11 Turner 1986.
12 Beal 2008: 74.
13 As reported in Roof 1994, 72.
14 https://fbccov.org/how-should-you-treat-non-believers/.
15 https://alygeorges.wordpress.com/2014/06/20/how-to-deal-with-non-believers/.
16 https://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/chapter-1-importance-of-religion-and-religious-beliefs/#paths-to-eternal-life.
17 http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.
18 FitzGerald 2018; Bean 2014.
19 Kagan 2012, 234–246.
20 https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/.
21 Alcorn 2004, 6.
22 Alcorn 2004, 241, 259.
23 Alcorn 2004, 289.
24 Alcorn 2004, 309.
25 Alcorn 2004, 352, 353.
26 Alcorn 2004, 449.
27 Graham 2012, 29, 31.
28 Graham 2012, 32.
29 Graham 2012; Tyson 2017.
30 Walter 1996, 25.
31 Bruce 1996, 89.
32 See Luhrmann 2012.
33 https://religionunplugged.com/news/2019/8/30/as-nones-increase-mainline-protestantism-is-headed-for-an-age-cliff; Hudnut-Beumler and Silk 2018.

34 https://www.economist.com/united-states/2022/05/26/sex-scandal-and-southern-baptists.
35 Hitchens 2008; Dawkins 2006.
36 As quoted in Dawkins 2006: 317.
37 D'Souza 2009; Alexander 2012.
38 Lester 2005.
39 Moody 2015 [1975].
40 See Kellehear 2020 for a book-length academic account of near-death phenomena and "visitors at the end of life."
41 See http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-films-about-afterlife, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOTh8UgZ-1c among other websites exploring how life after death is depicted in films in the United States.
42 https://news.uchicago.edu/story/religious-scholars-view-buddhist-themes-behind-groundhog-day.
43 Chopra 2006.
44 Sogyal 1993: 8–9, 83–84.
45 See Trungpa (1973) on what he calls "spiritual materialism." More broadly, see Underhill (1990) for a classic scholarly discussion of mysticism; see Stace (1960) for a collection of writings on mystical experience from different religious traditions.
46 Tolle 1999.
47 See Blackmore 2005: 81.
48 See Batchelor 1998, 2017, who advocates the practice of Buddhist meditation without any belief in life after death.
49 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kathleen-weldon/paradise-polled-americans_b_7587538.html.
50 Zuckerman 2014.
51 Zuckerman 2014, 70.
52 Zuckerman 2014, 212.
53 Seehttps://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/upshot/americans-claim-to-attend-church-much-more-than-they-do.html.
54 See https://www.aarp.org/personal-growth/spirituality-faith/info-2007/life-after-death.html.
55 See Stevenson and Wolfers 2009.
56 See Solomon et al. 2015, 101.
57 See Dawkins 1978, Dennett 1995.
58 Becker 1974.
59 Baumeister 1991, 367.
60 Bellah et al. 1985.

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3

JAPAN

The Strictures of Life Before Death and the Freedom of Life After Death

The Japanese Panorama

Last chapter we learned that 81% of Americans reported that they believe in life after death, according to the World Values Survey; among Japanese, the percentage is far smaller, at 51%.[1] A central element in senses of life after death for Americans was God and heaven—their ongoing reality for many people, and their absence for many more. The broad Japanese equivalent to this is ancestor worship or ancestor veneration ("worship," the earlier commonly used term in English, implies an attitude that most Japanese today do not hold). Most Japanese today practice ancestor veneration in various ways, but this may or may not connote their belief in life after death. The great majority of Japanese have had the experience of praying at the family altar, as well as of visiting the graves of the ancestors; the ongoing presence of familial ancestors has been the most important sense of life after death for Japanese over history. As Robert J. Smith has written,

> Since at least the seventh century some elements of the population have conducted ceremonies designed specifically to benefit the souls of the dead, to seek their benign protection and assistance, to secure the intercession on their behalf of one or another of the compassionate Buddhas, or to share with them the pleasures and sorrows of the living.[2]

Today, some Japanese people believe that their departed loved ones can hear them at the family altar or grave, but others are skeptical that ancestors really continue on in any realm beyond this one.

Although ancestor veneration has been the dominant basis for senses of life after death in Japanese history, there has long been an array of different conceptions

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of what happens after one dies,[3] ranging from paradise/heaven to reincarnation to nothing at all. Religious faith has not been of much concern to many Japanese historically and today as well, and Japanese have had much less worry than their American and European counterparts over issues of creed. The proper practice of ritual is far more important in Japan, with individuals to some extent left free to imagine what they will. As Ian Reader maintains, "Although conceptualizations of other worlds have long existed in Japan, particularly in Buddhism… the Japanese have not, by and large, dwelt much on speculations about what lies beyond"[4]—although this seems no longer the case today, as we will see.

Japan has two dominant religious traditions, Shinto and Buddhism, religious traditions which overlap in most Japanese people's minds today, with the large majority of Japanese people occasionally practicing rituals of them both. Buddhism has long been the religion of death ritual in Japan except for the Japanese war dead, who are commemorated in Shinto Shrines, and the Japanese we interviewed who envisioned life after death most typically spoke of it in Buddhist terms, as has been the case throughout Japanese history.[5] This has meant a belief in ancestors in paradise for some Japanese in some eras, and reincarnation for other Japanese in other eras.

In medieval Japan, Japan of the 12th through 16th centuries, the dominant sense of life after death was the Buddhist cycle of birth and death known as *rokudō*, the transmigration of humans upon death into one of six different levels of being, including gods, humans, violent titans, animals, hungry ghosts, or creatures of hell, in accordance with the workings of karma. This was the "basic map of reality" of the age, accepted as common sense by elites and peasants alike.[6] While virtually everyone of that era apparently believed in this depiction as a matter of course, it was unsettling to many. An alternative idea emerged, the idea that one could, through devotion and through dying in a state of right-mindedness, transcend the cycle of births and deaths and be transported directly to the paradise of Pure Land. This was the broad appeal of Pure Land Buddhism, which "eased the fear of the afterlife among a large segment of the Japanese population" in medieval Japan and in later historical eras as well[7]; it remains the largest Buddhist sect in Japan today. Pure Land Buddhism has encompassed over the centuries a variety of different understandings of the afterlife, from a realm of the ancestors in the mountains, to reincarnation based on karma, to the bliss of paradise or the nothingness of Buddhist enlightenment. But the Pure Land became seen, in popular consciousness, as a realm where one could rejoin deceased loved ones. In this way, Japanese Buddhism became tightly interlinked with ancestor veneration, implying, in contrast to the impartial individuality of reincarnation and the workings of karmic justice, a life after death based on the mutual succor provided by the living and the dead within the family.

An attitude of skepticism towards religion and beliefs in the afterlife emerged in Japan just as in Europe and the United States; 17th and 18th-century townspeople were exhorted by various writers to not think so much about life after death.[8] The late-19th-century intellectual Fukuzawa Yukichi (Japanese names

in this chapter are given surname first) reported in his autobiography how he secretly replaced sacred objects in a Shinto shrine with stones and found that nothing happened to him as a result—thereafter he stopped believing in Shinto's claims.[9] To some extent, this skepticism about a larger meaning of life may have been countered by World War II, and the ideal of dying for one's immortal country. By at least some accounts, *kamikaze* suicide pilots crashing their planes into American ships cried out *Tennō heika, Banzai!* ("Long live the emperor!") before dying, although others question whether dying soldiers "invoked the name of the emperor…[or] cried out for their mothers."[10] But over the past 70 years, despite government officials occasionally praying at Shinto Shrines for the Japanese war dead, belief in religion and in life after death has been an individual matter—just as in the United States, as we saw last chapter, but as is not the case in China, as we will see next chapter.

Japanese skepticism has very broadly grown into the present. But the biggest transformation in recent decades in Japanese practices of life after death is demographic. The ancestors have traditionally been attached to a family through the patriarchal line, with the eldest son inheriting the household (*ie*) and the Buddhist altar of his family; his wife, or in a three-generation household, typically his mother, would look after the Buddhist altar, lighting incense, and providing offerings of food or drink (whether rice, water, *sake*, or potato chips: whatever a particular deceased person may have liked in this world, or whatever the family may be having for dinner). However, Japan has become urbanized in the post-World-War II era. Most families live not in large rural three-generation households with many children, but rather in conjugal families in small apartments that have no room for large Buddhist altars. They may live far from the ancestral family's rural abode and the Buddhist temple to which it adhered. Families also have fewer and fewer children, and many families have no eldest son to carry on the family line.

But this doesn't mean that ancestor veneration is dying out. The household, for increasing numbers of Japanese, is no longer the central unit of ancestor veneration; rather it is the individual, particularly the individual who has lost a loved one, and prays to their memory and perhaps communicates with them on a regular basis as well. This is a trend that scholars of Japanese ancestor veneration have long predicted, and at present, it has indeed come to pass.[11] More broadly, there has been in recent decades a proliferation of different views of what lies after death. Ancestor veneration remains, of course, along with belief in reincarnation and heaven and hell, but also today a variety of other imagined fates. In Japan, family and society are somewhat more important as moral bases for most people than they are in the United States. Nonetheless, increasingly it seems that even more than in the United States, senses of life after death in Japan have become a matter for the individual to mull over rather than being the business of any larger collective. As Yanagawa Keiichi wrote about Japan in the 1970s, "If the ready-made view of life and death provided by religion is not helpful, then each person must find their own view of life and death."[12] This is all the truer today.

In this individual context, the dominant argument is not over belief or non-belief in God and life after death, as in the United States, but rather of hope for something beyond the grave against a backdrop of empirically-based skepticism. The comic strip *Sazae-san,* in a strip dating from 1965, amusingly reveals this attitude. A Buddhist priest is shown intoning sutras at a family's altar, having been engaged by the family to pray for a departed family member, and then, as is sometimes the custom in Japan, he eats a meal and drinks *sake* with the family. After drinking quite a bit, he says, "Heaven, hell? Who knows about such things until you're dead!" Members of the family then exclaim, "When you're drunk, what you say gets really interesting!"[13] It is difficult to imagine an American Christian minister making such a statement and being appreciated for it; but the Japanese religious world has been based on hope rather than belief (and Japan also has a more relaxed attitude towards alcohol), and so what this cartoon-character priest expressed half-a-century ago is an attitude that today is all-the-more widely and wryly shared.

There has been a proliferation of interest in life after death in recent years, with a large array of books speculating as to what happens after we die. A big reason for this publishing boom is the aging of the Japanese population: the post-war "baby boom" generation (born between 1947 and 1949, after Japan's war veterans returned home) has been aging and retiring and is deeply curious about what will happen to them once their lives on this earth end. "What happens to you after you die?," one such book by Imaizumi Masaaki asks, and provides a variety of different answers, from "you become garbage" to "you go to the other world [*ano yo*]," declaring, "It's up to you as to what you want to think."[14] The book's refrain is, "if it works for you, go ahead and think it," even though the author himself retains a tone of gentle skepticism. This attitude was apparent in our interviews; as one woman in her seventies told us, echoing a dozen more interviewees, "If I suddenly died now, I wonder what would happen? I haven't been there [to any other world] yet, so I don't know!" This woman was very curious about the topic of life after death and eager to talk with us; but like many of the Japanese we interviewed, she acknowledged that she finally had no idea what might happen to her beyond the grave.

The interest in this topic in a Japanese context was readily apparent. As a bartender in his fifties we interviewed said,

> Yes, my customers in this bar do on occasion wonder about life after death. "What do you think happens after we die?" they sometimes ask, if their acquaintance has recently died. Some talk about going to a fortune teller, and that gets linked to reincarnation: "in a previous world, I was…" It's casual conversation, drinking talk. People feel fear about this kind of thing, so they talk about it.

As a salaryman (corporate worker) in his fifties said, echoing Yanagawa's earlier-quoted words from 50 years ago,

> Why are books about life after death so popular in Japan today? Well, people are uneasy. People have become individuals in Japan; groups, community, have lost their power. Maybe it's because of this that there's a boom in books on life after death—people need to find their own way now.

We conducted interviews on life after death in Sapporo, Japan's fifth largest city, located in Hokkaido, Japan's northern island. Sapporo was settled in the last 160 years, and is thus less traditional than cities such as Kyoto, with a long historical accretion of tradition, and this may have at least a small effect on senses of life after death.[15] Nonetheless, Sapporo is broadly representative of Japanese views of life after death; people there are not particularly distinct from those elsewhere in Japan in an age of extensive geographical movement. This chapter focuses primarily on the 57 interviews Mathews conducted in the summer of 2018, but also occasionally uses the 66 interviews he conducted in the preceding nine years. About half of these people he has known for years or decades, and the other half, found through snowball sampling, were newly met.

We have found no Japanese ethnographic examinations of Japanese senses of life after death and relatively few statistical surveys. Because the surveys we found most often are based on statistical data of small segments of the Japanese population rather than Japan at large, and because they don't explore in detail their respondents' senses of life after death, they are of limited use for this book's analysis. In the pages that follow, we first discuss ancestor veneration, practiced at points in their lives by almost everyone we interviewed, although the majority felt that it had no necessary link to life after death; then we consider reincarnation and heaven/hell, adhered to by about one-fifth of those we interviewed; and then we explore the sense that after death there is only nothingness, the position of about half of those we interviewed.

Ancestor Veneration

Japanese households—most typically those headed by the eldest son, the male successor to the family lineage—have traditionally had *butsudan,* Buddhist altars: cabinets often bearing photographs of the dead, and usually having wooden strips called ancestor tablets commemorating the dead.[16] In an American context, one might prominently display a picture of one's late mother or father or spouse, but these photographs and the people they commemorate are not the objects of worship. In Japan, they are objects of worship or veneration. In many Japanese families, as earlier noted, offerings of food are left every day at the altar for the departed person; that person may also be conversed with—the dead within memory still belong to the living in this sense. Most Japanese visit the family grave in the summer festival of *obon*, when the dead are said to return to the realm of the living. Some 60 years ago, David Plath wrote an article entitled "Where the Family of God is the Family."[17] This title summarizes a key difference between Japan and Western countries such as the United States.

In the United States, many people think of the dead as ascending to the heaven of a JudeoChristian God. For many Japanese, the deceased person becomes an ancestor, to be worshipped or venerated at the family altar and grave, just as the deceased worshipped the family ancestors while he or she was still living. Ancestors are presumably somewhere near the family, ready to help members of the family if called upon, as they often may be.

Today, as analyzed by Kotani Midori in her book *'Hitori shi' jidai to osōshiki to ohaka* (Graves and funerals in an era of "dying alone"), a little less than half of Japanese households have Buddhist altars, a percentage lower than in the past largely because of long life expectancy, as well as contemporary secularization.[18] Generally, the eldest son inherits the family altar, but in the present era, with many people living into their nineties, younger families may have no Buddhist altar for decades and may pay their respects to ancestors and departed loved ones at their parents' houses. Many families, in today's era of smaller families, do not have sons, or do not have sons who are able or willing to take care of the family altar, and so the fate of the altar may be unclear. As one woman, a mother and grandmother in her seventies, told us,

> We had a big Buddhist altar in my house, but my nephew, the eldest son in the family, lives in an apartment, and doesn't have room for it. We talked to the Buddhist priest, my husband and I, and told him that we had no one to carry on the family line. The priest said, "this is the age we're in today." We got rid of it and bought a smaller altar. It looks like a toy! I don't like that. We really must cherish the ancestors. After all, it's because of the ancestors that we have this world!

She indicated that her family's altar may not be passed down to future generations—not simply the altar itself, but the practice of venerating the household ancestors generation after generation.

And indeed, this is happening in millions of families. But nonetheless, most Japanese today do indeed revere the ancestors at a family altar in their own or a parental household; most Japanese visit the ancestors at the family grave every year. What they actually think about what they are doing is an open question: some people believe that they do indeed communicate with their ancestors, while others simply hope that they do, and still others are quite sure that they do not. We interviewed a few people who firmly believed that their ancestors had directly helped them in their lives, and once they died, they themselves would become ancestors and help the living. This is a traditional concept of ancestor veneration; but this view is giving way in Japan today, as the traditional household itself is giving way.

One reason for ancestor veneration has been to ensure the passage of the newly dead from the world of the living to the world beyond—to transform the dead so that, in the popular view over Japanese history, they will not remain in this world as spirits or ghosts to potentially torment the living. The first 49 days

are the most perilous, with the dead, in Japanese traditional mythology, crossing the Sanzu River on the journey to the afterlife, being greeted by their ancestors, and eventually fully entering the realm of the dead. They are remembered as individuals in ancestor worship up until the 33rd or at most, the 50th yearly anniversary of their deaths, after which they join the generalized realm of ancestors in their particular household. Concepts such as the Sanzu River and its crossing are not taken seriously by most Japanese today, but they do indeed feature in Japanese books purporting to provide guidance to their readers about the world after death,[19] and were mentioned in some of our interviews, such as this woman in her seventies:

> As my husband was dying a few years ago. I saw him looking at a movement in the corner of the room—it was his father coming to meet him, I think. That's why he died in such a peaceful way. Is the Sanzu River something that I'll cross after I die? I wonder! On the 49th day after death, [they say] I'll be wandering around in the other world; but is that true or not? I do believe that my husband's father came to meet him. I've experienced evidence of the other world through my husband, and also through my mother. Two days before she died, she talked about a river she would cross, with beautiful flowers on the other side; her grandfather was calling to her to come. When my mother told me that, I shouted, "don't go yet!" Yes, I'd say there's an 80% chance that the world beyond this one is real. I don't know who will come to meet me after I die, but someone will definitely come. Maybe my mother. Maybe my husband. Which one, I wonder? My husband was pretty helpless in this world, so he'll probably be lost in the next one. I told him, "when you have trouble in the other world, come and get me and I can help you!"

This woman has a strong sense of a world beyond this one, based on her own experiences, as she has interpreted them: her husband upon death apparently meeting his father, and also her mother signaling her coming death. This causes her to think it quite likely that someone—maybe her mother; maybe her husband—will come to meet her when she dies. Unlike some of the American Christians we saw in the last chapter, hers is not a faith that there is a world beyond this one, but rather a hopeful conjecture. With just a few exceptions, this was about as far as most of the Japanese we spoke with were willing to assert their sense of life after death.

As we have seen, Japanese attitudes and practices towards death have been very much shaped by the family system based on the patriarchal line. The fact that a wife will not belong to this household until after her marriage—the fact that the departed parents she might pray for as her familial duty would not be her own but her husband's—was built into this system and accepted by most women as a matter of course. A mother and housewife in her sixties made clear that she venerates ancestors in both of her families, her husbands' and her own:

> We have a Buddhist altar in our home, and I talk to the ancestors [her husband's ancestors] every morning—"How are you doing?"—I appreciate the ancestors when I do that. I think the souls of the ancestors may really be there—I think it would be great to meet them after I die: maybe there's a 50/50 chance that they're really there. Since we don't know for sure, I want to believe that there's something there. I do the rituals and appreciate the ancestors every morning. I ask the ancestors, for example, when our son goes to work—he's in construction—to make sure that he doesn't have an accident. Do I distinguish my husband's ancestors and my own ancestors at the family altar? Yes. First it's my husband's family. I don't pray to my own ancestors at the Buddhist family altar. I have a separate altar—a photograph of my mother, and some of her ashes. I talk to her there. The first floor of this house is his family's altar. The second floor is my own family's. Which is more important to me? Maybe for now my husband's family altar is most important: I ask them to look over our children, and to protect the family. But my own mother is closest to me.

Although this woman's husband is the inheritor of the family altar and house, it is she who makes daily offerings of food or drink at the family altar to her husband's ancestors; only at a different, more private altar does she commune with her own family's ancestors. Taking care of the family altar is a role that she fully carries out, particularly because it is her husband's ancestors who she feels will help protect her son, in his dangerous line of work. Because she speaks with the ancestors every day, she may be predisposed to believe that she is not merely talking to herself, but to those ancestors, who may perhaps listen and respond, both her husband's ancestors and those of her own family, particularly her mother.

Other women frankly disliked praying to their husband's ancestors at the family altar, such as this childless teacher in her sixties:

> Yes, we have a Buddhist altar at home. My family and my husband's family are different—his family isn't my family. I don't pray to his ancestors, but I do play the role—while thinking it's annoying to have to do it, I place a bowl of rice on the altar. But I don't talk to my husband's ancestors at the altar. I'd really love to talk to my own parents, but I have no desire to talk to my husband's parents. It all seems so unfair. Why do I have to look after my husband's parents and ancestors when they had no relation to me when I was a child? But I do my duty at the altar.

Because this woman has no children, she feels that she has no reason to pray to her husband's parents and ancestors for their aid and protection of her and her husband's children; for her, her daily practice at the altar is simply a chore.

It has been the standard practice for wives to be buried with their husbands in the husband's familial grave, but this is giving way for some in Japan. According to one recent survey cited by Kotani Midori, some 20% of Japanese women

have no desire to share a familial grave with their husbands but would rather make their own individual arrangements.[20] One reason for this, as some of our interviewees have described, is that they resent their husband's behavior in their married lives, and do not want to share a grave and perhaps a life after death with him. In 2012, we interviewed a housewife and mother in her seventies who stoutly maintained this:

> My husband is the oldest son and inherits the family grave. That's a problem. It's Japanese convention for me to be in the family grave, but I don't want to be in a grave with him, I want to be with my own mother. The difficulties I had when I was young are just too much for me to forget. Since I've been married, I've never been to a movie with him, even once! I want to be reborn to marry a person who likes movies! All he ever thinks about is his work!

In 2018, along with her daughter, we visited this woman in an assisted-living facility, where she was ill with Parkinson's Disease. In her diminished voice, she whispered that she still didn't want to be buried with her husband, who had died the year before. But as her daughter later explained, "Yes, my mother said that. But still, she probably will be buried with my father following Japanese tradition—that's what other family members want." Where one is buried may not seem to bear an obvious relation to life after death, but in this case, based on her comments throughout our 2012 interview, it indeed does—she wants to be reborn into a paradise with her mother rather than with her husband, or reborn into a future life where she can be with a husband who likes movies, rather than with her husband in this life, who showed no interest at all in what she loved. (Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality* asks the pivotal question of a couple, "do you want to stay together in your next life, or never meet again?"[21] We asked this of several couples we knew in Japan and in the United States. The most frequent answer we received from men was that they would be happy to be remarried to the same spouse; the most frequent answer from women was that "I'd like to be married to someone else." To avoid creating marital discord, we quickly learned not to ask this question.)

Many older Japanese are resigned to the fact that the tradition of caring for the family Buddhist altar will end with their generation, as we earlier saw, but others are happy to shed the tradition. Some Japanese we interviewed have no belief whatsoever in a realm of life after death where the ancestors may reside, but nonetheless feel compelled for social reasons to go through the necessary rituals, such as this couple in their early seventies, he a former newspaper reporter and she a housewife and mother:

HE: We have this little Buddhist altar. But no, my children won't receive this when we die. It's really a pain having the priest come to chant sutras for the dead person's soul. But we have to do it…

SHE: My grandmother said it best: "When you die, there's only nothing. So, after I die, do whatever you want (*dō de mo ii*) for the funeral and the Buddhist altar." Our son definitely will not want to take care of the family altar! He thinks that the whole thing is ridiculous. He wants my husband to make a grave, so that he can enter into it. That's because it costs a lot of money.… Do I want to become an ancestor looking after my children and descendants? Even if I could see them, there's nothing I could do to help them. They'd probably want money, and I couldn't help with that!

When we mentioned that some people we interviewed believed that their parents will come to meet them when they die, this couple laughed loudly and incredulously. They carry out the Buddhist rituals only because it is socially necessary—like many Japanese, they feel that they must call in the Buddhist priest to chant sutras, even if they have no belief in it; pressure to behave in socially appropriate ways in Japan is very strong, and whatever you may think, you may feel compelled to act in accordance with social norms. As the teacher in her sixties told us,

> In Japan, what society tells you to do and what you yourself want to do are often different. With funerals and so on, you don't want to create quarrels, so if this is how something is done, you do it.

There is, however, a fading sense of obligation towards carrying out Buddhist rituals for many in Japan. As a woman in her eighties told us, "Religion has gotten weaker these days. In the past, when someone died, you had all kinds of things you had to do. But today, you just call the Buddhist priest to do them, that's all." Buddhism is wildly derided as "the funeral business," since Buddhist priests make much of their income from funerals; as one interviewee in her fifties told us, "We have a Buddhist altar here in the house, but I don't give much thought to religion. Priests often drive really fancy cars!" A number of new arrangements are emerging in response to this fading trust in Buddhism. Over the past decade, funerals and burials have become more individualized and privatized.[22] Underlying this are changing cultural attitudes towards death. As Hinohara Shigeaki argues in his book *Inochi to ikigai* (Life and what makes life worth living), "Death is the final chance you have to show who you really are….Death is the last chance you have for self-realization."[23] This individuation extends to senses of life after death as well.

By some accounts, the number of people who believe that there is life after death has risen in Japan in recent years. According to one survey,[24] 40% of Japanese believed in "the other world" [*ano yo*] in 2013, signifying "life after death," up from just 20% in 1958—due, it is argued, to Japan's affluence, enabling people to think about life after death rather than focusing only on their immediate livelihood. However, this is not an increase in belief in established religions, but rather an increase in people following their own individual paths. As Imaizumi Masaaki tells his readers about life after death in his book *Shi o*

kowagarazu, sei o yokubarazu (Not fearing death, not being greedy for life), "It's up to you as to what you want to think" might happen to you after you die[25]; as Inoue Kidō has commented about senses of life after death in Japan in his book *Shinikata sagashi, ikikata sagashi* (Looking for a way of death, looking for a way of life). "As for…'life after death,' if you have a hundred people you'll have a hundred different interpretations."[26] This trend towards individuation affects ancestor veneration, which is increasingly no longer tied to the household but is rather a matter of the individual who has lost a loved one and may communicate with them on a regular basis.

We interviewed a computer programmer in her fifties who lost her husband two decades ago, after they had been married for only a few years.

> My husband has been dead for 20 years, but I continue talking with him, and asking him for help. Whether he can really help, I doubt it. Maybe it's just a matter of soothing myself. But I definitely will meet my husband when I die. Basically, I think that there's only *mu*—nothingness. But I also think that I will definitely meet my husband again. That's a contradiction, but…No, it's not just that I *want* to meet my husband—I *will* meet him, I'm sure. I'm 100% sure. We won't have physical form, but somehow we'll be able to talk. Nobody knows what happens after you die. But I'm sure I'll meet him!

This woman's sense of life after death is based on hope. She is well aware that she is contradicting herself in believing in nothingness as our ultimate fate but also that she will meet her husband again, but to her, this doesn't matter. As she insisted, to us and to herself, this hope is a certainty: she *will* meet him after death, an emotional certainty transcending her logical doubts. This is an attitude that many Japanese we interviewed held to—life after death for lost loved ones was not a matter of logic but of emotion and feeling, with the latter winning out over the former as the basis for one's sense of what will happen beyond the grave.

Late one night in a bar, a young man in his twenties, a graduate student in engineering who had overheard our discussions about life after death, approached and told us this story.

> I have my late grandfather's watch. So, if I have an affair, I can't do it in my own bed at home, because my grandfather might be watching. His soul is in the watch. He might say, "That's wrong! Don't do that!" Yes, maybe most men would be worried about their wives finding out about their affairs rather than their grandfathers; maybe it's odd that I'm worried about my dead grandfather. That's because, to be honest, I don't think my wife would find out; she lives in a different city. But my grandfather would find out! If there was a wall here, you couldn't see past it. But because he's in heaven, he can see everything. He lives in the watch—his soul lives in the watch. Because of that I need to live properly. My ancestors are

> watching, so that if bad things happen to me, maybe it means punishment is descending on me. Would I ask my grandfather for help if something bad were happening to me? Yes, I'd ask him to save me! I do believe in another world! Or rather, whether I believe or not, I think that my grandfather definitely would save me. Whether it's a 30% chance he's in heaven or a 1% chance, I'm sure he'd help me. I see him in my dreams. Yes, I think that my grandfather is listening to this conversation. Whether it's 1% or 60% or 100% chance of that, I can't say. But I think he's listening.

This man was a bit drunk when he made these statements, but he shows the same kinds of contradictions we saw in more sober interviews. His grandfather resides in heaven, he somewhat believes, but also in the watch that he now possesses, which is why he cannot take his mistress home. This brings in the larger question of how, if his grandfather is in heaven or paradise, he can also be within the watch this man has inherited; but this is a logical intricacy that he feels no need to ponder. There may or may not be another world, he says, but his grandfather would definitely save him if he needs saving—this is most important, although it is one more logical contradiction: if there is no other world, how could his dead grandfather possibly save him? This man is a graduate student in a scientific discipline, but here too, emotion wins out over logic—human feeling is what is key.

Many younger Japanese professed no such feelings of closeness to their departed forebears. As an office worker in her thirties said,

> I don't have a husband or children, but I do have parents. I go on visits to the family grave with them twice a year. I ask the ancestors how they are doing ("*ogenki desuka*?"). But no, of course I don't really talk to them! No, I've never had any experience of meeting their spirits or anything like that.

For her, visiting ancestral graves with her parents is simply a custom; because she has only hazy memories of her grandparents, there is no personal linkage that might give her a sense of their actually being present when she speaks with them, or with her ancestors in general. After her own parents die, perhaps her sense of closeness to the departed will become much more personalized—perhaps she will even sense their presence, their communication—or perhaps not. Many more people we interviewed made such skeptical statements; as a salaryman in his fifties said, "Yes, I talk to my ancestors at *obon*, but I honestly don't think that they hear anything I say. I do this because it's tradition, that's all. This is what we're supposed to do."

We earlier discussed how in Japanese households wives are typically the ones who engage in the daily activities of ancestor veneration in the household. This may be a reason why they often sense that there is a life after death: they may be inclined to hope that what they are doing in their daily ritual at the family altar has a degree of meaning beyond the living. In most families these differences in

senses of life after death are not important—husbands and wives probably will not argue about such a thing. As the salaryman in his fifties quoted above told us,

> I don't believe that the ancestors are really there, but my wife's family does. I go to my wife's father's grave at *obon*, and talk to him in my heart, but I really doubt he can hear anything I'm saying. My wife, though, thinks that she can communicate with him: she can talk to his soul, she imagines. But we wouldn't quarrel over this. It doesn't matter to me what she thinks. We argue about lots of other things, but not about this!

This couple wholly differs in their senses of life after death, but it doesn't matter—life after death is simply irrelevant as a vital topic of disagreement. Just as we saw last chapter for some American couples, for these Japanese non-believers in life after death, the fact that their spouses may believe in life after death is not an important issue in their lives together. However, sometimes, these differences in senses of life after death may indeed be important, as in this couple, whom Mathews has known for decades and who thus can speak with remarkable frankness about one another. She is an English teacher; he is a heart surgeon: they are both in their fifties.

SHE: I believe 100% that there's life after death. I don't have any religion. But I really love my father, who died last year, so I believe he'll protect the family. My older sister and I and my mother all believe that my father will come to greet us when we die. I don't know if he's in paradise (*gokuraku*), but he's a fun person, so he must be in a fun place! We all know we're going to meet him! My husband isn't part of this family. I won't meet him after I die. I married him because I really like him, so I have no regrets, but we live in different worlds when it comes to life after death. He has a totally different attitude towards his parents than I have towards my father. I have the sense that my father, after he died, has really helped me. When I have trouble, I turn to him, and he protects me. I'm not afraid of death at all, because I know that my father is there for me, and my mother too in the future. There's a 100% chance that I'll meet my father after I die, and that makes me really happy.

HE: There's a 100% chance that there's nothing after we die. I wanted to study medicine when I was a child because death was so frightening. I was 10 years old when I first had this feeling, the sense that everyone dies. It was a big shock; I sensed that other people lived without realizing this, but for me it was inescapable. As doctors, we try to conquer death, although I know full well that we can't. I think my wife is just fooling herself (*jibun o gomakashite iru dake to omou*): there's no chance of anything after death. There's entropy. Cells can't come back to life; consciousness arises from the function of the brain. When brain function ends, it's gone, it's over.

SHE: Gordon, you ask how we can live together with these different views. Well, we don't talk about this. He knows we're different. But we don't judge. It's just a matter of character. People are just born that way….I think that people different from me are interesting. But because he's a pessimist, he thinks they're fools!

HE: I'm not a pessimist, I'm a realist. Basically, everyone is afraid of death, and so they created religion. And they're fooled by religion.

SHE: No, it's a matter of whatever you want to think! Some people like karaoke, others don't; some like egg-rice, others don't. You can't explain why. Everyone has their own point of view.…After I die, I don't think I'll be with my husband. I like him a lot, but my own family is waiting for me. I don't think we'll go to the same place after we die.

HE: There is no place for me to go after I die.

SHE: I didn't understand him, but after seeing how he was brought up, I can understand why he thinks the way he does. Of course, if he dies I'm going to miss him. And yes, after death, I'll be with my father, saying, "I really wish I could meet my husband again…"

This Japanese couple resembles in their differences the American couple we saw last chapter who mirthfully discussed their different senses of life after death or its lack. But whereas the American woman tells us that if her husband can't get into heaven, she doesn't want to be in heaven either, this Japanese woman believes that after death, despite her affection for her husband, she will be going to a different place than he will. He interprets this difference through his medical-scientific lens as a matter of logic: consciousness can't go anywhere after you die—it simply vanishes. His wife is deluded, he maintains. She, on the other hand, interprets their difference as a matter of upbringing—she grew up in a loving family whereas he did not, she implies; she is an optimist in life and he is a pessimist. Individualized ancestor worship is in large part a matter of how affectionate and deep one's ties were to the departed. To a considerable extent, the deeper those ties have been, the more likely the bereaved survivor is to feel that they can communicate and meet with the departed. Although this woman apparently loves her husband, for her this is the only life in which she will ever meet him. In the next life she will be with her father; her husband, on the other hand, will simply be dead. Few Americans we spoke with imagined being with their parents after they died, but this was a prominent Japanese trope, most typically for married women, as we've seen, often in contradistinction to being with their husbands after they died.

Women throughout the world tend to believe in life after death more than men, as we've discussed, and this is reflected in Japan more than in many other societies; in Japan, 60% of women but only 41% of men say that they believe in life after death, according to the World Values Survey.[27] In Japan, it is women who typically engage in the practices of ancestor worship; but there are men who

do this too. We spoke with a bartender in his fifties who waxed eloquently late one night when there were no other customers in his bar:

> My father died two years ago, and I really want to meet him again. I really can meet him, I think. Maybe it's only my imagination, but that world exists, I want to believe; I'd say that there's a 50% chance that I can see him, maybe in a different dimension. I have a Buddhist altar at home. I come home, wash my hands, burn incense and talk to my father. Does he hear me? Well, I hope he hears! I have doubts as to whether he hears me, but if he answers, I wouldn't be surprised. Well, I guess I would be surprised, but it's my father, so I'd think, wow, great! People say that paranormal things can happen. Yes, I think he's there; I really want to meet him again! There's lots I want to apologize to him for! (laughs ruefully)

This man longs to see his late father again; this is the fundamental emotion shaping his sense of life after death. As our more rationalistic Japanese interviewees maintained, there's a great gap between "I want to think that there's life after death" and "there is life after death," or between "I want to see my late father/husband/mother/wife" and "I *will* see them," with the former not necessarily leading to the latter; but this man allows for a 50% chance that he will indeed see his father again.

This man spoke of "heaven." In his words, "I want to go to heaven (*tengoku e ikitai*) after I die! No, I'm not Christian, I'm Buddhist." In our interviews, some Japanese people spoke of *gokuraku*, or paradise, a term with Buddhist connotations, and others spoke of *tengoku,* heaven, a term without such connotations. Buddhist writers such as Satō Yūsaku, in *Hito wa shindara dō naru no ka*: *ano yo no rūru*] (What happens after people die—the rules of the other world), discuss the differences between these two realms, maintaining that whereas heaven is the endpoint, in paradise one can still strive to improve.[28] For most Japanese, however, the difference is one of feeling; paradise sounds more tied to conventional Buddhist conceptions, whereas heaven, as a foreign concept, is more personal and amenable to one's own imaginings. Heaven also lacks the seriousness it holds for many American Christians, as we saw last chapter. As this bartender joked, "In heaven, age doesn't matter, I think. How old will my father be when I meet him? Will I still be able to recognize him? Yes, if my father has found a new girlfriend in heaven, I couldn't tell my mother anything!"

Pure Land Buddhism, as the most adhered-to religion in Japan, has its own term for paradise, *jōdo*, which we never heard in interviews; this may relate to a general discrediting of Buddhism in Japan in its spiritual tenets. As one recent Japanese volume on life after death maintains, "No one believes in *jōdo* anymore…Even priests don't believe in it anymore."[29] And yet Buddhist doctrines powerfully remain for some, as we will now consider, not just in terms of ancestor veneration but also in terms of reincarnation.

Reincarnation and Paradise/Heaven

Reincarnation and ancestor veneration seem contradictory. Ancestor veneration is based on love for an ancestor within the family, whereas reincarnation is based on one's individual behavior in this world apart from the family—being judged for your own karmic deeds. In ancestor veneration, you give offerings to and communicate with departed loved ones and ask them to help you in life; but in reincarnation, others can't help you—you are judged in terms of your own karmic slate in this life and past lives, and others' intercession is useless. Beyond this, there is the question of where the dead actually go. Are the dead reincarnated into a different existence, or do they stay spiritually close to their earlier home in order to protect their family members? At the family grave at *obon*, are the departed coming back from the dead, or have they been reincarnated into a different being, in which case they presumably couldn't possibly come back?

Some Japanese Buddhist authorities explain this apparent contradiction by saying that reincarnation is delayed until after the 33rd or 50th anniversary of the death of a person, after which Buddhist ceremonies conducted for a specific individual cease, and the individual becomes a more generalized ancestor. This indicates that for the first few decades, the departed are individual ancestors, and only after they are individually forgotten are they reincarnated.[30] In a broader sense, cognitively where people actually go after they die has never really been very clear to many Japanese, as we've seen. How reincarnation may interact with ancestor worship is something that no Japanese we've ever met spends much time wrestling with.

Only a small minority of Japanese we interviewed—less than 20% of our interviewees—spoke of reincarnation. (Indeed, almost as many Americans we interviewed believed in reincarnation as Japanese, despite the long historic roots of belief in reincarnation in Japan.) Some adhered to reincarnation in a traditional sense, espousing the earlier-mentioned philosophy of *rokudō,* the six realms of reincarnation that have been promulgated in Japan for a millennium. Others adhered to reincarnation in terms of more recent Japanese religions such as Soka Gakkai, adhering to reincarnation as a core doctrine, or, even more recently, American and European New Age ideas, whereby reincarnation is seen as a matter of the ongoing growth of the soul or spirit lifetime after lifetime.

One man who spoke of reincarnation was a former employee of a large company, now in his late sixties, who retired to become a Buddhist priest with his own small congregation—a move that left his former corporate colleagues dumbfounded, but that made perfect sense to him:

> There are a lot of suffering people today, but typical Buddhist priests, without any experience of the world, can't do anything to help them. My experience as a salaryman taught me how to relate to people's problems, and maybe solve them.

He maintained that his Buddhist path, involving significant meditational rigors, is the true one, as reflected in his views of life after death:

> There are many Buddhist priests in Japan who don't believe much in reincarnation. But I do—the body dies but the soul continues. Almost all Japanese think about only how they can enjoy their lives until they die. But I think about preparing myself for the next life. The soul goes on forever. Yes, I believe in the six levels of rebirth set forth in traditional Buddhism. It's fine if you don't adhere to this, and just properly live your life in this world. But the biggest mistake people make is to think that they were born into this life, and when they die it's done. They might try very hard to help people in this world, but they don't appreciate the fact that they were given this life by their ancestors, and through their own previous lives—they have no appreciation of the past and its link to the present and future. If people understood our links to the past and the future, their lives would be better. Our souls are immortal. If I found out in my final moments that that wasn't true, that there wasn't reincarnation, my life would still have been worth living this way: I wouldn't feel regret. But I am 100% certain that this is real.

Most Buddhist priests today inherit their profession, and perhaps their father's temple. This man has chosen this as his calling—he is not a Buddhist priest for the sake of the income derived from "the funeral business," but rather from his own deeply held beliefs, foremost among these, reincarnation. He mentions the importance of ancestors but does not discuss his own departed ancestors—instead, his effort is to move to a higher level of reincarnation, he maintained to us. He emphasized in our interview that one need not believe in this—the key is what you do in your life rather than what you believe: this is the opposite of many of the Christians we heard from last chapter, who emphasized faith in Christ more than how a person behaves in life. He also discusses the fate and potential destiny of Japan:

> I feel regret when I look at Japan today. Religion is the basis of human life; but most Japanese don't believe in religion. Schools don't teach about this, and priests also don't do this enough. If Japanese all believed in reincarnation, the world would become much brighter because people would feel appreciation and try to help others. Japan should be a leader in world peace, since it had the atom bomb dropped on it. That should be Japan's leadership—to end war…

Last chapter, a number of Americans, both Christian and atheist, spoke of the United States as their country and its spiritual state; next chapter, we will see a number of Chinese speaking of their country in somewhat similar terms. But this man was the only Japanese we interviewed to speak of the spiritual situation of

Japan as a country and to see his spiritual path as offering a path for his country. Because of the shadow of World War II, Japanese of his age are typically reluctant to speak of their vision of Japan, for fear of being seen as nationalistic; but for him, and for some others of his generation born in the wake of World War II's devastation, Japan's role should be to lead the world in peace. He believes that the true path to this is through belief in Buddhism and reincarnation.

S*hugendō,* the religious path followed by this man, has gained a certain spiritual cachet in recent years in Japan for its mountain-meditational rigors, but there are not many adherents to its belief systems—only a few people attend the services he offers, he indicated. We interviewed a woman in her seventies who was a member of a more conventional Buddhist sect and who spoke of reincarnation because she had no family to pray for her once she dies. Because reincarnation does not require the intervention of familial prayers—because it is entirely individual—it can provide succor to those who do not have families or are estranged from their families. "I don't have any family, but I have led a proper life, even though I have had many difficulties. I think I will be reborn into a life that won't be as hard as this one has been," she told us. Her suffering in this life provides hope for her that she will not have to suffer in her next life.

More Japanese adherents to reincarnation we spoke with belong to various Japanese New Religions, such as Soka Gakkai, which has millions of adherents in Japan and worldwide. New Religions (*shinshūkyō*) is the term used to characterize religions founded in Japan since the mid-19th century. Soka Gakkai is by far the largest such religion, with claims of having twenty million members, although this is disputed. In 2016 in Japan we interviewed a woman in her late fifties, an English teacher, single, and a long-time member of Soka Gakkai, who believed in reincarnation because it is a central tenet of Soka Gakkai; she spoke religiously of its truth. When we saw her again in 2018, she told us that she had left the organization:

> Yes, I was a Soka Gakkai member for 40 years, but no longer…Today, information is on the internet: people can find out lots of things about the religion apart from what it proclaims about itself. Young people especially—they don't follow an organization; they follow their hearts.

Soka Gakkai has in some respects been the closest Japanese equivalent to evangelical Christianity: it has, throughout much of its history, insisted on the exclusive loyalty of its members, unlike most Japanese religions, and has also at points in its history sought for its members to proselytize non-believers, as most Japanese religions have not. But it is apparently being eroded, not least by the internet, whereby organizational secrets may not remain secret but spread to the world. We cannot know conclusively about the erosion of religions such as Soka Gakkai in Japan,[31] but it seems reasonable to suppose that the internet does indeed have an effect on personal senses of belief: search out knowledge for yourself about life after death rather than relying on what religious organizations tell you.

Despite leaving Soka Gakkai, this woman still believed in reincarnation:

> If I died now, what would happen to me? While my body would die, my soul—or my heart, or spirit or consciousness—would continue. This isn't Soka Gakkai, this is my own thinking. Near-death experiences provide hints that something survives. I can't say that I believe this 100%—maybe it's just that I hope 100%. If you're sick or poor, it may be because of things you did in a past life. Maybe we ourselves decide this: "I did these things in a past life, and so I need to experience the other side." Or maybe there is an impersonal set of rules in the universe: "You did this, and so you need to experience the same things you did to others." People who have lots they need to learn will be reborn in a way that helps them learn. At some point we leave behind our separate selves and become part of a universal consciousness, I suspect.

She told us how she had been amazed by the apparent intelligence of the plants in her apartment, drawing themselves towards sunlight as if anticipating when and where the sun would appear. This led her to engage in her own investigations of nature and of the spiritual world, where she found a vast array of information on the internet and elsewhere, as part of what has been called a Japanese "spiritual boom":

> In Japan, interest in the spiritual world, in souls and channeling—90% of it may be nonsense, but it's really increased recently. People who don't think there is any life after death might think this is foolish. But science doesn't understand 97% of what goes on in the universe!

We saw New Age doctrines influencing some of the Americans we heard from last chapter; but partly because Christianity maintains a more vigorous presence in US religious belief than institutionalized Buddhism in Japanese religious belief, this strand of thinking is particularly prominent in Japan. We interviewed half-a-dozen other young Japanese who had been more or less swept up in this "spiritual boom," such as this office worker in her thirties:

> I think that we are here in order to grow. My ideas have been shaped by *Hi no tori* [Phoenix]—the famous last *manga* of Tezuka Osamu [perhaps Japan's most famous *manga* artist of the 20th century].[32] It talks about how through reincarnation we keep growing to a higher state. All religions are one—Christianity, Buddhism, Islam—at base, they're all saying the same thing, but humans break them up and make them different. The purpose of all this is growth towards the highest point. All living things in the universe are together in this. There is reincarnation for all of us: we are one and become separate beings in order to grow. We pick stories, choosing in order to experience different things for the sake of our

> soul's growth. Don't blame other people for what happens to you! If we suffer in this world, we were meant to suffer—we need to overcome this. I don't particularly want to be reborn—human life is tough!….I really like talking about this! I read lots of books, and watch lot of television programs and go over lots of websites about spiritual matters. Do I believe 100%? Well, maybe there's a 5% chance it's not true. Until I die, I won't know!

This woman has no immediate link to her ancestors—her parents are alive and she had no close link to her late grandparents. She also has no links to any organized religious groups. Her own sense of life's meaning makes use of Japanese popular culture—most obviously Tezuka Osamu, but also an array of present-day authors she spoke of. One bestselling author in this genre has been Iida Fumihiko, whose books, including works such as *Hito wa shinde mo ikite iru* (Those who die live on)[33] have sold some two million copies in Japan, discussing how each of us proceeds from reincarnation to reincarnation, choosing our future lives and their misfortunes in order to grow more fully. Death is thus not real but is merely a stage of growth in this view, echoed by the above interviewee, which is our human purpose: growth into wisdom. Another Japanese author, Imaizumi Masaaki, tartly comments that Iida's depiction of life after death is a bit unlikely since we seem likely to be reborn as insects [given their numbers], "but if you want to make it your life's meaning, go ahead."[34] Forty years ago, someone like the woman quoted above might have joined an organized religious group in Japan, but this seems less likely today. In accordance with the general individualization of Japanese spiritual convictions, this woman has created her own sense of life after death, as very much abetted by Japanese popular culture and the internet.

Indeed, there are countless magazines and websites in Japan on the occult, some taking up their own particular niche among aficionados and a few reaching a broader audience, such as Iida's writings mentioned above. There are also many movies. To name just two, the 1998 film "*Wandafuru raifu*" ("Wonderful Life," titled in English as "Afterlife") is about a single memory that the newly dead are asked to choose, and that will be filmed, in order for them to enter heaven with a memory that will then be with them for eternity, and that will define their eternity.[35] The 2015 film "*Haha to kuraseba*" (titled in English as "Living with my Mother") is about a young student who died in the atomic bombing in Nagasaki who returns years thereafter as an apparition and comes to understand his mother in a new light. These films, along with innumerable other movies and TV dramas, and *manga* dealing with ghosts and other supernatural entities, stimulate the imaginations of their viewers, just as we saw last chapter in an American context.[36] In a world where "no one knows what might happen after we die," viewers might think, "oh, so maybe that's what happens." A teacher in his thirties said,

> I haven't seen any ghosts or anything, but…there have been lots of programs on TV about spirits. At this point, I'd say there's a 30–40% chance of there being a world of life after death….I think that world might exist because of what I've seen on TV.[37]

A restaurant manager in her thirties said,

> If there was an earthquake now and I died, I'd be finished. But there's maybe a 30% chance that I'd go to heaven, and then be reborn as a human being. I'm interested in the occult. I read lots of magazines and on the internet about ghosts, about extraterrestrials, about reincarnation. I believe only 30% because even though I'm really interested, I just don't know. It's like science fiction to me.

As an office worker in his forties said,

> If I died now, I think I'd be reincarnated. That's what I hope, anyway. Maybe there's a 50-50 chance that it will really happen. I might be reborn as grass, or as flowers, or as an animal. That might be fun! I've never experienced it!

Reincarnation, and life after death in general, for people such as these, is something they imagine and may enjoy fantasizing about, but is not something that they take with great seriousness, because, as they maintained, they cannot know what is ultimately real. Thinking about reincarnation is simply a way of reassuring themselves that there might be something beyond this life, although there might not be—it is the possibility, abetted by the speculations to be found in media, that they find interesting and reassuring.

Some of the Buddhists we interviewed spoke of heaven, but heaven was also discussed by Japanese Christians, of whom there are very few in Japan, roughly 1% of Japan's population. A restaurant manager in his fifties said,

> My family is Christian—my wife and our children and my mother. But not my father. When he dies, he won't go to heaven, but he won't go to hell either, I don't think. Maybe he'll go to a Buddhist heaven. Or maybe he'll be reincarnated. No, I don't think he will simply go to nothingness. But it's not a matter of what I think. This is up to God. We are all God's children. Unless you confess to your sins, you cannot get into heaven.

This man takes the conventional evangelical Christian view that only those who confess to their sins can go to heaven. But unlike the accounts of the more conservative American Christians we heard from last chapter, he does not condemn non-believers like his father to hell. His father may simply go to a

heaven somewhere else, and perhaps be happy, although not, in his son's view, in communion with the one real God—and in any case, this decision is God's to make, not his, he tells us.

Another Christian, an accountant in his early seventies, is similarly pluralistic in his views

> I am a Christian, not a Buddhist, so I don't think that my relatives come back at *obon*. There are a few people in my family line who haven't been Christian, but I don't think they will be going to hell. Buddhists and Christians have different beliefs, but they'll all wind up in the same heaven—even the people who don't believe in anything will go to heaven….If I was killed in a car accident tonight, it's possible that I might just vanish. I do have doubts sometimes, even if I have my beliefs. Because I haven't died yet, I don't know! I've tried hard to live my best as a Christian—but if there were no next world, it would be OK.

This man's view of heaven resembles that of some American liberal Christians discussed last chapter—regardless of our beliefs, we will all go to the same heaven. He repeats the same line that so many Japanese interviewees say: "Because I haven't died yet, I don't know!" What happens after death remains a mystery to him, despite his Christian beliefs, beliefs that in other parts of our conversation he promulgated stoutly. In a pluralistic Japan, his is one more belief, one that can certainly be defended, as he ably did in a conversation we had about life after death with him and three of his non-Christian coworkers, but one that cannot easily be proclaimed as the one true faith. Rather, it is simply one more personal conviction.

Many others who discussed heaven described themselves as Buddhist. A salaryman in his twenties said:

> I'm a Buddhist, but I believe in heaven 100%. My image of heaven is of the best place you can imagine. Your dreams will come true: If, for example, you're a baseball player, you can be a professional in heaven. You can do anything….Yes, I've talked to my friends about this. One friend of mine wants to see what heaven is like before he decides whether to go to heaven or to be reincarnated. No, not everyone can get to heaven. Only 50% of people can get in, I think.

In a world in which no one knows what happens after you die, and in which institutional religions have to some extent lost their power, why not believe whatever you may like? Simply choose whatever seems most enticing, whether heaven or reincarnation, as this young man and his friend seem to imply in their comments.

Another salaryman in his twenties was skeptical about heaven or paradise—he used the terms interchangeably—not about whether these places might exist, but rather about whether they are worth going to:

> Any world after death is probably really boring! What do people do in paradise? Everyone might be playing chess, or net-surfing—that's not interesting! Yes, an interesting world is one where people do bad things! But paradise only has people who are perfect! Would hell be better? No, I don't want to be boiled in a pot! In Japan, unlike America, people don't really believe in any paradise after death all that much, and so people really don't want to die! Death is really frightening.

Much more than the Americans discussed in the last chapter, a surprising number of Japanese readily stated that death was frightening to them. The bartender quoted earlier said, "Yes, death is fearful, because you can't imagine it. From when you're a little child, your mother says, 'Don't do that or you might die!' You're taught that it's terrifying." He indicated that this was partly a matter of fear of early death: "if you can die at eighty, you've died at an old age, and that's natural. If someone dies at 45, on the other hand, it's tears and tears at their funeral. We're supposed to live long!" But partly it was fear of death itself at any age, as he himself mentioned, and as did another Japanese interviewee who spoke of how his elderly relative had died in terror in his eighties, deeply worried about what might happen after death. As a non-believing retired salaryman in his seventies told us,

> After I die, where does the self that is thinking and worrying go to? What happens when a person never wakes up? That's why it's so frightening! Where on earth do I go? I want to believe in something after death, but I just can't!

Only one American man we interviewed expressed fear of death but some dozen Japanese men did. Why? This may be partly a matter of the personal forthrightness of many Japanese we spoke with, who did not hold to what seems to be the more pride-protecting demeanor of some Americans. To say "I'm afraid of death" is to admit personal vulnerability, something that many Japanese men we spoke with seemed willing to admit. Beyond this, whereas the United States has a dominant religion whose express purpose is to protect the individual from death and to promise eternal life, Japan has no such dominant religion. Buddhism, "the funeral business," has lost its ability to comfort many Japanese; the dominant view, expressed over and over again in these pages, is that "no one knows what happens after you die," a view giving room for hope, but also for fear: "no one knows what happens…" The young people quoted above spun out rather lightly an array of possible fates after death, but as the last comments above indicate, underlying these comments may indeed be fear.

There was a remarkable subjectivity among some we interviewed, who felt that life after death might differ for different people, depending on what they believe. We have seen this in terms of ancestor veneration, with, in the couple we earlier saw, the wife maintaining that she and her husband will go to different places on the basis of their different beliefs as to life after death. A Japanese woman

in her sixties who engages in ancestor veneration said, "Of course, no one knows if heaven or paradise are real—it's OK if people have their own different beliefs." We also saw this subjectivity in one of the Japanese Christians quoted above, who felt that his non-Christian family members would not go to hell but simply to their own different paradises. A Japanese woman in her twenties, a graduate student, took this view to its logical conclusion:

> Maybe where you go depends upon what you believe in. If you think there's reincarnation, then that's what will happen to you. If you believe in heaven or hell, then that's what will happen to you. If you think there's nothing, then that's what will happen to you.[38]

Life after death, in this view, becomes wholly individuated, even solipsistic—there is no common reality, but rather one's personal belief, perhaps determining one's destination for a future lifetime or for eternity.

Nothingness

The sense of life after death adhered to by slightly less than half of those we spoke with was, in Japanese, *mu*, nothingness, indicating through various linguistic subtleties that after you are dead, nothing continues. This is a rough and ambiguous calculation since in a Japanese context the distinction between one who says the possibility of life after death is 30%, or 15%, or 5% is often unclear and varies even with the same person at different moments. For some we interviewed, nothingness co-existed with at least a small degree of hope; they felt that there is no reason to totally disbelieve in life after death, since, as we often heard, "after all, nobody knows…" But for others, reason and science left little room for serious consideration of life after death. As a discussion between Kishida Shū and Kotaki Tōru in the book *Ikiru gensō, shinu gensō* (the illusion of living, the illusion of dying) eloquently explores:

> In the 20th century…we have only been left with an ideology of reason…. It can to some extent address problems in this world, but it can't answer the question of what we were before we were born or what happens after we die….Take a three-year-old child who died of cancer. Science can only say that "your child, by chance, died." But the parents need more than that: another world, or reincarnation to believe in: "She received something awful from an earlier life, so she had to suffer in this life; by dying, she solved this problem, and will be reborn in a better place." This kind of fiction is necessary and was taken care of by religion in the past….But rationality has destroyed that other world [*ano yo*].[39]

A salaryman in his fifties we interviewed exemplified this view—even if he left some small possibility in his mind for a world beyond this one:

> If I died now, would I go anywhere? Scientifically speaking, there's nothing. But while the body will die, as for the soul—I'd say there's a 20% chance that something will continue. I've read that there were experiments where they checked the weight of dying people and found that their weight went down by a few grams when they died. Maybe that indicates something. Although, as I rethink it, maybe 20% is too high; maybe it's more like 1%. I sometimes hear about ghosts. I've never seen one, but I've seen on TV people who have seen them. Because of that, I think there's a possibility that there really may be something like life after death. After you die, your soul isn't Japanese or American, male or female—it's not even human. Yes, maybe there's a collective consciousness that we enter. Maybe there's a God, but it's not the God of any religion—it's the universe: the system of life.

This salaryman initially says that he believes 20% that he will go to some life after death, but then revises this to 1%. As a scientific rationalist (although the idea that the weight of the body decreases by a few grams after death has been found to have no scientific basis), he devotes little thought to life after death, although for our benefit as interviewers, he was willing to wax on about the topic. Science is the ultimate arbiter for Japanese such as this man, who adhere to nothingness as their fate. For people such as him, scientific fact renders belief in life after death implausible if not irrational—even though this man seems to allow for the possibility of some form of collective consciousness after death.

One area that may inspire hope and skepticism is that of near-death experiences, which were discussed by a number of those we interviewed, both believers and non-believers in life after death, including the former Soka Gakkai believer in reincarnation we earlier heard from. As a skeptical mother in her seventies said:

> People who come back [from near-death experience] sometimes say that it's a really beautiful place, full of light (*hikari ga afurete iru*) with fields full of flowers (*hanabatake*). There was a book I read interviewing people who experienced brain death: it discussed these things: "you emerge from a tunnel and enter a splendid world." But then they came back. When I read that, I thought, "Maybe that's how it will be. There's no suffering or fear. Maybe there's no need to be afraid of death." But I'm pretty sure that's only an illusion. When you die you just die. People are looking for any reason that they can to believe in life after death.

We also saw this view expressed last chapter by Americans, who felt that near-death experience gave hope for the possibility of life after death; just as in the United States, in Japan this hope was sometimes accompanied by a degree of skepticism. One with a scientific point of view may hope for life after death on the basis of a near-death experience but can only hope—one should be

skeptical of hope as a justification for belief, the woman quoted above is saying. We interviewed a pharmacist in his sixties who expressed a similar view:

> The human brain really can't comprehend what is happening to it as it's dying, I've read. Yes, I think the idea that the brain simply stops with death is easiest to make sense of. Anything more than that is just what the brain is imagining while it's alive; this is what it wants to think. There's no chance that consciousness lasts beyond the grave.

And so too a civil servant and mother in her forties:

> I've thought about what happens after I die. I've come to think that nothing happens. It's like turning off a TV, that's all. I think there's a 0% chance there's heaven, or reincarnation. I've had several friends die in recent years. Sometimes, I think of talking with them—I've wanted to call them on the phone. But their lives are over. Yes, people always say that "when you die, your loved ones who have died will come and meet you." But scientifically speaking, they won't come to meet you. That's just for the sake of comforting yourself.

But the human attachments of these scientifically minded skeptics sometimes gave them pause. As the pharmacist said,

> Widows in World War II—I've read about how a wife was able to sense that her husband had been killed before she was notified; there are many cases like this. Doctors, being told of this by these women, might have said, "Oh, your memory is playing tricks on you." But more compassionate doctors might have said, "Well, who knows?" Japan used to be a society where people lived together with nature. Your father would die, and you would see the flowers bloom on the anniversary of his death. It was an era when you could encounter people's spirits; you could directly encounter your dead grandparents, from what you remembered of them—they would live on in you. The question is not whether this is an illusion or not. It's more subtle, a matter not of reason but of emotion, how beautiful the moon or the flowers are. It's not that science is wrong, but it's too small, in acknowledging only what can be proved. There's more than that. The astronauts, some of them, after coming back to earth, began to believe in God. These highly-trained people—when they saw the earth from space, they changed. The academic world is based on logic. But that may not be enough.

Despite these words, he himself felt that there was nothing after death: "When I die, there is indeed a 100% chance that I will vanish." But he then added these words: "If I were to lose my wife or one of my children, my mind might

change." Science and logic are not enough, he tells us, but are "too small." But for himself, at present anyway, science and rationality indicate that there is no chance that anything might survive death: this is simply the brain fooling itself, he told us. We left our interview with this man unclear as to whether for him, life after death was a realm beyond science, or whether, on the other hand, it was a matter of illusory comfort—as to whether he had a wisdom that transcended the yes-or-no of science and logic being ultimately valid or not, or whether he was simply trying to "have his cake and eat it too" in his beliefs. Is there a realm beyond logic and science that our own immersion in logic and science blinds us to? Or is such a realm no more than a matter of humans seeking solace that logic and solace deny us? This man would not or could not answer this question—as indeed, few among us can.

The civil servant and mother we heard from above was more dismissive of her desires to believe in a realm beyond death:

> Because I have children, maybe I do believe in life after death 1% anyway—I would want to meet them again if I died—but rationally speaking, I think it's impossible. If I died, it would be wonderful to meet my children again, for example to become a ghost and see how they're doing. But I can't believe that! There's no evidence that there's anything after this biological life. Of course, I've never seen a black hole, either; but scientists say it's there, so I believe it. That can be proved by science; life after death can't be.

This woman began our interview by discussing a fortune teller she had encountered, and in whom she had lost faith:

> I went to a fortune teller to look at my past lives a few years ago. I was told that in a past life, I'd been born in a wealthy merchant's household. The fortune teller saw me as being safe in a big car and said that I would have good luck in my life. I believed him, but then I began suffering from depression, and two years ago I had cancer—after four or five hospitalizations for depression and cancer, I became pretty tired. Maybe what the fortune teller said was a lie.

On this basis, we queried as to whether she would be happier if she believed in life after death—that maybe her depression was rooted in her sense that life didn't mean anything (Mathews is a long-time friend of hers, and felt he could ask her questions that might have been dangerous if asked of someone he did not know well). She said this:

> If I don't believe in any other world after death, if I think we're simply animals who die, is it easier to get depressed? If I believed in reincarnation, or that my ancestors would come to meet me after I died, would I be happier? Well, I don't believe in any of those things, and maybe I'm

> not happy. But if I'm not happy in this life, I certainly can't think about happiness in the next life! I'm now in a situation where I don't really know why I live. If I could know why I lived, if I believed in something after this life, then maybe I would be happier.

This woman's answer indicates that for her a sense of life after death might not mitigate her depression: to extrapolate from her words, "if I'm not happy in this life, why should I think that I'd be happier in any next life?" But while she does not feel the need for a sense of life after death, she does feel the need for a sense of larger meaning and purpose in her life. She has children she dearly loves, but they can't provide that larger meaning. Beyond this, her belief in science makes this sense of larger meaning impossible for her, even if it also may make her less happy.

We discussed earlier how "societies without God" can be perfectly happy without larger meaning, with Phil Zuckerman arguing that lack of belief in life after death does not lead to despair among most Danes and Swedes.[40] The same is true for many Japanese. There are many things to be depressed about in Japanese life today, including its long-term economic stagnation. There are also innumerable personal disappointments that individuals may suffer, in family, work, and life as a whole: few Japanese or human beings in general ever evade such disappointments for very long. However, lack of a firm sense of life after death is not something that apparently depresses most Japanese, not least because there are so many options available for belief if one so chooses. But at an individual level, the inability to sense that life has a larger meaning is indeed a source of unhappiness for some. If life has no larger meaning and if life does not seem particularly happy, then why bother with it?

Others we interviewed did not feel the weight of unhappiness in their mortal lives and could accept death with equanimity, or so they told us. One such person was a coffee-shop proprietor in his fifties:

> There's a 100% chance that when I die, I'll become nothing. Yes, I guess we really are the same as mosquitos: simply animals that die. But I don't think that's lonely. Everything that's born dies. You may live to be eighty, but you'll die; that's how life works. I sometimes imagine the worst thing that could happen to me—for example, my wife divorcing me and taking our child. That would be very lonely, but I'd survive. Even if the doctor said I had lung cancer and had six months to live, I could accept it. If you're born, you die. So the question, instead, is how well you can live, in a fun and creative way. I don't think that life after death matters very much at all. What's important is how you live now. For people who are afraid of death, I'd say, "Everyone dies. So just accept it. And live well in the meantime!"

This man believes in no life after death and thinks little about anything beyond this world: his is a down-to-earth secular approach, as was apparent among

some of the Americans we saw last chapter, such as the man we interviewed who rolled his eyes at any discussion of life after death. If human beings could indeed all straightforwardly live this way, then life would be simpler—"You'll die. Get used to it!" But obviously, many human beings cannot do this—and according to Ernest Becker in his last work, *Escape from Evil*, massive human suffering, in the form of wars, has been caused by the human inability to accept death, with human beings inflicting misery on others in an effort to escape their own mortality.[41] Our interviewee may be extraordinarily wise or perhaps just unreflective, but his attitude is perhaps the only way out of the problem that we inevitably die: "accept it and get on with your life."

A few people we interviewed in Japan extended this view, in their imaginations, to the final moments of their lives. If nothing lies beyond this world, then for secularists it is one's last moments in the world that provide the final opportunity to look back upon one's life to see how it has been lived. A woman in her sixties on the cusp of retirement from a large corporation told us, "If I die at 85, I hope to be saying to myself, 'wow, it was a pretty good life!' I live so that I can say such a thing when I die: that's why I live as I do." An office worker in her forties, another non-believer in any life after death, said with a bit less self-assurance,

> At the moment I die, I don't want to feel any regrets…I don't want to be dying and think, "Ah, I wish I'd done that!" I try to live so that on my deathbed, I'll look back on my life and think that I lived my life as I wanted to live it.

The term "self-realization" (*jiko jitsugen*) is a relatively common Japanese term today among those interested in psychology. If there is no life after death, self-realization might be thought of as what might come at that last moment—"wow, it was a pretty good life!"—before one's consciousness vanishes. Of course, as Sherwin Nuland pointed out in his book *How We Die*,[42] in today's world of combatting death in hospitals, very few of us are able to die with consciousness and dignity intact—the desired death these women describe will not happen to them unless they are very fortunate. But some non-believers we interviewed still felt that they might last beyond their last moments of consciousness before death.

Metaphorical Life After Death

A number of Japanese we interviewed over the years believed in no world beyond this one, but still felt that they might be remembered beyond the grave. A designer in his thirties told Mathews many years ago that "I want everyone to look at my work after I'm gone and say, 'Nakamura did that!'"[43] But perhaps because those we interviewed in recent years are older and see more realistically the likely fate of their artistic endeavors, they were more modest. As an artist and

teacher in her fifties said, "I really don't expect to be remembered for very long after I die. Of course, my work will vanish, except maybe among my relatives and friends. I'm not Picasso!" A musician in her thirties we interviewed insisted that the electronic music she performed bore no relation to being remembered in any future: her music was only for now. A salaryman in his fifties said,

> Fifty years from now, my sons will remember me. But after they die—maybe my grandchildren will remember, but….This is lonely, but there's nothing I can do. This is true for everyone, unless you're Lincoln or Washington or someone like that.

A Japanese authority on aging, Takenaka Hoshiro, in his book *Kōreisha no sonshitsutaiken to saisei* (Old people's experiences of loss and rebirth), writes of how what remains of one's efforts in the face of losses in old age may serve to justify one's life:

> When one is old, one may collect everything one has done in one's life: your work or research. This process may give a sense of achievement in that what you have done for decades can reach its endpoint. Some may do this to have one's name known in history, and others from a sense of mission that one can help others who come in one's footsteps….This is the desire to leave something after you die.[44]

This is an ideal, but few Japanese we interviewed felt that they had any lifelong work or research that could provide such a sense of achievement. Few felt that their names would be remembered much beyond their own deaths, but they did feel that their small contribution would remain as part of a larger whole. As a manager in his fifties told us,

> I'm a civil engineer: various things I've done in infrastructure will remain. Of course, the buildings I've worked on will vanish after a few decades; but their small influence will continue—not directly, but indirectly. No one will know my name, but it doesn't matter. It's proof that one has existed (*Ikite ita akashi ga aru*). For knowledge, your name is not important; it's the contribution you make—it's one piece of a larger whole, to which you add your little bit. It's really a bit much to talk about "contribution to society." You simply have some relation to something larger. But that's important: you've helped to create something.

A teacher at an English school in his early sixties said:

> I'm quite sure there's no life after death in any other world—there's a 0% chance of such a thing. After I die, I want to remain in the consciousness of

> people in this world. It's OK if I'm not remembered at all after 100 years, but for now I want to live on through the memories of my students. Yes, death is a bit frightening—I don't want to go through a lot of pain! I just want to die peacefully at 95. You have to be brave in facing death! I'd rather not live on in any next world, but rather continue in the minds of people in this world. I want my ideas to remain in some people's minds—they'll get occasional messages, inklings from their remembrances of me. You don't have to be famous to leave your influence. To be famous would just be too much trouble. Everyone would always be noticing you! It's better not to be known by most people! For me, life after death means being remembered by my students and by all the people I've known.

This man, who enabled Mathews to first come to Japan in 1980 and has long been one of his closest Japanese friends, died months after this interview of late-diagnosed cancer: Mathews never saw him again after this interview. This book is dedicated to him. As he acknowledges, the legacy of memory is brief—once his students are gone, he too will vanish, for there is nothing beyond, he believes.

These people's words led us to wonder if any sense of personal life after death might simply be arrogance: we don't matter enough to last beyond ourselves, or perhaps slightly longer in the larger scheme of things. But perhaps our modest contributions to a larger whole may be enough: we have added our own tiny bit to a world that goes on long after we ourselves are gone and all memories of our existence have been swallowed up by the passage of time. Some of the Americans whose words we saw last chapter also spoke this way; but a few did indeed speak of being remembered, at least for a while. The Japanese we interviewed, on the other hand, were dismissive about the possibility that any of their personal accomplishments would last. This may partly be due to the fact that several of the Americans were well-known, as almost all the Japanese were not; in any case, the Japanese we interviewed were content to accept that their own beings and achievements would eventually simply vanish into nothingness

Aside from living beyond the grave through one's art or one's achievements, there is also living beyond the grave through one's children. A mother in her forties said, "I will die eventually, but my children will live on, and then their children, and their children." This is definitely the case genetically; as we saw last chapter as well, some people take solace in the fact that their genes will extend far into the future, albeit increasingly diluted after each new generation. This is also linked to ancestor veneration, although that is still generally confined to the male family line. In any case, one will almost certainly be forgotten beyond one's grandchildren. Mathews once sat with a Japanese man as he went through drawers in his family Buddhist altar, long unexamined, finding artifacts from forebears. These included, to his surprise, a medal from a long-ago war—apparently from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. The recipient of this medal was completely unknown to this man, despite being present in his own genes and his

family altar. But perhaps all this doesn't matter. As the engineer quoted above said,

> I visit the graves of my ancestors; but I think that my grandparents and my ancestors are inside me: they're with me, not in the forms of graves. I visit the graves more as a matter a custom. If there is nothing—I die and that's all—what meaning would my life have? I have a 20-year-old son, in university—I have a strong emotional linkage with him. Yes, when I'm dying my child will remain. This is why, when a child dies before its parents, it's so completely sad.

An ultimate form of posterity, transcending memory or books or children or genes, is that of the matter in our bodies returning to nature. A teacher in his forties said, "When I die, I return to nature. I become part of the soil and air and water." This is undoubtedly the case, not as a matter of faith but of fact: we will all continue in the sense that the matter which has composed our bodies will return to the nature and cosmos which has created us. The idea of returning to nature has long been a prominent Japanese concept; as Genyū Sōkyū has written in *Shindara dō naru no*? [What happens after we die?], "In the Japanese other world, our ancestors are just beyond the nature around us, in the moon, or the mountains, or the ocean."[45] However, today this is diminished by the fact that almost all Japanese are cremated rather than buried, as was not the case 80 years ago. One woman spoke of how a big reason Japanese today are so afraid of death is the fact of cremation—typically observed by the grieving family—in which the deceased is swallowed up in flames and almost instantly becomes nothing but ashes and a few fragments of bone. Scholars have argued that "in contemporary Japanese society 'ideal death' refers to a process in which a body is cremated and its ashes then interred. Cremation purifies the dead of death from pollution and brings them to rest."[46] Perhaps this is true for many Japanese; but our own interviewees expressed reservations about cremation. We spoke with an eccentrically dressed old man in a park in Sapporo who had these wise words to say:

> Rather than life after death, the most basic thing is being buried. Human flesh rots away: the maggots eat you. But everything has become strange today: we burn people rather than burying them. Human beings are animals; we all need to eat, maggots too. So we really need to practice burial. We need to put dead people back in the ground rather than burning them. Rather than there being any life after death, we are all part of this universe.

We are nature just as maggots are, this man is saying, so let us sustain them through our own rotting bodies. Japan's "new death rites," such as the scattering of ashes and tree burial,[47] indicate how, despite cremation, there may indeed be a sense of physically returning to nature for some Japanese.

Larger Implications

In the American context explored last chapter, an implication arising from senses of life after death was community: what can hold Americans together if not religion and belief in life after death? In the Japanese context, there is apparently a growing degree of individualism in society and in senses of life after death, with ancestor veneration becoming less a matter of families than of individuals, and with senses of life after death becoming a matter of personal conviction and no more. But despite this, there was generally not much questioning among the people we interviewed about what holds Japanese society together—Japanese society in its social strictures holds Japanese together, they felt, and leads Japanese to behave morally. Religion plays little role in this, and Japanese may engage in the religious practices demanded by Buddhism only because of social pressure. If a key question in the United States is, "Without a common sense of life after death, what can hold America together?" in Japan, the key question is more private and more direct: simply, "What happens after we die?" This is not a question with collectively agreed-upon answers in Japan today, but is largely a matter of one's own private imaginings.

One theme that appears frequently in the preceding pages is that of hope—hope versus rationality or hope versus despair. Consider the wife who had lost her husband, who said, "I think that there's only *mu*—nothingness. But I also think that I will definitely meet my husband again when I die." Similar to this woman, a number of Japanese we interviewed were rationally skeptical that such a thing could happen, but emotionally were convinced that indeed it could. Some skeptical Japanese maintained, as earlier noted, that "just because you *want* to meet someone after you die doesn't mean that you *will* meet them." But that hope remains in a range of Japanese we interviewed—not a faith in anything universal, but rather a private and particular hope to meet again a loved one lost through death.

Does love conquer all? Or does death conquer all? This is a fundamental human question, one that many of the Japanese we interviewed had their own private provisional answer for, as expressed at the Buddhist altar, the family grave, or in daily life—a hopeful yearning most typically intermingled with doubt and skepticism. Might the long-faithful bereaved wife indeed possibly meet her late husband once more somehow, somewhere? Might the women in the World War II era who were somehow able to sense when their husbands had been killed in wartime indeed have communicated with them at their moment of death? The pharmacist who gave us this example does not think it's true, it seems—the doctors, he implies are compassionate more than truthful. But as he told us at the close of our interview with him,

> My wife…and daughters—I can't quite imagine how I would feel if they died. But I may well want to believe that I can meet them again somewhere. And I may be able to convince myself that I indeed can.

Hope is key not only in many of the people we spoke with but also in many Japanese writings on life after death, as we've seen. Japanese books rarely argue vociferously for one point of view or another; rather, their continual refrain is, "If it works for you, go ahead and believe it." As the Japanese writer Ueda Hokugaku puts it, echoing a number of other writers in this genre, "Some people believe in religious depictions of life after death, and some people reject them. We can't judge what's true or not." But "rather than being skeptical about life after death, it's better to be positive. Just as we are born into the world without knowing anything, so too we die: and that's fine."[48] At the end of a children's book by the poet Tanikawa Shuntaro, the grandson finds out that his grandfather has died and doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. "It's begun," he thinks. What's happened isn't the end but a beginning—but he has no idea what that may mean.[49] A similar message is provided in the well-known 2008 Japanese film *Okuribito* (Departures), about Japanese funerals and the undertaking business, in its proclamation that "to die is not the end"—although this too can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. This is typical of so many Japanese books and other media that don't declare what happens after you die but leave it open: the Japanese literature on life after death at present is largely based on this sense of hope. This attitude differs from the American books we saw last chapter, which were often relentlessly argumentative over the question of whether or not God or life after death exist, arguing either "yes" or "no" with no middle ground. But this Japanese sense of hope does parallel the 19th-century American pragmatist William James, in his doctrine that in the absence of proof, believe what is best for you to believe: If you "believe that life *is* worth living…your belief will help create the fact."[50] These books, and many of our interviewees as well in these pages, seem to embody a gentle Japanese pragmatism: "no one knows, so hope for whatever you are able to hope for as to what happens beyond the grave…"

As against hope, there is also an acute awareness of death and vanishing. A key Japanese phrase, in classical literature and also, to some extent, in Japanese life as a whole, is *ningen no hakanasa*, "the brevity of human life." Japanese aesthetics have long adhered to the idea that the essence of beauty lies in vanishing. The beauty of cherry blossoms, to many Japanese, lies in the fact that the blossoms last for only a short time, and then scatter in the wind—it is the fact that they scatter that makes them so beautiful. This idea, when applied to human life, may make death more bearable—but then, perhaps not. The 18th-century poet Kobayashi Issa, shortly after his little daughter had died, wrote the extraordinary haiku, *tsuyu no yo wa, tsuyu no yo nagara, sarinagara*, which can be translated, liberally, as, "Yes, this world is but a world of dew. And yet…" Issa wrote that haiku in response to his friends who had come to commiserate with him in his loss. His reply: "Yes, I know that all things pass, including human life. I know that. And still…" Despite all one's knowledge of life's brevity, the searing pain of loss and grief remains.[51]

Aside from the grief at losing the people one loves, there is also fear, as we've seen: fear of the pain that may precede death, as well as of the finality

of being cremated; and the fear of vanishing after death and being ultimately forgotten. Ancestor veneration has long been one way around this fear, for after one dies, one remains a part of the family, venerated after death as one practiced veneration while alive. The cultural nightmare in an earlier era of the household and its Buddhist altar was of dying as *muenbotoke*, a person without linkages to a household, and who thus cannot enter the world of the dead. Today, with the emergence of alternative funeral arrangements, this is less of a worry for many. Instead, the new cultural nightmare for many Japanese is *kodokushi*, or "dying a lonely death." Japanese newspapers often contain accounts of an old person's corpse being found only weeks or months after death, after the stench becomes so overpowering that the neighbors, who may never even have known the deceased, cannot help but take notice. Japanese TV dramas on occasion show a lone elderly person dying a neglected, unnoticed death, sometimes surrounded by empty *sake* bottles, drunk to diminish dying's pain. As a recent book by Shimada Hiromi emphasizes, all death is ultimately alone, so concern over *kodokushi* is futile.[52] But the acute cultural concern of the present era remains.[53]

There has indeed been an individualization in Japan in recent years; but against this, the Japanese fear of dying alone is fear of an individualization at its extreme—dying without the comforting touch of anyone one loves. Japan is becoming culturally individualistic, but at the same time, its social institutions—companies and schools, and families as well—remain remarkably demanding of those who belong to them. For many of the people we interviewed, their lives in Japan involved considerable social pressure—the long hours one must work at one's company, the demands made upon children in school and upon their parents, the opinions of others in one's extended family that one must more or less abide by. On the other hand, "believe whatever you want to believe," many books on life after death say: this is because, unlike this world, where social pressures abound, you are free in how you imagine the next world, bound only by the limits of your imagination. Thus, whether you want to believe in a realm of ancestors, a world where you can be with your lost loved ones, reincarnation, existence on another planet or dimension, or as a stone or a ray of light, or nothing at all after death, is entirely up to you—a realm where society and its pressures cannot reach.

In Japan, the idea of religious belief and life after death providing a basis for morality was true for some we interviewed. But many more felt that morality in Japanese society was based on social pressure in this world rather than on any world beyond. As a salaryman in his sixties said,

> Japan is like a village. You follow what other people think. Japan can have a variety of religions because that's not the basis of morality—life after death has nothing to do with morality. People don't think about life after death; they think about life now, and about what other people think of you, and the rules you have to follow.

As a teacher in her fifties said, "People in Japan don't do bad things because of *sekentei*, the opinions of other people. You don't do bad things because of how other people will judge you." As a salaryman in his fifties said,

> Why don't I do bad things in my life? Well, Japan is crowded, *semai*. Even if you think that no one is watching you, it will probably be discovered. Even if there was absolutely no chance of being discovered, I'd still be ashamed to do anything bad.

In this commentary, people in Japan behave well because of social pressure in this world rather than the surveillance of any next world. If a world beyond death is viewed by some Americans as a way to keep people behaving properly in this world before death, it is for some Japanese a world of individual freedom where this world before death in all its social pressures cannot reach. Japanese life today continues to be in many ways quite constraining. But it seems that Japanese senses of life after death are remarkably liberating in their tolerance, the freedom to hope whatever you want to hope about what may happen to you after you die and about the ultimate meaning of your existence.

Notes

1 Inglehart et al. 2004: 353.
2 Smith 1974, 211.
3 See Formanek and LaFleur 2004.
4 Reader 1991, 42–43.
5 Stone and Walter 2008, 6.
6 LaFleur 1986: 27.
7 Amstutz 2004: 174.
8 Formanek 2004.
9 Fukuzawa 1966 [1899], 17.
10 Smith 1983: 36; Ohnuki-Tierney 2002, 2007.
11 See Smith 1974 and Morioka 1984 predicting the individuation of ancestor veneration; for recent discussions, see Shimada 2016 and I. Suzuki 2013; for an overview, see Tsuji 2004.
12 Yanagawa 1977: 308.
13 Hasegawa 1995, 139.
14 Imaizumi 2006, 46–47.
15 See Danely 2014 for a discussion of death, loss, and bereavement in Kyoto.
16 Smith 1974, Reader 1991, Lewis 2017.
17 Plath 1964.
18 Kotani 2017: 33, 33–35; see Reader 2012 on Japanese secularization.
19 For example Satō 2016: 40–41.
20 Kotani 2017: 107.
21 Kundera 1999, 43.
22 See Inoue 2013; H. Suzuki 2013b; Kawano 2010; Boret 2014.
23 Hinohara 2003, 201, 221.
24 Reported by Saitō 2015, 153.
25 Imaizumi 2006: 46–47.
26 Inoue 2007, 74.

27 Inglehart et al. 2004: 353.
28 See Satō 2016: 21–23.
29 Kishida and Kotaki 2005: 154.
30 For example, Shimada 2016: 23, 26–27.
31 See McLaughlin 2018.
32 See https://tezukaosamu.net/en/manga/656.html for an overview; see, for an academic analysis, Godart 2013.
33 Iida 2005.
34 Imaizumi 2006: 59.
35 See https://itpworld.wordpress.com/2019/06/20/after-life-wandafuru-raifu-japan-1998/ for a popular discussion of the film; for a more academic discussion see Janes 2018, 256–289.
36 Japanese-language websites on films concerning life after death include https://happyeiga.com/the-ten-best-movies-of-supernatural and https://www.shochiku.co.jp/cinema/database/04264/.
37 In Mathews 2011: 375.
38 In Mathews 2011: 375.
39 Kishida and Kotaki 2005, 99–100.
40 Zuckerman 2008.
41 Becker 1975.
42 Nuland 1995.
43 In Mathews 2011, 377.
44 Takenaka 2005, 210.
45 Genyū 2005, 59–60.
46 I. Suzuki 2011, 104.
47 See Kawano 2010; Boret 2014.
48 Ueda 2013,199, 202, 222.
49 Tanikawa 2014.
50 James [1897] 1956, 62.
51 See, for a fuller interpretation, https://www.lionsroar.com/about-a-poem/.
52 Shimada 2016, 122–124.
53 See Long 2004, 2006.

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4

CHINA

The Loss of a This-World Utopia, and the Lure of a World Beyond

The Chinese Panorama

China resembles Japan in its traditional practices and beliefs concerning life after death, which is hardly surprising since many Japanese cultural characteristics have historically derived from China. In both Japan and China, ritual and practice have been emphasized over faith, unlike in the United States, and ancestor veneration has been key. People from both societies burn incense sticks and make food offerings for their deceased family members when they visit the family grave. Cremation is compulsory in China, as in Japan, and the ashes of the ancestors are usually stored in burial urns in cemeteries. In Chinese funerals, Buddhist rituals may be practiced, as they are in Japan, such as chanting Buddhist sutras for the good reincarnation of the deceased (Taoist rituals may also be practiced in China). A difference between China and Japan in worlds beyond this one is that China has had its panoply of deities, as Japan has not; another difference is that China has had rituals such as burning paper money for the dead, as Japan has not, in order to benefit those who have gone to the other world. Still another difference is that most Chinese today do not keep an altar at home for their ancestors as many Japanese do; Chinese families were forbidden to have family altars during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, and the tradition of having a family altar has since waned for many.

While there are a number of similarities between Japan and China in their traditional practices towards the dead, there is today one fundamental difference. In China over the past 70 years, unlike Japan and the United States, the state has played a pivotal role in shaping what its citizens think about life after death. The Chinese government outlawed the teaching of religion in the early 1950s and declared religion, and belief in life after death, to be no more than superstition. This has eased somewhat in a wealthier China but has continued until today,

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with churches not officially allowed by the Chinese government sometimes harassed or closed down by the authorities, and with perhaps a million Muslims in the Western province of Xinjiang placed in camps where they are "re-educated" to be proper citizens of China.[1]

Despite the Chinese government's ideological position against belief in life after death, there has been significant scholarship in mainland China as well as in Taiwan in recent decades on traditional Chinese conceptions of death.[2] Death, in ancient China, was viewed not as the end, but as a transformation. After a person died, it was believed that a person's life force or energy was dispersed into yin and yang; the yin energy was attached to the tomb and the yang energy went to the world of spirits,[3] with the dead becoming one of three different entities: ancestors, deities, or ghosts.[4] As early as the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), the tombs of royalty were built with windows and doors and provided with daily utensils—there was a general trend of "death imitating life,"[5] at least among the affluent. As the historian, Poo Mu-chou (Chinese names in this chapter are given surname first) has written, "The evolution of ancient Chinese tomb styles… shows that there was an increasingly clear material expression of the netherworld imitating the world of the living."[6] By equipping tombs with all that was needed for daily life, Chinese—the most affluent Chinese, anyway—could ensure that their ancestors would have a comfortable life in the world after death, and that the ancestors would bless their living descendants with prosperity and peace.

The ritual practice of funerals, burials, and ancestral rites has been more or less continuous throughout Chinese history up until the recent past, as a means of reinforcing family ties and social solidarity.[7] James L. Watson has written of how the Chinese state created a broad ritual standardization of death rites, fostering, in the late imperial era, a cultural integration of China through ritual practice, orthopraxy, the standardization of ritual rather than orthodoxy, the standardization of belief.[8] In Watson's words, in the late imperial era, "the Chinese state had no effective means of controlling beliefs regarding the afterlife in the absence of a unified church" or central religious authority,[9] and so sought to standardize ritual—unlike China in recent years, where the state has indeed attempted to control belief, as we will see.

Broadly speaking, in China of different Chinese regions and times before the present era, ancestors have been kinsmen regularly worshipped at tombs and ancestor halls, while ghosts have been strangers for whom no family cared; they were venerated in temples and in public to appease them so that they would not wreak havoc on the living.[10] A small minority of outstanding people in this life were deified as gods or goddesses after they died and were worshipped in temples. If the deceased were maltreated, they might become ghosts and haunt the living to avenge the wrongs done to them and to settle injustices,[11] so considerable effort was made in performing rituals properly and fully and thereby treating the dead well.

Chinese gods and goddesses in traditional religion are in charge of various functions related to the world of the living. At the very top, there is the God of

Heaven (or Jade Emperor) overseeing everything. His wife, Queen Mother of the West, commands all goddesses. Below them, there are hundreds of deities, including Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy; the Wealth God, in charge of fortune; Guan Yu, the God of War; Mazu, the Goddess of the Sea; and the Three Stars, in charge of prosperity, success, and longevity. Chinese deities are quite similar to Greek gods, with individual areas they oversee, and with shortcomings just like human beings. They are important as gods to which people pray, but they have had a limited link to senses of life after death; most Chinese have anticipated becoming ancestors rather than gods. The heavenly court was imagined as resembling the bureaucracy of the imperial court, with this world and the other world as mirror images of one another,[12] and people might pray to various of these gods depending upon what they sought. As C. K. Yang wrote 60 years ago in his still essential book *Religion in Chinese Society*,

> To obtain a male heir, a layman might go to a Buddhist temple to pray to the goddess of mercy or the goddess Niang-niang; but to pray for the return of his health, he might go to a temple dedicated to the Taoist patron of medicine, Hua-t'o. Selection of a temple was guided not by faithful attachment to a single religious faith, but by the reputed magical efficacy of a certain god for a certain purpose.[13]

This categorization of afterlife beings into ancestors, ghosts, and deities, and the powerful ongoing linkages between ancestors and descendants in the family line sums up Chinese senses of life after death before the 20th century. It is impossible to fully know the extent to which people in China actually believed in life after death, but it seems that most people indeed did, through the veneration of ancestors as well as deities and ghosts.

At the end of the 19th century, the Qing Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty in China, was shattered by Western powers and by social movements within China itself. The Qing emperor, with his semi-divine identity as the "son of heaven," lost his political legitimacy. The newly founded Nationalist Party (*Kuomintang*) proclaimed "Standards of Shrine Abolition," and many temples, including numerous city god temples where Qing official rituals were held, were destroyed or converted into schools.[14] The Chinese Communist Party emerged in the 1920s and promoted itself through the ideology of Marxism, a philosophical system based on "matter" whereby everything conceived by humans (including social relationships, spiritual beings, and religion) was no more than "superstructure," ephemeral within the material world.[15] Marx's equating of religion with opium resonated with the Chinese Communist Party's subsequent campaigns to suppress religious and folk beliefs about the supernatural and about life after death.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has vigorously promoted what it terms "state atheism." Traditions related to deities, ancestors, and ghosts were labeled as superstitions

that needed to be abolished. This political campaign began at a relatively mild level: a special tax was levied on "superstitious commodities" (incense sticks and paper offerings burned for the dead) to discourage traditional rituals, and temples or tombs of deities were occasionally destroyed to prevent people from holding worship activities.[16] But in the Cultural Revolution, beginning in 1966 and lasting for a decade, this campaign became more severe, and temples and ancestral shrines, as well as Western churches and mosques, were all either shut down or destroyed.[17] As Ian Johnson has written, during the Cultural Revolution

> Virtually every place of worship was shuttered and clergy driven out. In the Catholic stronghold of Taiyuan in Shanxi Province, the central cathedral was turned into a "living exhibition" of how backward religion was. Priests and nuns were held in cages and local residents ordered to troop by and watch them. Across the country, Buddhist, Daoist, and Catholic clergy who had taken vows of chastity were forced to marry….Family shrines were dismantled and thrown out….Almost all [temples] were emptied of their statues, which were pitched into bonfires or smuggled…to Hong Kong to be sold off through antiques dealers.[18]

During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards, Mao-inspired student-led paramilitaries, went into people's homes to confiscate anything pertaining to the "Four Olds," "Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas," including ancestral altars and portraits of deities.[19] William Jankowiak has described in his ethnography *Sex, Death, and Hierarchy in a Chinese City* the effects that these movements against religious belief and practice had on senses of the supernatural and of life after death. Discussing the late 1980s in the northern city of Huhhot, he noted that

> The state, through persuasion and intimidation, has transformed the northern urbanites' view of the supernatural (and to a lesser extent, the view of inhabitants of Canton [Guangzhou] and Xiamen) from one of efficacy to one of irrelevance, or the by-product of ignorance….The success of the socialist state in undermining traditional cosmology is startling. I was repeatedly surprised to learn how few people prayed to any god.[20]

He asked his interviewees, "When your parents die, do you think they will become spiritual beings?" and found that while some flatly denied that possibility, seeing them as dead and gone, others sought to somehow retain earlier beliefs in a world beyond death within the current strictures of Marxist materialism. "For a number of Huhhotians, the desire to deny death's finality is intense enough to foster a reinterpretation of folk belief and custom in order to maintain the links that have bound family members together for centuries"[21]—while most of his interviewees did not pray, they still sought to believe in something that might last beyond the grave.

In 1982, the Chinese government issued a new edict concerning religion, through which Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism were granted legal existence with official regulations and monitoring.[22] Since then, the Chinese government has taken cautious steps in promoting Buddhism, Daoism, folk religions, and Confucianism, partly to counter the rapid rise of Christianity in China. In the past few decades there has been a vibrant religious revival in China, and a restoration of Chinese religious venues and spiritual practices; but this revival is selective and partial. In schools, Marxism remains a mandatory subject for every student. While the Chinese constitution guarantees citizens "freedom of religious belief," the state shows a preference for "acceptable" faiths such as Buddhism and Chinese folk religions over those with foreign ties like Protestant Christianity.[23] Altars for the God of Wealth and God of Protection are again popular in local restaurants and roadside shrines, but few venues for Protestant communion are considered legitimate. Practices connected with domestic religious practices in the household have been more tolerated than most forms of organized religion.

Many Chinese today maintain the tradition of visiting ancestral halls or tombs in early April's Ching Ming (Qingming) Festival, "Tomb-Sweeping Day," a festival for people to pray and make ritual offerings to their deceased ancestors. Just as in Japanese festivals such as *obon*, many Chinese with no belief whatsoever in life after death participate in the rituals of the Ching Ming Festival, which reinforce the importance of family and familial belonging. This has been a tradition among Chinese for the last 2,500 years; it was discouraged in recent decades, but in 2008 was made a public holiday. Burning incense sticks and paper offerings is allowed and continues to be a common custom during the Ching Ming Festival, including burning joss paper (representing money for the deceased), and paper houses, clothes, and other items; burning them signifies that these items will go to the deceased.[24] Unlike the Ching Ming Festival, however, other festivals for the dead, such as the Hungry Ghost Festival, are seldom celebrated today, as they were in the past. This is the Chinese equivalent of the Japanese *obon,* considered to be when ghosts and spirits return to the world of the living. This summer festival is considered ominous by many Chinese, some of whom avoid traveling at night when it takes place; it has lost its earlier public recognition.

The traditional practices and customs of religion have thus been restored in part, but the question remains, to what extent have Chinese beliefs in life after death reverted to more traditional ideologies, and to what extent have they died out after some 70 years of suppression? This is a matter not just of the extent to which Marxist teachings have eroded and replaced Chinese traditional beliefs, but also of how Chinese relate to the world in an increasingly affluent capitalistic society. Scholars such as Yan Yunxiang have identified a shift in the moral landscape in China from collective ethics to an individual-centered morality of rights and self-realization, a shift that has helped to create a public perception of moral decline in China.[25] During the socialist era, individuals were

supposed to be "seeking no advantage for oneself, pursuing benefits only for others"; each individual was enjoined to serve as "a restless screw of the revolutionary machine" according to socialist discourse.[26] Lei Feng, the devoted servant of Chairman Mao and Communist Party hero, died in 1962 and has been lauded in countless songs over the past 60 years; he was emblematic of this era in his total devotion to the socialist ideal and his eagerness to sacrifice his own well-being for the sake of others.[27] In that era, the pursuit of self-interest was seen as illegitimate. In the 1980s, however, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, doubts about collective moral values emerged, and a new trend towards individualization became visible. In the early 1990s, socialist collective ethics continued to lose ground as government officials and cultural elites rushed to make money in the marketplace,[28] confirming the legitimacy of self-interest and profit-making in a newly capitalistic China, although state control over funerary practices and modes of memorialization of the dead, as well as of religious worship, has remained quite significant.[29] There has been a very significant surge in recent years in religious belief in China, as we will see later in this chapter, and particularly in Christianity[30]—much of which is practiced in underground churches beyond the control of the Chinese state. This chapter's depictions of senses of life after death reflect the shifting values in China over recent decades.

This chapter was written primarily by Yang Yang; the research is based on Kwong Miu Ying's 41 interviews in 2014–2015, Yang Yang's 32 interviews in 2018–2019, and 24 interviews from students of Mathews' class "Meanings of Life" over the past nine years who gave us their consent to make use of their interviews. Interviews were conducted in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. Half of the interviewees were men and half were women; they were people of all different ages, from their twenties to their eighties, and of all different levels of affluence and background, as well as religious beliefs or their lack. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the dominant language of south China.

Guangzhou, like Denver and Sapporo, the cities where interviews took place in the last two chapters, is a city with its own unique history. In its earlier name, Canton, it was a center of foreign traders' incursion into China at various points throughout China's history, most notably in the 18th and 19th centuries. More recently, Guangzhou has been to some extent freer from tight central government control than cities like Beijing. Now it is among the three most developed Chinese cities, which people refer to as "Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou." But although Guangzhou has its own particular characteristics, and although some areas of China, such as Tibet or Xinjiang, would give markedly different interviewee responses, the people portrayed in this chapter are broadly representative of contemporary urban Han Chinese as a whole. Even more than in the United States and Japan, rural Chinese may have significantly different values than urban Chinese, due, among other factors, to a lack of education. Minority nationalities in China such as Uyghur and Hui and Tibetan have their own religious backgrounds, Muslim and Buddhist, different from the Han Chinese majority, which

makes up some 92% of China's population. In this chapter's accounts, we focus on urban Han Chinese in Guangzhou in their senses of life after death.

We have seen the strong influence of Christianity in the United States, and the prevalence of ancestor veneration among Japanese in shaping attitudes towards life after death. In China, today, the dominant sense is of nothing at all after death. In 2015, a WIN/Gallup International poll reported that 61% of mainland Chinese identified themselves as "convinced atheists," whereas the figure was only 11% on average worldwide.[31] Although "atheism" and "not adhering to any sense of life after death" are not the same thing, with atheism referring to the rejection of belief in God, it seems clear that a majority of Chinese at present are not adherents to any sense of life after death. Among the Chinese we spoke with, over half told us that there is no life after death, even though many still practice some form of ancestor veneration like their Japanese counterparts. Less than our American and Japanese interviewees, many of the Chinese we spoke with did not seem to project their hopes beyond their current life. In Japan too, close to half of interviewees expressed skepticism as to life after death, but in Japan hope was key—many Japanese said that they hoped for life after death, even though they may have felt that it was unlikely. In China, largely because of the role of the state in teaching atheism in schools, hope was much less emphasized—the hope that was so prevalent in Japan was typically belittled in China as idealism or as superstition, something to be avoided in one's thinking.

Some people we sought to interview were unwilling to talk to us. Discussing death has negative connotations for many Chinese, who consider it bad luck to mention such a thing—we were sometimes told, "I don't want to talk about that," or "this topic is too awkward for me," by people declining to talk with us. As a young mother in her early thirties who accepted Kwong's interview request explained,

> Chinese don't talk about death, because it's taboo. People avoid this topic because they feel that something bad might happen to them if they bring it up. My son is four now and often asks me, "where is Grandpa?" I told him that Grandpa died because he was sick and had become a star in the sky. Generally, only children use the word "die."

When Kwong asked her aunt to invite a kindergarten-principal friend to be interviewed, the principal responded, "Why does your niece do research on this topic? She should do something more positive [*yangguang*]!" Yang encountered the same situation when she tried to interview a young medical doctor, who declined the interview with the words, "I think talking about death and the afterlife can make a person pessimistic, so I don't want to talk about this with you." When we approached friends and relatives for their introduction to more interviewees, several of them suggested that we change the term "life after death," *sihou shijie,* to "reincarnation" or "heaven" because the word "death" put people off. We tried to interview Chinese couples, as was done in interviews in

Japan and the United States, but quite a number of the spouses of our Chinese interviewees declined our request because death seemed to them to be such a dark and inauspicious topic. Eventually, we learned to modify our requests by largely avoiding the term "death," to make the topic of our interviews more acceptable to skittish potential interviewees.

Comparing the interviews in the three societies, the age of the interviewers may be a factor in the flow of their narratives. Kwong and Yang, in their late twenties and early thirties, are younger than many of the people they interviewed, some of whom may have had reservations about being interviewed because of this age difference; these reservations were different from those that Mathews, in his sixties, may have faced, and may have caused interviewees in China to respond in subtly different ways than those in the United States and Japan. This age difference may also have incentivized other Chinese interviewees, those who felt keen to teach their life stories to those who were younger than they were. The identity of interviewers did not have a decisive effect in shaping what interviewees told us, we sense, but it doubtless had some effect.

In this chapter, we explore the different streams of narratives regarding senses of life after death among our interviewees. Because the historical trend in China has not been from belief in life after death to non-belief, as has broadly been the case in the United States, and, over the long term, in Japan, but rather from non-belief to belief, we begin with those who do not think there is any life after death.

Non-belief: "Atheism"

The majority of Chinese we interviewed told us that they didn't believe in any form of life after death: "A person dies the way a light goes out," we were often told. The dying process, the suffering before death, might take a long time, but death itself happens in the blink of an eye, they said. When asked where the deceased had gone, these people gave us answers such as "Yinhe" (a large public cemetery near Guangzhou), "in the earth," or "on an operating table for intern doctors to learn from."

Many we interviewed specifically identified themselves as atheists, using the word *wushenlunzhe* [atheist]. In our American chapter too, although not our Japanese chapter, we heard from a number of atheists; however, while the American atheists were often rejecting their childhood religious training in Sunday school and elsewhere, the Chinese atheists were embracing their childhood education, with the concept of "atheism" universally taught in Chinese schools. China's government understands religion and other spiritual beliefs in terms of Marxism; they are an "opium" used by the exploiting class,[32] and must ultimately be eliminated. The influence of this ideology was most obvious among our interviewees over 50 years old, who grew up under the influence of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A retired teacher in

her sixties who highly appreciated the education she had received, said, "After a person dies and the bones disappear, the person does not exist anymore, since matter comes before consciousness." A manager in his fifties at a large corporation spoke similarly, at length:

> When a person dies, they're just dead. There's nothing after you die. I think this attitude is related to our education in atheism and materialism. When I first went to school as a child, the Cultural Revolution had just begun. It was all about destroying the Four Olds. Later, after working in a state enterprise for a few years, I had the chance to pursue public administration training for officials and cadres for two years in the Party School. I studied Marxism and materialism. If you follow the logic that "when matter is gone, consciousness is gone," there can't be an afterlife. When the body dies, consciousness vanishes too. I can't believe in things like reincarnation or heaven and hell unless I witness them with my own eyes. When we were in the Communist Party School, we sometimes discussed the supernatural. Our teacher joked that if there were ghosts, the entire earth would be filled with ghosts! I can never understand why people think there's a heaven. No one has ever seen it! Is heaven absolutely peaceful? As you can read from novels, the deities always have conflicts with each other because each has self-interest. Heaven is the same as earth! We used to say that if we attained the ultimate stage of socialism, we could achieve complete equality: "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." It's a great ideal. But how can it ever be achieved? The inherent weakness in human beings makes true socialism unachievable. If socialism is unachievable, then how can there be a place like heaven where everyone is carefree and happy?

The Chinese Communist Party maintains that China is still in the primary stage of socialism, with communism a distant ideal. For this reason, interviewees like this manager typically use the word "socialism" rather than "communism" in describing China's political system. There is also a key difference as shown in this manager's words between heaven as envisioned by many Americans and heaven as envisioned by many Chinese. For many Americans, heaven is a matter of unimaginable bliss. For many Chinese, on the other hand, heaven is quite imaginable: a realm no different in its interpersonal conflicts from our human world. This man first seems to be referring to a Chinese concept of heaven, and then, in rejecting the idea of heaven, to a Western concept of heaven.

Intrigued by his comparing belief in afterlife to belief in socialism, we asked if he had been consistent in this belief throughout his life. He told us that he had wavered but only once:

> I am an absolute atheist. When I go to temples, I don't worship any deities. Well, I did once, when my son was applying for universities. At that moment I really wished that the deity would bless him. It was an expression of my desperate wish

This is a wish that many Chinese parents share: that their children will excel in university entrance examinations, attend a good university, and thereby be propelled along the path to becoming a success in life. This man is a Communist Party member (all members are required to be atheists), but he compares heaven to the ultimate stage of socialism, indicating that both are equally impossible. In his view, every individual is self-seeking and so any effort to establish complete equality and peace on earth or in heaven is doomed.

He mentions how his atheism stemmed from the Cultural Revolution and the campaign to destroy the Four Olds, which overturned the tradition and ideology of earlier generations. Another interviewee, a retired teacher in his sixties recalled,

> I was 13 or 14 when the Cultural Revolution started. Yes, I participated in eliminating the Four Olds. We went to people's homes, including our teachers', and smashed everything we considered superstitious, feudal or capitalist. I was in my first year of secondary school at that time, and I felt nothing but enthusiasm.

"Science" and "scientific" were terms frequently used during our interviews with some we spoke with, who maintained, "I don't believe in superstition. I believe in science," or "These beliefs in life after death are not scientific." A number of our Japanese interviewees last chapter also spoke of science as a reason why they didn't believe in any life after death, but this reference to science was all but ubiquitous among Chinese non-believers. Advocacy of science was one of the most important elements in the Communist Party's national campaigns and can be traced back to the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement that began in 1919. The movement led to calls for the abolition of backward tradition and the adoption of Western ideals of science and democracy. At that time, science was recognized as one of the defining features of modernity; in contrast, religion and supernatural beliefs were seen as superstitions that in their backwardness were an obstacle to modernity.[33] This helps explain how the hierarchy of science over the supernatural was internalized by our interviewees. They present themselves as being scientific, rational, and sophisticated by affirming their disbelief in the supernatural, the spiritual, or the religious.

A cardiologist in his sixties illustrates this adherence to science:

> I've worked in the emergency room for many years. Some people have near-death experiences, of being in a so-called heaven, but I believe it's because they still have brain waves and thus some form of memory or illusion occurs. For cardiac arrest, I've often given electric shocks to patients. They wake up and ask, "What happened?" We only declare death when cerebral circulation has stopped. When this condition lasts for more than four minutes, it's irreversible. Your awareness disappears, but this world continues: accidents, quarrels, and births happen on a daily basis without your involvement. I'm quite sure that a person's consciousness vanishes

> right after death. When you die, it's like sleeping, that's all. If people aren't attached to anything in this world, they won't be scared of death.

Modern science was considered by many we talked to as the evidence that the afterlife does not exist, because if it did exist it should have been proven by now. As Yang experienced in school in Guangzhou in the 1990s, science teachers would have their students watch the "Haier Brothers," a cartoon series sponsored by the Chinese electronic brand Haier in which the characters explore the world to find out explanations for natural phenomena.[34] One episode Yang remembers well is "The Valley of Ghosts," or "Devil's Valley," where villagers told the Haier brothers that ghosts in a low-lying basin devoured humans. The brothers found out that the valley was an iron mine that attracted lightning, and the low-lying geographic location formed swamps that could easily trap visitors.[35] Their conclusion was always, "There is a scientific reason for everything." So it was no surprise to us when we heard many interviewees like this cardiologist use science to dismiss any evidence for any afterlife. As he elaborated,

> Most people with medical training don't believe in life after death. There's no evidence for ghosts or spirits. There are still many things we can't explain and are still trying to explain in this universe. We have a radioactivity detector in the hospital that often alarms the people who use it—the radioactivity suddenly rises. None of us can explain it. I suspect it's because of the magnetic field activity of sunspots or cosmic rays. But who knows? Maybe ghosts are also explicable through the magnetic field and through quantum activities.

He then recalled how his personal experience was also a factor shaping why he could not believe in any afterlife:

> I had a serious car accident in my twenties. Our car was pressed like an accordion and I was thrown into a farmer's field. Farmers surrounded me, saying, "Oh, this guy will be dead soon." After that, I understood that there's nothing more important than being alive. If you're dead, it doesn't mean anything to get a good salary, buy a house, or fall in love! I'm a materialist. Idealists think that God or some supernatural being controls this world. But with what we know now, materialistic explanations are more convincing.

But not everyone in his family fully shares his materialistic beliefs:

> After my father died, my sister often dreamed about him. She asked if I had similar dreams. I said, "Yes, I dream of him because he had a big impact on my life, that's all"—the dreams don't indicate the existence of any other world. No, I don't think I can communicate with my father, like

> my sister thinks she can. I visit the family tomb during the Ching Ming Festival, but that's because it's a tradition, like worshiping ancestral tablets [wooden strips representing the spirits of deceased ancestors]. It's important to construct a purpose for people to come together—a ritual to tell you to be patriotic and believe in justice, or to be filial. I don't want to have an expensive cemetery lot for myself after I die. I'd rather use the money for travel while I'm alive. Throwing my ashes into the sea will do just fine!

This doctor believes that brainwave activity determines whether a person is living or dead and also helps explain why some patients feel that they've been to heaven during a near-death experience. In his opinion, everything can be explained scientifically, including ghosts and spirits. He sees visiting the family tomb and venerating the ancestors as a ritual for reinforcing senses of filial piety among the living, rather than having anything to do with actually communicating with the dead. We've heard from medical doctors in the last two chapters in an American and Japanese context; this cardiologist sounds very much like they do in his materialism and scientific outlook—those who believe in life after death, like his sister, are simply deluded, in his view.

A former public prosecutor in her fifties held similar views. As she said,

> I think life is finished when we die. There's no doubt about this. After my body is cremated, my spirit or soul can't exist anymore. In the court of justice, I've dealt with cases involving violent crimes. Offenders were often uneducated people who left school when they were teenagers and got into drug trafficking and robbery. For serious cases, they would be sentenced to death. I've witnessed death sentences being carried out. A person is gone just like that, with the snap of a finger.

We also interviewed some former soldiers who had fought in the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979. We had thought that some of them might believe in supernatural beings and life after death, having directly faced death at a young age; but while they emphasized the importance of rituals for the dead, they too denied the existence of any life after death. A former artilleryman said:

> I came from a rural area of Guangdong and my family was poor. When I graduated from high school, I joined the military; I didn't have many choices, because I didn't receive much education during the Cultural Revolution. China was at peace at the time, so I never thought I'd be sent to a war. Would I have joined the army if I'd known I'd be fighting the Vietnamese? Probably not! When I got to the battlefield, there was no time to think about what death might be like; I was only trying to survive, and I could only do that by killing the enemy. I saw dead bodies on the ground, and they were terrifying. Our squad leader was shot through the heart one day. The enemy was sweeping our area with machine-gun fire and he

> was unlucky. I saw blood pouring out of his chest; he trembled for a few seconds and then dropped dead. We had to carry him to the back, so that his body could be sent home. Of course we were scared seeing all this. No one deserted, but we were all afraid: I knew someone who wet his pants from seeing all the dead bodies.

These former soldiers had reunions and would even occasionally travel to the old battlefields in Vietnam to visit their departed fellows' tombs. We asked the artilleryman what this meant and were told that it had nothing to do with any sense of a world beyond this one:

> There's no underworld after this life. [The underworld is where people go to after death in Chinese traditional conceptions, where they are sent to heaven, reincarnated, or sent to hell]. There's no heaven and hell, and no ghosts either, I'm quite sure. If there were anything supernatural, the things I saw in the war wouldn't have happened as they did. When people died, they just lay dead on the ground; they didn't appear as ghosts at night to influence the living or to send a message. No, they just lay there. Maybe some people today believe in Buddhism and things like that. I was raised in the socialist era, so no one talked about ghosts or spirits. We just didn't think about it. Probably only the older generation was superstitious and believed in ghosts. Next year is the 40th anniversary of the Sino-Vietnamese War. We who fought in the war have a really close bond; we're like brothers. We'll burn incense sticks and paper money to those who died, but I don't believe the commemoration is for the spirits of the dead soldiers. This is to commemorate the end of the war. We should never fight again.

This former soldier describes vividly his war experiences and how he was constantly in fear of death. It is because he saw so many deaths that he is sure that there is no afterlife: the dead simply are dead, he tells us. As another ex-soldier told us, "We hid ourselves among the gravestones….We slept there, and I wasn't scared of ghosts; I was constantly afraid of being killed by the Vietnamese." The former soldiers we talked to were all raised in the socialist era, before the economic reform of the 1980s. The soldier above mentioned to us how people around him didn't ever talk about ghosts and spirits. He felt that only older generations, growing up before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, would be so "superstitious" as to believe in them. Another ex-soldier told us,

> I believe Chairman Mao, that there are no monsters, gods and demons in this world. If there really were spirits or ghosts, Nanjing [where the Nanjing Massacre took place in 1937, in which a large number of Chinese were killed by invading Japanese] would be filled with ghosts now.

Like the cardiologist, these former soldiers still burn incense sticks and paper money for the departed even though they believe in no afterlife. One former soldier quoted above, now a successful businessman, funded the visits of his squad to their former battlefields near the Vietnamese border. Another soldier said to us,

> Every year, we have former soldiers visiting the revolutionary martyrs in Guangxi province [near the Vietnamese border] and burning incense. It's like how we burn incense for our ancestors during the Ching Ming Festival. The practice means we have not forgotten our dead comrades. Of course, I don't think that the spirits of these soldiers still linger around to receive our wishes.

To these former soldiers, conducting the commemorative rituals is an important symbolic gesture, but one involving no sense of actually communicating with the dead.

Indeed, while many Chinese sweep their ancestors' tombs and make offerings every year, most people we interviewed, young and old, do not believe the ancestors actually receive their offerings. However, they may worship their ancestors not just as a custom but also as solace. This view is apparent in views of the retired public prosecutor we earlier heard from. She actively engages in tomb-sweeping rituals every year, and we asked her why she did this if she didn't believe in any afterlife. She replied,

> The afterlife is probably something created to make us more obedient to social rules. If you do bad things, you'll wind up in a bad afterlife, people are told, so they believe they need to behave well in this life. During the Ching Ming Festival, I visit my parents' tomb; I burn incense and paper money, and pray to them. But it's not like they can hear me. I do it for two reasons. First, I'm doing it because other people are doing it. It'd be strange if I didn't visit my parents' tomb during the Ching Ming Festival, since everyone else is visiting their family's tomb. Second, the ritual is a way to release my emotions. I can talk about my problems at the tomb, something I wouldn't tell others. I wish my parents could hear me, but I know they can't. A lot of things people claim in religion are not scientific, like reincarnation. Some people still believe in these things, because it gives them peace of mind. In the first two years after my father died, I sometimes dreamed of him. I thought it would be great if he could be reincarnated, but I knew it was only my wishful thinking. Right now, I'm happy with how I am; I want to focus on living for the present. It's not much use thinking about what happens after we die. Why spend time thinking about that when you can enjoy your life now?

Having been a Communist Party member for most of her adult life, she does not believe in the existence of any life after death. (Less than 7% of the Chinese

population belong to the Chinese Communist Party,[36] a status which brings them considerable career rewards, and which requires at least the appearance of non-belief in religion and in any life after death.) But she regards belief in the afterlife as a valuable tool for governance and acknowledges the positive effect of traditional practices for herself—she conducts the traditional rituals during the Ching Ming Festival, thereby conforming to social norms but also giving herself psychological relief. At the same time, she emphasizes that her parents' spirits do not exist, and thus cannot hear her words.

A company employee in her thirties told us that she prays at temples even though she too does not believe that deities exist:

> I don't really believe my prayers will come true because the Buddha hears me. It's more because when I pray, I focus my mind on the issue I'm trying to solve. Later on, I consciously think more about the issue. When I pray, it's more like I'm telling myself what I need to do. I won't pray for things that aren't practical!

A secondary-school teacher in her fifties said,

> My parents are both Party members and we never do any rituals at home, but do we visit temples during the Spring Festival [the Chinese New Year, usually a familial celebration event at the beginning of the traditional Chinese calendrical year]. We burn incense and donate money like other people do, because it's comforting psychologically.

This view is similar to how many Japanese feel about ancestor veneration, as we've seen—practiced as no more than a tradition and a solace—but in China, this view seems even more widespread than in Japan: the rituals performed by these people we have heard from are accompanied by no belief in anything beyond this world.

The retired public prosecutor said that she prefers to focus on her present life rather than thinking about life after death, a common theme in many of our Chinese interviews. Our interviewees often uttered the phrase, "live for the present" [*huozai dangxia*]. A housewife in her forties told us, "Do what you want before you die! Don't wait till the next life! [because there is none]." She told us that a few months earlier she had resigned from the company she was working for to open her own small store to sell "the things I like." A retired teacher in her sixties remarked, "When I die, I die. What happens to your body after you die means nothing. That's why I'm good now to my parents, and to the people I know in my life." Another interviewee, a snack-store owner in her forties, recalls,

> I know a person who was very bad to her mother-in-law. She wouldn't even give her enough rice to eat. But after her mother-in-law died, she

> burned lots of offerings and even brought presents to her grave. What's the use of that?

When asked if they wanted to be reincarnated into another life, many of these non-believers maintained that it was unrealistic to even consider such a thing, just as there was no need to feel any regret about one's current life. A worker in a railway company in his forties said, "What's passed has passed. There is no *houhuiyao* ["medicine for regrets" enabling one to start over] in the world. I don't need it. So, I don't want another life after this one." He told us that he dislikes his job, and that he is unmarried and has no girlfriend. But he says that this is because his mother begs him to stay at his job and has never liked any of his former girlfriends. If he could travel in time, he would still listen to his mother because of his love for her, so he has no regrets, he maintained. In his opinion, wanting an afterlife is a form of regret, so he denies its very possibility.

Many non-believers in life after death do not simply "live for the present," but still seek something beyond. We will return to them in the last section of this chapter when we explore metaphorical life after death—those who seek to remain after their death through their children or fame or country. But first, let us turn to those who believe, in part or in full, in some form of actual life beyond the grave.

Agnosticism

Between the non-believers and believers in life after death, some 15% of our Chinese interviewees were unsure about any afterlife. They are not at all convinced of the existence of life after death, but they did not want to rule out its possibility. We categorize them as agnostics here, borrowing the Western idea of agnosticism because they are indeed undecided about life after death. None of the Chinese interviewees verbally said that they are "agnostic," but they did say, "I don't know. Maybe there is life after death," or "Who knows? Anything is possible….An afterlife isn't a bad idea. I'd still be able to experience the world!" Many agnostic Chinese we talked with said that they hadn't put much thought into questions of life after death. For example, a secondary school teacher in her fifties remarked, "I never think about life after death. I don't have any religious belief. I'm a very pragmatic person. I don't think about something that I can't ever know." A housewife in her forties said, "I don't know, I feel quite confused about this topic. Different religions say different things"—a sense expressed in common by a number of the agnostics we interviewed in all three societies discussed in this book. She continued,

> I don't feel like believing in anything those religions say, because I haven't experienced death. But I can't dismiss any possibilities. We can't see what goes on inside a radio, but it does clearly exist. But I guess I incline to non-belief. You know, belief in life after death has led to some superstitious practices.

A retired nurse in her sixties said,

> I can't believe in afterlife completely, but I can't deny it completely either. I have no answer. For me it's half and half. Personally I hope that some sort of spirit will remain after death. But I can't know whether this might really be the case or not. I worked in a hospital, and I'm quite interested in the topic of death. There are near-death experiences reported in medical journals in the West. These haven't been explained…

These agnostics' views of life after death were often situational. The retired nurse told us,

> When I go to my parents' grave, I feel like we communicate, but of course, it might be only my imagination. I tell them about my life, and about my daughter. But normally, I don't think about my parents. I've never devoted much thought about where they are now, and how they are living now. I never even dream about them.

In some cases, these agnostic interviewees mentioned the supernatural experiences of others: "Some people really see things—my friend saw a ghost! But I've had no such experiences, so I can't say anything." And sometimes they raised possibilities based on religious doctrines that they didn't fully believe in but were willing to entertain. Unlike those who rejected life after death, the agnostics did not put much effort into forming a coherent narrative; "I don't know" was their standard answer to contradictions in their statements.

Some agnostics we interviewed practice traditional rituals just in case any afterlife does exist. A bus driver in his fifties said:

> Life after death to me is really abstract. It's a matter of belief. Western belief says that after you die, you will either go to heaven or hell. Hell also exists in Chinese beliefs. Some people may say that after you die you'll turn into a ghost wandering on the street. But do such things really exist? I don't know.…If you ask me what I want life after death to be like, I'd say that it should at least be a place where I can fix my mistakes so that I won't have any regrets. But ultimately, no one knows whether any life after death exists; it's our present world that matters. My children will last beyond my own lifespan; yes, I do want my children to adopt my view of the world, to have a conscience, and to be hardworking and make contributions to society. But beyond that…I'm skeptical about any life after death, but I tend to think, "What if it's true?" I can't do bad things because, what if there is a life after death [where I'll be judged for my behavior in this life]? So even though I don't really believe in Christianity or Chinese religions, I still try to behave well, just as people who believe in those religions do.…I visit our ancestors' graves during the Ching Ming

> Festival. Many people burn paper houses or cars or offer food, and in return get protection and blessings from their ancestors; I do too. People like me just want our ancestors to have a good life in their afterlife. I don't know if there's really any life after death, but at least I've fulfilled my responsibility as a descendent.

This man is not religious, but he still behaves well and doesn't do bad things, he tells us, because he does not want to end up in hell if it really exists. Similarly, he doesn't claim to know whether ancestors' spirits exist or not, but he still burns paper offerings in case deceased family members can receive them. This sense of practicality, which we also saw last chapter among some practitioners of Japanese ancestor veneration, was apparent in a number of our Chinese interviews, with some people saying that they really don't believe that the rituals practiced in the Ching Ming Festival have any efficacy, but still they practice ancestor veneration and follow the traditional rituals because "it doesn't hurt" or "just in case."

A retired social worker in her fifties said,

> Some of my friends go to fortune tellers, who've told them that next year is the year of widows: marriages in that year might end in the husband's early death. My only son has a girlfriend, so I tell my son that if they want to get married, do it this year or wait for another two years. I don't believe in fortune tellers, but I do follow what they say if I can…

Indeed, why not follow fortune tellers if one can, since they just might be right in their prognostications? A bank clerk in his forties said,

> There are stories of wandering ghosts that you hear about, but most of them are obviously made up. But then again, I don't want to walk through those dark alleys in town during the Hungry Ghost Festival. I choose a different route.

A middle-aged chef was also unsure about what happens after death:

> I visit my ancestors' grave during the Ching Ming Festival, but I don't know most of the people I'm praying for. I never met my grandfather; I never met my uncle; I only met my grandmother a few times when I was little. When I burn paper money, I tell them, "You can get some good food down there with this money!" I don't know if they really get the money. I also worship the deities when I feel unhappy about things. There are a lot of things I pray for, since I've had an unstable life. My restaurant failed; I'm not satisfied with my life, because I'm still empty-handed in my forties. I pray for safety, and for business and everything. It doesn't take a lot of effort to pray. Maybe it's useless, but if I don't do it, maybe the gods won't help me. Of course, I can't ask for too much from the gods. I still need to

> work on things by myself. The gods won't send me money and a wife just because I pray!
>
> Chinese don't really have faith. We just blindly follow others in society—we pray to the gods to become wealthy. If you have a religion like Catholicism, you need to have moral standards about how you treat others, so it's maybe difficult for you to be with other people. I'm happy without these restrictions! I just focus on living my life every day and doing what I want to do. Death arrives at any time and you can't take anything with you, so it's important to focus on living a good life now.

This chef shared a similar sense of practicality as the bus driver and others we've seen in this section. However, he refuses to follow any religion when he carries out the rituals, viewing religions and their doctrines as moral restrictions that constrain his behavior. He identifies himself as a typical Chinese who has no religious faith, but at the same time, he follows practices such as praying for wealth at a temple. He actively participates in worshipping deities because, as he tells us, even though it might be useless, it doesn't take much effort, so why not?

Beliefs in Life after Death: Reincarnation

We've seen how non-believers and semi-believers in life after death engage in rituals in the Ching Ming Festival and on other occasions but claim that those rituals do not reflect any underlying sense of life after death. In this section, we look at those for whom senses of life after death seem to have a more direct impact on their lives—affecting their emotions and providing moral guidance for their everyday actions. A third of the Chinese we interviewed feel that there is or probably is a life after death. Their senses of life after death include reincarnation and heaven and hell, as well as ghosts. Similar to our American and Japanese interviewees, more Chinese women than men we spoke with sensed that there was life after death. Chinese women seemed to be more expressive of feelings of fear, doubt, uncertainty, and faith in discussing life after death, whereas Chinese men seemed more reluctant to express these feelings. Claiming not to believe in life after death may have served as an easier response for some since non-belief in life after death was the Chinese taken-for-granted norm. In any case, like men in the United States and Japan, Chinese men expressed more skepticism than did their female counterparts as to the possibility of any life after death.

Like non-belief in life after death, senses of life after death can be understood in the context of the socialist era of 1949–1978 and the subsequent reform era in China. The atheist education of the socialist era also influenced many of the believers in life after death we interviewed. An owner of a travel agency in her late forties, who now believes in Buddhist reincarnation, recalled, "My mother didn't know anything about religion. When I was young, we went to temples but

never learned about beliefs and rituals. We were supposed to be atheists. But that just meant that we were ignorant about religion," an ignorance that in her adult life she has sought to overcome. Most of the people who felt that there was life after death began believing after 1982, when the Chinese government granted legal recognition to various religions and their practice. A company worker in his fifties discussed how the ritual of burning offerings and incense at graves, once banned during the Cultural Revolution, had become legal again: "It seems that people know how to do this from their hearts. If everyone is doing this and even the government allows it, then there must be some truth to it." Others converted to various religions and participated in their activities, such as Buddhist chanting assemblies and Christian scripture study groups. Unlike the United States and Japan, where organized religions have lost a degree of influence for many, as we've seen, in China, largely because these organized religions and religious groups were banned by the government for decades, they have retained influence for a significant number of those we interviewed.

In China today, schools continue to educate their students on Marxist materialism and atheism; nonetheless, China is a somewhat more religiously open society than in the past. Ghost stories and horror movies based on traditional Chinese folk beliefs about life after death feature in popular media. For example, there is a popular series of novels, *Grave Robbers' Chronicles* (*Daomu Biji*), similar to the American *Tomb Raider* films but with Chinese twists, such as plots involving emperors' graves and folk legends.[37] There are also horror movies such as *The Hungry Ghost Ritual* (*Yulan Shengong*), based on the traditional Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival. Video games like *Devotion* (*Huanyuan*), in which players unravel the mystery of a haunted apartment, also have become well-known among Chinese young people.[38] Few books or other media offer serious discussions of life after death—although Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying,* discussed in our American chapter, is available in Chinese translation, and is apparently widely read.[39] Most popular writings on life after death in China are religious in nature, targeting those who already believe: several dozen books have been published in recent years about reincarnation in terms of Buddhist teachings, books in which reincarnation is taken for granted as being real.[40] Unlike the United States and Japan, Chinese portrayals of life after death focus either on entertainment or on religious teachings; there are very few discussions as to whether life after death might actually exist or not. The Chinese government today is tolerant of traditional Chinese religions as long as the Communist Party and Chinese patriotism are proclaimed as coming first in adherents' lives.

We first consider those we interviewed who believed in reincarnation. Most who believed in reincarnation linked it to Buddhism and were convinced that their future life is determined by the deeds of their present and past lives. These people often did not belong to a specific religious group but took the concept of reincarnation from Buddhist stories or folk religion. A shopkeeper in her sixties

who had suffered much in her earlier life became a devout Buddhist as a path to happiness:

> When I was little, Buddhism was regarded as superstition, one of the Four Olds. The Red Guards destroyed so many temples and Buddha figures—the young people at that time were all so ignorant! I was ignorant too….When I was a young woman I raised three sons by myself, while my husband was off working in another city. My parents-in-law accused me of sleeping with other men; they took away all the money that my husband sent me. I fished at night for food; I went to places where there were corpses—I wasn't afraid of ghosts; my only fear was not having enough food to feed my sons....I didn't believe in Buddhism, but late one night a few years ago, my son, a student, hadn't come home. I was so worried that I burned incense and chanted to Guanyin [the Buddhist goddess of mercy], and my son eventually came home safe. I later taught someone else this chant—he came back to thank me, and so I kept teaching it: it works!
>
> I never learned to read; I've learned what I've learned from Buddhist radio programs. I run a small store selling incense and paper money for worshipping ancestors, deities, and ghosts. I cultivate myself: Donate money! Set animals free! I tell my children, "don't look for any money from me after I die"—I'll spend every penny on releasing animals and printing mantra books. I want to be good in this life and follow the Buddha and Guanyin. I may have committed sins unintentionally. I hope I won't be reincarnated into an animal destined to be killed and eaten. If I can't become a Buddha in heaven, I hope I can be a human being again. If I follow Guanyin properly, when I want delicious food, I'll see it right in front of me! If I want nice clothes, I'll find myself wearing them. And I'll obtain stronger power to help people! I'm determined to follow the Buddha; that's why I chant regularly. I don't want to suffer anymore. It's so painful and bitter to be human.

Her belief in reincarnation offers her relief from the difficult memories of her past. Repeatedly, she told us, "Human life is so bitter. I want to be with the Buddha." She donates most of her income to Buddhist temples and to printing Buddhist scriptures for free distribution and uses some of the money her customers provide her to buy and release animals. (Releasing live animals is a common Buddhist practice in China thought to cleanse one's sins and generate good karma. Chinese temples often sell live fish and turtles to worshipers, who subsequently release the animals in ponds inside the temple grounds.) She told us stories about butchers suffering from health problems because their killing of animals generates bad karma.

Another woman in her sixties, who came from a more affluent background, has also become influenced by Buddhism, partly because of her experience

overseas. Now running a travel agency, this woman lived in Canada for 10 years before returning to Guangzhou.

> After finishing secondary school, I worked in a big hotel. My aunt told me to get further education abroad, so I went to Canada. It was a different world! Everyone queues and is polite; life was simpler and more enjoyable. I met a devoted Christian—Christians are so diligent in promoting their religion, but I didn't like his way of selling his faith. When we went out shopping, he'd thank Jesus for letting us meet! I'm Chinese after all. I feel more comfortable in temples looking at the Buddha than looking at Jesus—I don't feel I have anything to do with Jesus's death!

She is one of the few Chinese we met who talked much about the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Her views of life after death are deeply linked to Buddhism and also to Chinese traditional religious beliefs:

> Am I afraid of death? In the past, maybe I was, but now I'm not. Some Buddhist books say our life on earth is preordained. If we accumulated good karma in the past, then it's easier for us to get over all kinds of hardships in this life. After our time here, Yama [the King of the Underworld] will call us without a moment of delay. Even the emperor has to die. The only thing we can do is be content every day.…When I was young, I didn't know what heaven was. But I always knew that bad people would suffer and be thrown into cauldrons of boiling oil after they die. Everyone around me at that time was an atheist, so they wouldn't believe in these things; we didn't talk about it. I'm really influenced by karma and reincarnation; I think that those who harm others will get retribution. I haven't harmed anyone; I really don't want to be sent to hell or be tortured! Let's say you do something bad today; retribution may not come before you die. But what about the punishment after your death? I think there is a "merit book" for everyone recording their good and bad deeds. If a person does something bad, he'll be demoted to hell. The "Ox-Head and Horse-Face," Zhong Kui and Ksitigarbha exist there; if a person does anything bad, after they're punished, they'll drink the soup made by Meng Po and be reborn in the next life. If a person is extremely good when living, he might be raised into becoming a deity in heaven after death.

The Ox-Head and Horse-Face mentioned by this woman are guardians of the underworld in Chinese traditional beliefs, with human bodies but the head of an ox and the face of a horse. Zhong Kui is a deity appointed by Yama to maintain order among ghosts. Ksitigarbha is a Buddhist deity responsible for the six realms of reincarnation, whose image is often displayed in Chinese temples and memorial halls where people pray for their deceased friends and family. Meng Po is the Lady of Forgetfulness of the underworld, who erases the memory of the

deceased before they are reincarnated. Images of the Chinese underworld (*diyu*) are common in Chinese popular literature and cinema, so even people with no religious beliefs are well aware of the terms this woman mentioned.

Many Chinese are also familiar with symbols related to the underworld from hearing folktales. Taoism has incorporated many Chinese folk legends and symbols, and it is common to see images of *diyu* in Taoist temples.[41] One of the most famous Chinese story collections, written 350 years ago and frequently adapted in contemporary movie and television depictions, is the *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio).[42] One tale is about how a corrupt minister in ancient China was sent to the underworld and forced to climb up a mountain of sharp blades and then drink the molten gold he had stolen from those who had lived in his realm in this world. People go to *diyu* after they die, where they will be judged by Yama for their deeds on earth—the majority will be reincarnated on earth, but people who have committed evil deeds will be sent to various levels of hell to be tortured; only a very few people who have performed highly virtuous deeds are deified and sent to heaven.

This belief in the underworld and in reincarnation had a significant effect on some of those we interviewed, causing them to try to behave in a moral way. As a company worker in her fifties told us,

> A person can be considered a good person as long as they haven't hurt others. To be good, a person only needs to do simple things, like helping an old person cross the road. So far, I haven't done anything that makes me worry about going to hell. I don't know if I've harmed anyone unintentionally. But I think that my punishment will be only be half as long if what I did was unintentional. Sometimes people grumble that bad people are usually the ones who live a long life—they doubt there will be retribution. But we have to consider their past lives—maybe they were extremely good in a past life. But if they've done something bad in this life, they're bound to suffer in their next life!

For this woman, reincarnation is a bringer of justice, punishing and rewarding deeds of past lives. But it also seems to be a source of fear, particularly since she will be punished even for unintentional deeds that harm others. She believes, like the woman quoted earlier, that good deeds and bad deeds are recorded and will be measured in the afterlife, a measurement which will decide one's destination in reincarnation.

The idea of ghosts or spirits beyond the grave is compatible with reincarnation in these accounts. In the process of reincarnation, some people's spirits may linger for a period after death (usually after a traumatic accident or crime, where the spirits are regarded as still seeking vengeance or redemption) before going to the underworld or before being reborn into the next life. Many reincarnation adherents we met mentioned this liminal stage, where a deceased person's spirit may still communicate with the living. When our Chinese interviewees believe

in communication with spirits, this may represent their belief in a connection between the living and the afterlife that takes place before reincarnation. A teacher in her forties we interviewed believed that she could communicate with her deceased father through spirit mediums, which have traditionally been part of Chinese folk religious practice and continue to be visited today as well[43]:

> I saw my father in a dream, but he didn't speak. Later my friends commented that my father must have a message for me, so I visited a *wenmipo* (spirit medium). In the *wenmipo*'s voice, the ghost of my father asked, "I want to see your mother! But I haven't got a passport." After burning a [fake] paper passport for him, I went back to the *wenmipo*. My father said through her, "I've arrived! I'm relieved now!"

Dream interpretation has been an essential practice in Chinese traditional folk religion, one closely related to ancestor veneration and reincarnation.[44] Dreams were believed to carry crucial messages related to the performance of duties towards ancestors, and through dreams, the spirits were believed to offer instructions in the affairs of the living. For believers like the woman quoted above, such dreams are evidence of the existence of the afterlife. She told us that her father had stopped appearing in her dreams, which she interpreted as being due to the fact that he had been reincarnated. We earlier saw how non-believers such as the cardiologist and the prosecutor were convinced that dreams of deceased loved ones come from no more than one's strong psychological attachment to them. But a number of other Chinese people we interviewed said that they have encountered a world beyond this world, a world of life after death, through dreams.

Consider the words of this white-collar woman in her twenties:

> My grandma passed away a few years ago. I had a dream about being in a taxi that carried me to a small hill by the sea. On that hill there was a family that had just had a baby. My dream told me that the baby was my reincarnated grandma.

Aside from dreams as a window into realms beyond this waking world, this young woman also expressed belief in ghosts:

> When my husband and I were still college students, my husband had this deep scratch on his face. I asked if he did this while he was sleeping, but he said that was impossible. The scratch was quite bad, so I told my mom and she told my grandma. Grandma said it was April, near the Ching Ming Festival, so the gate to the underworld was wide open. She told us to burn paper money to feed the ghost who did this. We went to a shop that was selling paper money for burning. The shopkeeper asked if my boyfriend had crossed any intersection after midnight, and indeed he had one recent

> night. The shopkeeper told us to go to that intersection and burn the paper money. We did it and the scratch was gone in a day or two. I came to believe more in ghost stories after that incident!
>
> When my son was 20 days old, he was crying loudly, and none of us could help. An aunt told me that there probably were ghosts harassing my son. We needed to sweep his face with a piece of underwear to get rid of those ghosts. We did and he stopped crying—it worked! The arrival of my son made me fear death more. Before having children, I would fly with my mom; I thought that even if the plane crashed it wasn't such a big deal because I was with my mom, and we'd both die. But now I have a son and I want to see him grow up! Still, if I died, I'd come back to visit my son as a spirit or ghost. Maybe as people get older, they tend to believe more in life after death. I think it's good for society if more people believe in life after death; then they will cherish their loved ones and cherish being alive. I'm not a Christian, but I believe there's heaven and hell. When people die, they'll be sent to heaven or hell depending on what they've done in this life. Some of them can also come back and influence us as ghosts. But when you face difficulties, you can't just rely on the deities—you yourself need to solve your problems. Your fate is in your own hands. When I worship my ancestors, I show respect to them, but I don't rely on them to protect me. When you talk to your ancestors, it's like you're talking to a psychiatrist.

This young woman has an array of different beliefs concerning life after death, including ghosts, reincarnation, heaven and hell, and ancestors. Like some of the Japanese we saw last chapter, she feels no need to be logically consistent in her beliefs—instead, it is her own experience that provides her with reason to believe in all of these. She is not a Buddhist, nor does she attempt to accumulate good karma for a better afterlife; she emphasized that she does not rely only on deities and supernatural beings, but also on herself in overcoming problems. She also mentioned how the birth of her son has shaped her view of life after death—her belief in the afterlife and spirits allows her to imagine being with her son beyond her own lifetime. We heard similar views from others. For example, another mother of a four-year-old told us (echoing some of our Japanese interviewees last chapter who imagined being free of their husbands after death),

> My son is the only reason I might want to linger around after death. I have so much love for him....I wish my spirit could somehow remain in this world after I die. But my husband? I don't want to be with him after death!

We have discussed the relationship between Chinese non-belief and the influence of socialism, with Party members saying that they don't believe in any life after death because of their atheistic education as well as their Communist Party membership. However, not all Party members are non-believers. A high-ranking

government official and Party member we interviewed, a woman in her sixties, believes in the afterlife and reincarnation, as shaped by her experience of ghosts:

> My father passed away three years ago, and my mother is almost 90. I sometimes dream of my father sitting in his apartment. I've seen ghosts, so I know that supernatural beings exist. I remember once at around 5 a.m., suddenly waking up when I heard a sigh behind me; my husband was sound asleep. The sound was soft and yet so close; I first thought there was a thief in the house. But then I saw someone standing next to my dressing table—he was my husband's late friend, who had asked me to help his son find a job. He died before I could do anything. I was so scared when I saw him that I jumped to the edge of my bed and prayed. I'm not a Buddhist, but I was saying "*Namo Amitabha*" [a common Buddhist recitation]—it wasn't a dream because I was wide awake when I saw him! Later I did indeed find his son a job, and also prayed to a photo of the friend, telling him that I'd done my part.

She is convinced of the existence of the afterlife because of her direct personal encounter with a ghost, a ghost that she saw and felt. This encounter conflicts with her status as a high-ranking Communist official, which she handles by keeping her behavior within recognized limits and keeping her beliefs to herself:

> Communist Party members are not allowed to be religious. We are allowed to follow the rituals when visiting a temple, but we can't talk to the deities; we can't promote these things. I used to pass by a prominent Buddhist temple in Guangzhou, and I asked if I could enter and take a look. My colleagues said it was OK. I don't mention my beliefs to my colleagues, of course. I pray there just like everyone else; it's just seen as normal behavior, following other people's rituals.

Chinese officials should never admit in public that they engage in "superstitious activities," but there are many stories about how certain government buildings in China have been designed with unusual architectural features in accordance with *feng shui* to keep away bad fortune.[45] This official and her colleagues have the understanding that just "taking a look" at a temple and doing what others are doing there is permissible.

Another government official we spoke with, a woman in her fifties, told us another story about dreams and reincarnation:

> I have a friend who is a famous writer. After his father passed away, his father sent a message through a dream: "I have gone through reincarnation. I'm now in so-and-so county, and so-and-so village. You can find me in this address in the village. It's next to a river and there's a willow tree there." He didn't take it seriously, but one day he met someone who knew

> that area. He asked: "I dreamed of this place and the names of the county and village are so-and-so." That person said: "Yes, we do have this county and village." "Is there a river?" "Yes, there is." "Can you take me there?" "Sure." So he went to that village and he indeed saw a river and a willow tree. He dared not go any further, because he didn't know what to call his father if he were to see his father as a reincarnated child! How do you explain things like this?….I believe in reincarnation. In my work I know of cases where corrupt officials donated lots of money to charity because they were afraid to be punished after this life. I think it's good for people to believe in karma and reincarnation, because it can teach them not to be greedy and to have a conscience while they are alive.

This official is not a Buddhist, nor does she conduct any Buddhist rituals. But although she publicly maintains her atheist position as a Communist Party member and keeps her belief in the afterlife to herself, she very much adheres to such a belief, on the basis of her own experience and those of her friends, and perhaps because she believes that it is good for society if people hold to such beliefs, even if it goes against Communist ideology. Some Chinese Communist Party members are indeed religious and believe in life after death. A study based on two national surveys of China, in 2001 by Peking University and in 2007 by Horizon, found that 12% of Party members said they were Buddhists and 1.7% of Party-affiliated members identified themselves as Christians.[46] Since Party members are not supposed to be religious, some respondents no doubt keep quiet about their beliefs, even in an anonymous survey; these numbers almost certainly under-represent the actual number of Party-member religious adherents. Although the Communist Party does not allow for belief in life after death, and although there is ongoing atheist education, there are indeed no doubt a significant number of Party members like this official who believe in life after death. As generations of Chinese continue to benefit from an abundance of information in the digital age, more adherents to senses of life after death may emerge like the young woman we saw above in her multiple vivid senses of a life beyond this one.

A cleaner in her sixties reflects this new world, by inventing her own beliefs apart from any established religious doctrines:

> I read about an American boy who recalled his previous life as a soldier in World War II. He remembered his earlier name and exactly where he had lived. I believe that may be true….Of course, it's better to be reborn as a human again than as an animal. But where I'll end up in my next life isn't up to me. I think it's all random. I think the next life is like starting all over again. What one has done in one's previous life won't impact one's future life. The dead shouldn't be classified into different levels. It's fair only if it's a complete startover, because it's not you anymore in the next life, it's someone else.

For this woman, bearing the consequences of acts committed in previous lives, when the person who committed them is a different person, seems unfair. Her belief in random reincarnation is in accordance with this idea. This attitude is shared by a white-collar worker in her thirties: "The idea that the end of this life is also a new start makes me feel positive. I'm going to have another journey, whatever form it takes: becoming a human being or a butterfly is fine with me." In this sense, random reincarnation gives those who believe in it a sense of hope in resetting their future life without regard to what they have done in this life. Others held this belief more casually: a Chinese domestic helper in her fifties said,

> My husband told our birthdays to a fortune teller. The fortune teller said I was a street cleaner in my previous life while my husband was an assistant of Yama, the King of the Underworld. I kind of think it's true!

Beliefs in Life After Death: Heaven and Hell

Aside from belief in reincarnation, some of the people we spoke with believe in heaven and hell, not in the traditional Chinese folk senses of these terms, but as two eternal destinations, the permanent fate of those who are good and who are evil, in a form paralleling some of the Americans we saw in chapter two. Some of the believers in heaven and hell we interviewed are followers of religions such as Christianity or Islam, while others are adherents to no religion, such as this housewife in her fifties who suffered much in her youth[47]:

> I don't want the world after death to be the same as the world before death. This world of mortals is so complicated; it's in such a mess. Good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell—it should be as simple as that. If people believe in heaven and hell, they'll try their best and won't commit crimes. If I work hard, I think I can go to heaven. Who doesn't want to go to heaven? I think there's an 80% chance I can go to heaven because I'm loyal to God. I didn't do anything particularly bad or hurt others. The world after death will be a happy world. I've heard about reincarnation but I don't believe it. What I do now is for the world I'm in right now. Of course, no one wants to die. I live happily with my husband and my children now. If I die, I will be separated from them. We won't meet each other again in our afterlife. Everyone is born and dies once. It's a necessary process of life.

This woman told us that she doesn't believe in any religious doctrine, and initially spoke of heaven and hell as something she hopes can exist to make this world morally better; but later in her comments, it becomes clear that she believes that she herself can probably go to heaven. We heard similar views from others we interviewed about how belief in heaven and hell provides moral guidance

to Chinese society. A businessman in his fifties said, "Chinese generally don't believe in life after death. It's probably not a good thing. If people believed in heaven and hell, the social order would improve. There are too many problems in the social environment today."

There are also Chinese Christians we talked with who believed in the existence of heaven and hell. A company manager in her fifties who converted to Christianity ten years ago, said this:

> Before I become a Christian, I thought there would be nothing after death. I argued with my brother, who was already a Christian, accusing him of being an idealist. But then, I was living alone after graduation, in a dark apartment. My uncle said that there once were babies abandoned there, and told me to place a needle wrapped in red paper in the room to ward off malicious spirits. I thought that was superstition, so I didn't do it. I began reading a lot from the Bible every night when I felt scared and felt a sense of peace when I learned that Christians go to heaven after death. I decided to become a Christian. If I wasn't a Christian, I might worry a lot about what others think of me. But now that I'm Christian, I can read the Bible and pray for guidance—as long as my decision doesn't go against the Bible, I can go ahead!

Although she had never directly encountered these malicious spirits or ghosts, as did several other people we've heard from in this chapter, she became Christian in order to counter their influence, attaining a sense of peace through her reading of the Bible. Later, she held onto what she saw as Christian moral values in her work, in helping others:

> A few years ago, our company sold a building to a developer. The building had been rented to our staff at a very low rent; after the building was sold, the staff refused to move out. My job was to settle this issue and get the staff to leave the building. I prayed, and realized that we needed to secure the staff's basic livelihood. I negotiated with the developer and they agreed to pay compensation to the staff. Sometimes, it's not easy to follow God's will. The Bible sets a higher moral standard than social norms or laws.

This woman believes that as a Christian she has a particular moral responsibility—a higher morality than that of the society around her—even though she attributes her moral behavior to her carrying out God's will. Chinese Christians, she implies, have higher moral values than non-Christians.

Another Christian we spoke with, a corporate worker in her fifties, depicted heaven in terms paralleling the American Christians in chapter two:

> I think heaven will be like the paintings on the ceiling of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Book of Revelations tells us that in heaven we won't have

> physical bodies. I won't have biological needs, like food, but will live in bliss and enjoyment. In heaven, there are heart-to-heart exchanges in perfect harmony. Beings there don't need to guard themselves from each other; we are brothers and sisters to everyone. There's no marriage, no family. I may meet my family members, but we won't be an independent family anymore. Life is much simpler in heaven! Human relationships will be less complicated! Now there are lots of temptations in life. In heaven there aren't any. People who are unrepentant will be sent to hell, a burning sulfur lake. I think there's maybe another level between heaven and hell, for people who don't believe in God but haven't done anything really bad.

While those who believe in reincarnation or heaven and hell in a karmic sense believe that their good and bad deeds are measured, this woman, like many of the American Christians we heard from, sees the basis for entering heaven as faith in Jesus Christ. She told us that she participates in familial tradition in her own way as a Christian:

> My family burns incense at the family grave. I told my relatives that since I was a Christian, I wouldn't do the rituals—if we burn paper money, I don't think our ancestors can really get it. So I just buy flowers as a way of commemoration.

Unlike some of the American Christians we heard from in chapter two, she does not seem to have a deep urge to "save" her family and friends. As she sees it, her family will not exist in heaven; she sees another world of life after death between heaven and hell for non-believers among her family members and friends, who can eventually make their own way to heaven.

There are also those who believe in heaven as followers of other religions. We talked to a graduate student in her twenties who once had suicidal urges but has overcome them through the Bahá'í faith:

> I went through difficult times when I was in college. I had pressure from my studies, from my family, and from life in general. Normal people can't understand why someone wants to commit suicide, but I know what it feels like. In a class I took, I met a Bahá'í follower, who argued that religion and science weren't contradictory. I don't know if it was seeing a psychologist or getting more involved in Bahá'í, but I got out of the downward spiral I was in. My Bahá'í friends told me that I should finish the tasks that were placed before me by God; He would never assign me tasks that are beyond my capability. It is definitely good that the faith tells me that I should not commit suicide. The professor that encouraged me to see a counsellor is a Christian. He often talked to me after class about life and death. He said God will always love us, no matter what we do. But this was a dangerous

> thought to me, because if I really killed myself, then I would still be loved and forgiven by God.

She is the only person we talked to in China who mentioned suicide (she is a good friend of Yang, which is why she felt so free to speak about a private matter that generally would not be disclosed). In Bahá'í, everyone's soul goes to the same afterlife no matter what belief one holds, but suicide is regarded as a rejection of God's plan for humans. By comparison, she felt that the unconditional love of the Christian God could not improve her mental state, since suicide would be forgiven.

She rejects the idea of heaven as a reward for the good and hell as punishment for the evil:

> In society, there are lots of people who believe in the existence of heaven and hell—that good guys go to heaven and bad guys go to hell. In this way they can justify why people who do evil things are having a good life, while good people get no reward in life: the judgement will come in their life after death. This kind of belief is like a bedtime story to make children behave well. I don't think we should take heaven and hell literally. Rather, they're states of mind. This world is our spiritual training ground and we should strive to improve our spiritual life to be prepared for the next stage. People should not seek a shortcut to the next world, even though the afterlife in Bahá'í is a wonderful place. There's no hell in our religious view. Our life after death is totally spiritual and we will all be with God, no matter if you're a believer or not. There will be stages after that as well. At each stage, we should live our lives fully and elevate our spiritual level.

Compared to many other people we spoke with in our Chinese interviews, this woman actively ponders the issue of life and death. She has found that the Christian discourse of being loved by God cannot provide her with motivation to live; nor can she accept the idea of heaven and hell. Rather the afterlife she adheres to is one of different spiritual levels. Despite the fact that her religious faith has apparently saved her, her parents do not accept it: "My father doesn't believe in any of this; my parents…are quite against me becoming a follower of any religion. They're against religion, even though my mother burns paper money and believes in ghosts."

Her parents believe that education is at odds with religious belief, she told us, just as others quoted in this chapter have argued. But as she maintained, "Some of the most influential scientists and philosophers were religious, like Darwin and Einstein. Even now, leaders like Obama publicly say they believe in God." This woman may to some extent typify members of the young generation in China who are well educated and able to absorb all kinds of ideologies, among which they can choose a belief that is more plausible to them given their surrounding reality and globalized identity. Young Chinese like her resemble some

of the younger Japanese and Americans we interviewed in their globally eclectic views of life after death.

Metaphorical Life after Death

Quite a number of our Chinese interviewees, sometimes believers in life after death but more typically non-believers, mentioned that they would like to "leave something behind," marking their posterity and influence in this life through their children, work, or country. For example, our first interviewee presented in the preceding pages, the "absolute atheist," told us, "I've never thought that my spirit will linger on after I die. But I do think about leaving something, not something huge—but to establish a family motto" (a moral teaching passed down to later generations, sometimes written in a family genealogy book). The agnostic bus driver remarked that he wants his children to adopt his worldview and be conscientious citizens after he dies. The young mother who believes in reincarnation also hopes that her son will carry on fulfilling her dreams after she dies. Indeed, many Chinese we met sought a sense of immortality from extending their bloodlines, just as did some of the Americans and Japanese we spoke with. Almost all interviewees who have children sought a sense of continuation of life after death through their children. This aligns with the Chinese tradition emphasizing the preservation of lineage and passing down the family fortune and family values through offspring.

A gynecologist in her fifties emphasized,

> Your children have your blood in them. They have your genes. This kind of extension of life is proven scientifically, unlike other kinds of belief in life after death….If you have children, your children will also have children, and so on and so on; you are still in their bodies.

Paradoxically, this women's medical practice is conducting abortions:

> I can see the fetus when I operate. There are always those who say there might be retribution [from the spirits of the dead or karma] because I kill, in some sense. But I'm not afraid. It's my job! I'm helping patients solve their problems; I don't force them to get an abortion.

Her own hopes for life beyond death are not for heaven or reincarnation, which she wholly rejects, but rather for her son:

> Because I have a son, I can share the fruit of my lifetime of hard work with my son, my grandchildren and great grandchildren. When I die, I can give everything I have to my offspring—I'll leave this apartment to my son. Aside from this, I think that personalities can be inherited from parents to children genetically, at least partly, not to mention appearance. My husband

> and I don't like reading, so our son doesn't like reading either! Once you have a child, they become the center of your life. I mean, my son belongs to me! My husband may not, he may have mistresses. You never know.

Her 23-year-old son did not have a promising future: he hadn't gone to university and couldn't find long-term employment. She knew this well enough, but still, having offspring means to her that her genes and appearance will be passed down to future generations. She is convinced from her medical practice that death is probably final for each individual. But she feels that as long as her son continues to live in this world after her death, and perhaps has children, she too will continue.

There are also others who seek to be remembered in other ways, such as through their creative activity, as with an artist in his fifties, a non-believer in life after death except through his art:

> I started drawing when I was eleven, and became a professional painter in 2008. At first, I wasn't able to survive by selling my paintings; but I managed to display my works at various exhibitions, and more and more people liked my work, and I became more and more recognized. Painting is what I can leave to the world. I seek to leave my name in Chinese art history or even world art history. A teacher at the art academy passed away, and the Palace Museum published a book of his work, and a university established a research institute in his name. This is what I pursue. Having a name in history means recognition from others. I want the appreciation and recognition not only from people of this generation, but also people of future generations. But I guess that even if I fail to achieve this dream, I'll enjoy the process!

This artist died of a heart attack six months after we interviewed him. At his funeral, there was a memorial banner that proclaimed him a "famous painter," and many friends, family members, and fans attended the funeral. This might be a realization of his dream of being recognized by society, leaving his mark—although of course how long his name and his art will remain beyond his death remains to be seen. He was more expressive of his desire for fame than were the American and Japanese artists we interviewed, but perhaps he was simply more directly honest in his entreaties than they were: "I want to be remembered!"

Apart from individual metaphorical life after death, there is also a collective sense of posterity apparent in our Chinese interviews. The Chinese state in recent years has attempted to direct the individual's pursuit of transcendence through ideologies. The state promoted collectivism; as Bauman has written,

> Immortality was to be the lot of the group, not of its members, the lot which could be assured only on condition that the fashion in which members conducted their mortal lives was such as to enable the life of the group to continue unendangered.[48]

Individuals have been encouraged to pursue metaphorical collective immortality in China through socialism and then, after socialism lost its luster, nationalism. As C. K. Yang has argued, socialist ideology had its certitude based on the promise of "posterity"—a future socialist utopia, which served a parallel function to "life after death."[49]

This utopian ideal is powerful for older interviewees. A woman in her sixties recalls, "In the 1960s, we believed deeply that people all over the whole world, except for Chinese, were suffering, and we needed to liberate the world from its disastrous condition." We asked our interviewees what their education had told them about death in the 1960s and 1970s. The immediate answer they often gave was "lighter than a feather, or heavier than Mount Tai" (*Qingru hongmao, zhongyu Taishan*), a Chinese proverb meaning that one can either die for an insignificant purpose, with no more than the weight of a feather, or die for a purpose as momentous as the weight of Mount Tai, a mountain that is one of the five sacred mountains of China.[50] A housewife in her forties explained the significance of Mount Tai: "Some people sacrifice for their nation and save a lot of other people by giving up their lives. I think their bravery and fearlessness should be celebrated. This kind of death is 'heavier than Mount Tai!'"

This sense of nationalism was emphasized by a number of people we interviewed when they spoke about posterity. They pursue collective immortality—the prosperity of the nation and its people. As a factory owner in his fifties told us:

> I wanted to be a scientist and leave my mark in history when I was young. But now I think promoting moral values is more important. Well, it's also because I'm not smart enough to be a scientist! I feel that China is going downhill these days. In the past, we truly believed that socialism could be realized and we all strived for the same goal. Even if we were all poor, it didn't matter. But now, people's pursuit of money has gone wild. Trust, mutual help and other traditional values have disappeared….I want to promote traditional Chinese values to my daughter, my family, and the people I know, by being a decent citizen. I hope that if one day people think about me after I die, they will say, "He was a good person, caring and helpful, and could unite people around him." In that case, I will have succeeded in leaving my mark. Now in China, many people produce fake products, food, or medicine that hurt people. There are so many frauds. We don't trust each other anymore. The most important virtue is filial piety. It's the basis of morality. My father died before I gained success in my business. Now I try to spend more time with my mother. I also educate my daughter about this. In fact, in terms of filial piety, Chinese are much more advanced than the West. But we've forgotten about these values because of our selfishness.

When asked about life after death, he replied by describing how he wants to be remembered: by promoting virtues such as trust, caring for others, and filial piety. Having deep concern over the current materialism in Chinese society,

he views his character and influence on others as his posterity and meaning of life. After his life is over, he wants above all to leave a mark by having a positive remembrance from others.

Many of those we interviewed wanted to pass on values, perhaps vague ones (to be "a good person"), to their children. For example, a middle-aged man remarked,

> I'm not famous; I can't influence the world. But I still have a moral principle—we should not harm society. I haven't made a big contribution to the country, but I haven't done any harm either. I'll have no regrets when I die. I hope my son can learn from this.

Indeed, many interviewees commented that they were just ordinary people, not influential or "cultured" enough to be purveyors of virtues or values. But they did try to teach their children well—to help society and to contribute to their country. Not many Americans or Japanese spoke directly of contributing to their country as their legacy, but this was spoken of by a number of Chinese interviewees in terms of what they sought to leave with their lives: this seems partly a product of contemporary Chinese nationalism. At the same time, a number of Americans and Japanese did indeed speak of contributing to their society beyond themselves as their ultimate legacy, and this is the same basic ideal shared by our Chinese interviewees in this chapter.

Larger Implications

Chinese traditional senses of life after death had much in common with Japanese traditional senses; but as we've seen, these senses were fundamentally transformed after the communist revolution in China. Whereas Japanese traditional practices have been slowly eroding and changing, Chinese traditional practices were obliterated in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by the government. Life after death was seen as no more than superstition, as was taught to generations of young people. This attitude remains powerful today. Non-belief in life after death shows the cultural and social capital of non-believers, indicating how scientific, cultured and sophisticated they are; mostly unlike Japan, but somewhat like the United States, non-believers may feel superior to believers in life after death. Clearly, the education offered by the Chinese state has had extraordinary effects in obliterating senses of life after death in China. This situation makes China fundamentally different from both the United States and Japan. In the latter two societies, belief in life after death has been passing from collective belief to individuated belief or non-belief. In China, however, collective belief was transformed through education into collective non-belief quite rapidly. It is only since the 1980s that individuals have been turning from collective non-belief to a variety of different individual beliefs in life after death. The state has receded in recent decades in its

shaping of individual beliefs, but still, socialist doctrine reigns supreme, at least in official discourse.

An important element of "Chinese atheism" is the fact that the socialist state in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was not simply anti-religion; rather, as Liang Yongjia has discussed, it was against any religion other than itself.[51] Chinese socialism has been a secular religion; this is reflected in interviewees who described to us their upbringing in an earlier era in China. When an atheist we interviewed stated that heaven is impossible, just as true socialism is impossible, his comment is highly revealing. The this-world paradise of equality that he and others of his generation were taught to envision as their potential future did not come to pass; instead, China has become wealthy and capitalistic, and those earlier dreams have faded. In this sense, the Chinese religion of socialism has become discredited. China has become nationalistic in recent decades in an effort to replace socialism, but with only partial success in the minds of many Chinese people. The turning to belief in life after death that we see in the latter part of this chapter is built on disappointment and loss, despite China's extraordinary increase in wealth in recent decades. There used to be a utopian Chinese dream, promising, in effect, that although one died, the socialist ideal would live on. This has faded, and in its wake, individuals, especially those who are younger, may seek ideologies of life after death. As Ian Johnson has written in *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*, "hundreds of millions of Chinese are consumed with doubt about their society and turning to religion and faith for answers that they do not find in the radically secular world constructed around them."[52]

Belief in life after death in China, as in Japan, is about possibilities and also hope. Belief in ghosts, as several interviewees expressed, makes plausible a belief in worlds beyond this one; belief in reincarnation or in heaven opens up doors towards a desirable afterlife, or a chance to start over. These beliefs seem to motivate and morally guide some individuals to follow righteous conduct in this life. In a China that is seen, just like the United States and Japan, as growing ever more individualistic, a number of our Chinese interviewees imagine that belief in life after death may lead people to behave morally in society. Socialism obliterated belief in heaven or other forms of life after death, substituting in its place the promise of a this-world utopia before death. When that promise faded, life after death reappeared, but following not the dictates of the state but rather those of the market—"choose whatever belief makes the most sense to you." Some Chinese interviewees seek life after death through metaphorical immortality, living through their descendants or their art, but most essentially through their country, as if in echo of the earlier socialist dream. Others do this through literal immortality, in their personal dreams of heaven or reincarnation, pursued either on their own or through membership in a religious group that stands in opposition to the atheistic governing philosophy, often elaborated upon through their own imagination. A number of the people we interviewed expressed a belief in reincarnation or heaven and hell because they sought justice and fairness in

the next world—justice and fairness that they felt were lacking in the society in which they lived in this world.

China, more than the United States and Japan, continues to have a dominantly atheist population which does not embrace religious belief; but we have heard both believers and non-believers in life after death expressing longing for Chinese society to be more religious than it is now. A few non-believers in life after death have commented, "Because of atheism, Chinese now lack a sense of fear. They will do anything." "Society will become more harmonious if people believe in reincarnation or heaven and hell. People now are so anxious. Money has become too important." As a result, belief in life after death is often viewed as a way to reinstall moral order in society, whether the person we spoke with is a believer in life after death or not. This is an interesting echo of the situation described in the United States by a number of our interviewees, seeking some sort of common moral basis to unify society. Possibly this will happen in China—some people believe that China may become the next true home of Christianity in the world.[53] Christianity is booming in China today, with more Christians than Communist Party members, by some accounts[54]; who knows how this will play out into the future? Or perhaps—as seems more likely—China will follow the path of the United States and Japan, in having an emerging multitude of believers in life after death who follow their own personal paths, largely apart from larger public discourses. This may be the future of senses of life after death in China and in the world as a whole, as we will discuss in the final chapter of this book.

Notes

1 See https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uighurs-xinjiang; see also Gillette 2002; Liang 2014.
2 Jin 1999; Xue 2012; Zhang 1996; Zheng 2008.
3 Brashier 1996; Berling 1992.
4 Gong, 2006; Poo 1995; Wolf 1974.
5 Poo 1995: 90–96; Poo 2018: 242–243.
6 Poo 2018: 242.
7 Armstrong 1998.
8 Watson and Rawski 1988; Sutton 2007.
9 Watson 1988: 11.
10 Wolf 1974: 106–111.
11 Palmer 2011; Poo 1995; Poo 2010.
12 Yang 1961.
13 Yang 1961: 328.
14 Johnson 2017; Zhou 2017.
15 Ladany 1988.
16 Yang 1961: 180–196, 389.
17 Marsh 2011; Johnson 2017.
18 Johnson 2017: 26.
19 Whyte 1988.
20 Jankowiak 1993: 258–259, 261.
21 Jankowiak 1993, 266.
22 Johnson 2017.
23 Johnson 2017: 397–398.

24 See Scott 2010.
25 Yan 2011.
26 Yan 2011, 44.
27 Ebrey 1993: 442–446.
28 Yan 2011, 44.
29 Kipnis 2017.
30 See https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christianity-china; Johnson 2017.
31 http://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/GIA-Book-2015.pdf.
32 Yang 1961, 386.
33 Tu 1999: 87.
34 See http://en.chinaculture.org/focus/focus/2011dmyx/2011–06/24/content_418004.htm.
35 See https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1j54y1a7kA/ for a video of this episode.
36 https://www.statista.com/topics/1247/chinese-communist-party/.
37 See, in English https://grave-robbers-chronicles.fandom.com/wiki/The_Grave_Robbers%27_Chronicles.
38 This game evoked considerable controversy in China: https://technode.com/2019/02/25/horror-game-devotion-sparks-heated-debate-on-chinese-social-media-for-politically-cnt/.
39 Sogyal 1993.
40 See, to mention only two such books, Khenpo 2015 and Chen 2012.
41 Additional information about the Chinese underworld can be found at https://supchina.com/2021/01/18/hells-bittersweet-end-meng-po-goddess-of-forgetfulness/; https://daoistgate.com/zhong-kui-demon-hunter/; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diyu. See for an interesting academic account of the relation of the Chinese underworld to Chinese legal culture, Katz 2008.
42 See, for additional information, https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2018/10/the-strange-tales-from-liaozhai/.
43 See https://www.asianscientist.com/2015/01/features/chinese-spirit-medium-worship/.
44 Fang and Zhang 2000; Giskin 2004.
45 See for example, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/11/world/asia/feng-shui-grows-in-china-as-officials-seek-success.html.
46 Stark and Liu 2011.
47 This interview was conducted by the undergraduate student Natalie Lo for the class "Meanings of Life" at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in fall 2011.
48 Bauman 1992,104.
49 Yang 1961, 385.
50 As quoted in the selected Works of Chairman Mao: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_19.htm.
51 Liang 2014, 53.
52 Johnson 2017: 16.
53 Mathews, Lin and Yang 2017, 192–193.
54 See https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/01/chinese-communist-party-scared-of-christianity-religion/.

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5

LIFE AFTER DEATH/LIFE BEFORE DEATH AND THEIR LINKAGES

Life After Death/Life Before Death in Three Societies

What can senses of life after death in the three societies we have examined tell us about life before death in these societies? We can first look at this in an individual sense. In all three societies, some people think that beyond the grave there is nothing; some of these people hope to be remembered on this earth in various ways, through their art or their fame or their children or their country. A few see the potential absence of life after death as a situation calling for deep moral reflection as to how we should live, while many others see it as common sense to be taken for granted and ignored. Others aren't at all sure about what happens after they die and give the matter little thought. Still others vaguely or vividly imagine heaven, paradise, reincarnation, ghosts, or planets or dimensions beyond this one. Among those people who envision life after death, some believe that they will be reunited with family and loved ones, while others foresee an individual reunion with God, and still others envision being reborn into another life. Some imagine details of heaven, while others anticipate only overwhelming love; some remember lives lived beyond this one, while others only hope for such lives. Some imagine life after death as a casual speculation, while others believe in it as their life's deepest passion.

Often, what these individuals think happens to them after they die bears no relation to how they think about and live their lives before they die. For some, this is because they adhere to no sense of life after death and have felt no need to justify how they live in terms of any prospective life after death. For others, there may be a life after death, but it bears no relation to this world and how one should live and act in this world. However, for still others, we interviewed in these three societies, what they felt would happen to them after they die did seem to have a large or small influence on how they think and live in this world.

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(And of course vice-versa—how they have thought and lived in this world no doubt has shaped their envisioning or rejection of worlds beyond this one, not least in terms of their childhood upbringing, whether followed or spurned.) We cannot know this for certain—what people tell us and how they think and live in their lives as a whole may sometimes bear only a tenuous relationship—but judging from what we have been told in these three societies, we can come to some general conclusions.

It is broadly the case in these three societies that the more religious or spiritually inclined a person we interviewed was, the more obvious the linkage between their envisioned life after death and their life before death; the less overtly religious or spiritually inclined a person was, the less obvious the linkage. This is partly because the more a person believes in life after death, the more likely they are to try to shape their lives before death around that belief. This is also no doubt because the more important a conviction concerning life after death was to a person, the more he or she would shape her or his life's narrative around that conviction. A person who professed a deep belief in heaven/hell or reincarnation, or a profound sense of commitment to one's familial ancestors, or even a deep sense that although there is no life after death, the world would be better if people behaved in a moral way, might tell a life story revolving around these beliefs or commitments, particularly so because of the nature of our questions. On the other hand, a person whose sense of life after death was tentative or absent would be more likely to tell a life story bearing little or no relation to any sense of life after death.

These linkages between senses of life after death and of life before death are apparent among many of those we interviewed who believe in some form of organized religion, and others as well. These include Christians who live by the Bible in this life and envision their next life in heaven, and Buddhists who believe in reincarnation and live lives pursuing goodness in order to be reborn in a better place. These also include Japanese practitioners of ancestor worship who feel that their forebears may indeed be in another world where they themselves will go once they die. These also include atheists who seek to live their lives by a moral code that does not depend on any sense of life after death, such as the Chinese who grew up in the socialist era and maintain their firm conviction that all the world is matter alone and must be understood as such, and the Americans who justify their senses of morality through their own thought-out moral codes. These linkages may also be seen among the pursuers of metaphorical immortality who seek to be remembered through their children, their art, their accomplishments, or in the memories of those who survive them, and who may more or less conceive of their lives in that light. There are also those people who have less than full certainty about any life after death who nonetheless look carefully to a world beyond this one—from the American New-Age mystic who communicates with the vibrations in her being to ask what happens after death, to the young Japanese man not taking his mistress home for fear that his dead grandfather might see what he is doing, to the Chinese Communist Party member who

does not follow Party strictures in her beliefs about life after death, a violation of her job but not of her convictions. These examples all imply a significant relation between how some we interviewed see their fate after death and how they see their lives before death.

This influence should not be exaggerated. It seems likely that some of the people we interviewed overemphasized the extent to which senses of what might happen after death influence their lives before death simply because this is what we were asking about, and they sought to oblige their interviewers. Beyond this, because we interviewed people but did not follow them in their lives, we generally cannot know much about how what they told us relates to how they actually live. But nonetheless, it does seem quite reasonable to maintain that senses of life after death or its lack do indeed have an impact on how a number of people comprehend their lives in these three societies. As an influence on how we think about and live our lives before death in these three societies, senses of life after death live on.

Above all, there is a radical difference in outlook between those who firmly believe in life after death and those who firmly do not. In all three of these societies, there are those who are convinced that God is their protector, that the ancestors watch over them, or that they are on a succession of reincarnated life journeys, and there are those who are convinced that any such beliefs are nonsense, that those who are dead are only dead. These two groups of people live in different universes, although they live together in the same communities in all three of these societies. And between these two poles of adhering to or denying life after death, there are those of us, perhaps the majority, who speculate or hope but don't claim to know what our ultimate fate as human beings in the cosmos might be.

The relation between life after death and life before death is often not apparent at an individual level but is more obvious at a collective level. These three societies at present have created fundamentally different social environments within which life after death is imagined, believed in, hoped for, or rejected, as we will now examine.

The United States, Japan, and China Compared

In the analyses of the preceding pages, there is a broad but obvious similarity between the United States, Japan, and China, in the array of beliefs concerning life after death that our interviewees in these three societies adhere to—the array of senses of life after death in our three ethnographic chapters cover broadly the same terrain. In all three societies, many people have moved away from collective beliefs concerning life after death, whether American Christianity, Japanese ancestor veneration, or Chinese Marxist atheism, to embrace their own individual beliefs from an ideational "cultural supermarket" of such belief[1]—even though their choices of senses of life after death are often chosen hardly as a casual supermarket choice but only after deep personal reflection or even agony,

and even though the overall range of choices seems limited to a relatively small number of possibilities. The spectrum of different imaginings of life after death or its lack in these societies is quite similar, a similarity that serves as a testament to the internet-connected world that we live in today, creating a broadly common world culture when it comes to senses of life after death.

But there also are some very basic differences. For the majority of Americans, the Christian God and promise of heaven are more or less real, but for the majority of Japanese and Chinese, there is no such real afterlife—some half of Japanese and more than half of Chinese are convinced there is no life after death, although a significant minority do believe in reincarnation, God in heaven, a realm of the ancestors, or other forms of afterlife. If in the United States, God is the taken-for-granted cultural presence in discussions of life after death, the comparative Japanese presence is the ancestors who may or may not be beckoning from beyond; while the comparable Chinese presence, against the background of state-sponsored atheism, as well as the veneration of ancestors, reincarnation, and heaven, is perhaps ghosts—when many of our Chinese interviewees referred to life after death, it was ghosts that came up. God, ancestors and ghosts have very different implications. God is the ultimate being in the universe; one's ancestors are one's own particular forebears, shared by one's own family but by no one else; and ghosts, unlike God or (usually) ancestors, are potentially malevolent.

Some of our American interviewees talked regularly to a being they identified as God about life and death and their meaning. Only Americans so communicated, such as the God-consulting American mystic we heard from. This sense of personally relating to God, the ultimate being in the universe, marks a distinct difference between American senses of life after death and those of China and Japan—some of those we interviewed in those societies, if confronted with the above example, might say, "If there were a God, why would God want to talk to me in particular?" Only a few Americans we spoke with said that they had direct communication with God; but the very fact that anyone would claim this is remarkable. In ancestor veneration in Japan and in China, one communicates not with the God of the universe but with one's own late grandfather or mother or spouse, a far more modest form of communication.

Linked to this, some Americans, particularly some evangelical Christians, were universalistic in their claims about life after death: the being they worshipped was everybody's, and everybody should worship as they did. As an American evangelical Christian tells us in chapter two, "Yes, if my friends don't accept what the Bible says, they're going to hell." But this certainty seems unsuited for the contemporary era of relativism in the United States and elsewhere. As her fellow American evangelical tells us, "Religions that say, 'if you don't believe this, you're not going to heaven,' are seen as judgmental," and are thus rejected by many in the contemporary United States. It is interesting that the Japanese and Chinese Christians we interviewed were unwilling to take the uncompromising views of some American Christians that their non-Christian fellows would burn in hell and never know the love of God. In their societies of multiple beliefs, this

seemed untenable because they would thereby be consigning most of the people around them to hell.

Relativism is the dominant view, increasingly true in the United States as well as in Japan and China. For those who engage in ancestor veneration, relativism is readily apparent, in that one's family is all that matters, as is apparent in a number of our Japanese interviews, such as that of the woman who is convinced that she will be with her father and not with her husband after she dies. People in other families may perhaps have wholly different destinies, but that is not the concern of those who engage in ancestor veneration in their own families and with their own lost loved ones. For agnostics in all three societies, they are relativists almost by definition. Since they themselves have no firm convictions as to what happens after they die, they can't know what happens after death for others. As for non-believers' views of life after death, many of those we interviewed stated that they would not criticize others for their beliefs; and several Americans and Japanese we interviewed who are convinced that life after death is probably or certainly fictitious, felt that it was not important enough to argue about with their spouses. There are various individual exceptions among the Chinese and Japanese we spoke with. However, generally, the only people who really care enough about life after death to argue about it with others and to insist they are right and others are wrong among the people we interviewed are American evangelical Christians, as well as some Chinese socialist materialists.

In Japan and China, senses of life after death are expressed in terms of ritual practice—venerating the ancestors at the family altar and visiting the family grave at *obon* in Japan, and visiting the family grave during the Ching Ming Festival in China. Some people who do this believe that they really can communicate with their ancestors through this practice, and others keep an open mind as to whether communication might possibly take place; but many others, probably the majority in China, think that no communication is possible—the practice is a social ritual for the sake of the living. In the United States, practice is secondary to belief—several of the American Christians we interviewed said that going to church was not necessary; their own faith was what was most important. This book's analysis deals with belief more than practice, with what people think and feel more than what they do, but these are often linked. As one wife in Japan tells us, "I talk to the ancestors every morning.…I think the souls of the ancestors may really be there." It seems likely that the act of talking to the ancestors every morning helps to shape her belief that they just might be listening.

In China and the United States, senses of life after death are most broadly conceived of as matters of belief versus non-belief, but in Japan, for many people we interviewed, it is a matter of hope: "Who knows? Maybe the ancestors really are there!" Even those Japanese who are inclined to embrace the possibility of life after death typically say that they do not know what might happen after they die. Some Americans and Chinese we interviewed also spoke of hope but this was a particularly strong tendency in Japan. This may be because in both the United States and China there have been dominant ideologies—American Christianity

and Chinese Communism—requiring assent or dissent, belief or non-belief, as to their conceptions of life after death, while in Japan there has been no such dominant ideology in the lifetimes of most of those we interviewed, leaving room for hope but no more. (There was such an ideology during the World War II years in Japan.)

This sense of hope is linked to emotion and its contrast with logic. The Japanese pharmacist we interviewed maintained that when he dies, he will definitely only vanish; but he also tells us that if he were to lose a beloved family member, his view of life after death might change. The long-bereaved Japanese computer programmer makes a similar argument vis-à-vis her late husband, whom she believes she will definitely meet again after death despite its logical implausibility. Few Americans or Chinese we interviewed spoke so explicitly about the power of emotion to overcome logic in their beliefs about life after death.

If China and Japan share a common emphasis on ritual practice over faith in life after death—if not on hope, which seems more particular to Japan—the United States and Japan share a common emphasis on free choice in belief without state intervention. In the United States, there has long been a linkage of political life to senses of life after death—as an interviewee says about the United States today, "you can't be an atheist and get elected"; "In God We Trust" is on American coins. In Japan, in World War II, Japanese died for their emperor, and for the eternal life of Japan through the emperor. But at present, in both Japan and the United States, the state generally stays out.

This has not been the case in China, where the state's influence over the past 70 years has been paramount. Those Chinese who grew up in the 1950s, through the 1970s are likely to be materialists in the Marxist mold because this is how they were educated and because the Chinese government, during their formative years, outlawed all displays of religious belief. (A number of Americans and Japanese we spoke with went to religious schools; but unlike Chinese, for Americans and Japanese these schools were often resisted rather than accepted in their ideologies concerning religion and life after death. This is unlike the Chinese we interviewed, many of whom fully accepted Marxist-derived materialism as reality. This may be partly because religious schooling in the United States and Japan was seen by many as being redolent of eroding tradition, whereas Chinese atheism was seen as the scientific future.) One interviewee tells us, "There's nothing after you die. I think this attitude is related to our education in atheism and materialism"; another maintains, "I was raised in the socialist era, so no one talked about ghosts or spirits." In the early 1980s, the government loosened its control over religious and spiritual beliefs, and so those Chinese who are younger or outside the mainstream often have adopted senses of life after death. There has been a broad global movement from collective senses of life after death to individualized senses or no senses of life after death in the developed world, patterns which the United States and Japan seem to be following. China, on the other hand, has been moving in a different direction: from a collective sense of no life after death to individuated senses of life after death, as the state has to

some extent receded from its role in shaping its citizens' formulations of what happens after we die.

In all three of our ethnographic chapters, we have seen people emphasizing metaphorical immortality. Often these pursuits are similar in these three societies, with, for example, the Chinese painter telling us, "I seek to leave my name in Chinese art history or even world art history," in words that sound similar to those of the Japanese designer: "I want everyone to look at my work after I'm gone and say, 'Nakamura did that!'" But most of the people we interviewed were more modest or at least less direct about their claims to fame. The former governor of Colorado mentioned that while he was pleased to be on a list of the hundred people who had most affected his state, "in future eras, they'll come up with a new list and I won't be on it." Several of the Japanese are even more modest: "no one will know my name [after I'm dead], but it doesn't matter….For knowledge, your name is not important—it's the contribution you make." Very few Americans or Japanese spoke of collective metaphorical immortality in terms of their country, but this was more common among Chinese, seeking to leave their legacy through the prosperity and well-being of their nation, particularly given the lack of morality that some saw in their nation at present.

From the analysis thus far, we can see that the United States is distinct in its ongoing belief in Christianity and heaven among many of its people, unlike the skepticism towards life after death among many in Japan and China, leading at least some to believe in the absolute truth of their views. China is distinct in its state manipulation of senses of life after death, with its education in atheism and materialism, unlike the more hands-off approach of the state in recent decades in the United States and Japan. Japan is distinct in the emphasis on hope rather than belief, and the frank place given to emotion in senses of life after death. But there is one more pivotal sense in which Japan differs from China and the United States: the role attributed to beliefs in life after death in maintaining social order.

In the United States, one prominent theme of our interviews is the need for a sense of life after death in order to create a sense of societal unity. Christians spoke of this, but so too did atheists; as the former governor told us, "Yes, if there's no common sense of life after death, you do wonder what social glue will hold increasingly diverse people together." In China, a similar sentiment was uttered; as a businessman told us, "If people believe in heaven and hell, the social order will improve." This was often linked to disappointment at what China has become in recent decades, the sense that Chinese society is in moral decline; as a factory owner said, "In the past, we truly believed that socialism could be realized….But now, people's pursuit of money has gone wild." In both the United States, once unified by Christianity, and China, once unified by the socialist ideal, the fading of these ideologies leaves some people wishing for a common basis of morality in society. But this is much less true in Japan, where very few interviewees (only the atypical Buddhist priest we interviewed) spoke directly of the need for belief in life after death in order to improve the moral order of society.

One reason for the salience of God and the promise of heaven is that in the United States societal pressures to live in certain ways remain comparatively muted in many respects as compared to societies such as Japan and China, where social pressure (in Japan) or state pressure (in China) is marked. In the United States, the promise of heaven and salvation causes at least some people to seek to live in a morally "good" way, since social and institutional pressures may not themselves be sufficient. Life after death and its promise, particularly in terms of the Christian God and the Bible (as well as in the alternative formulations of morality offered by some of the non-believers we interviewed) serves as a form of moral guidance. The fact that this promise may not work well in leading to morally "good" behavior (U.S. states with the highest church attendance also tend to have the highest murder rates[2]) is beside the point. The point instead is that the promise or hope of life after death through God's salvation addresses a need that social pressure and education may not be felt to adequately address: why lead a morally "good" life? Educated American rationalists have their own answers; but for many Americans, God and the promise of the next world continue to give moral guidance as to how to live in this world. The United States is in transition; we see a flight from collective Christianity to individual beliefs of a wide variety, from Christianity to atheism to reincarnation. But without a broadly common sense of what life means, what can hold America together?

This is true of China as well. Some Chinese we interviewed, for example the woman who told us, "If people believe in heaven and hell, they'll try their best and won't commit crimes" sound much like American Christians; but the Chinese situation is more complicated. For several decades China imposed the atheism that Marxist doctrine dictated, but it lasted only for a limited time—as communist doctrine receded, many Chinese began to seek their own freedom to believe or not believe in life after death as they saw fit. Just as the United States remains in the shadow of Christianity, China is in the shadow of Marxism and communism. But the movement in China is not away from belief in life after death but towards it, with the market-oriented principle of "believe whatever you please" winning out over state-mandated conceptions of what should be believed.

Senses of life after death in China are seen by at least some adherents as offering a moral basis that life before death in its injustice and greed can no longer provide. The communist government created a powerful secular moral order replacing earlier religious strands and promising the metaphorical immortality of a coming Chinese utopia. But that moral order lost its legitimacy in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and later because of China's growing wealth. (The Chinese state has attempted to replace communism with nationalism in morally uniting its citizens, but this seems to work less well, in part because it cannot be universal.) In China, the promise of a communist secular utopia providing metaphorical immortality for all who help to create it has become instead an all-too-human world of corruption and the pursuit of money: thus some of our interviewees long for a widespread belief in life after death to enable

morality's return. For China, senses of life after death are often expressed not in terms of moral guidance, as in the United States, but in terms of moral loss: the loss of a utopian dream, one which, however unrealistic it may have been over the long term, was compelling for many who grew up in the socialist era.

Japan, again, seems different. Unlike the United States and China today, morality in Japan tends to be based on social pressure, with *sekentei*, the opinions of other people, working powerfully in many people's lives; for this reason, belief in life after death is largely unnecessary as moral guidance. Some we interviewed did speak of moral guidance, such as the drunken graduate student who can't bring his mistress home because his late grandfather might be watching, and the Buddhist priest living virtuously in this life in preparation for his next one. But this was unusual in the Japanese context. A more typical view was that of the salaryman who tells us that in Japan "people don't think about life after death; they think about life now, and about what other people think of you, and the rules you have to follow"—this is what creates morality in the society, he insisted.

Just as American spiritual guidance may be of limited effectiveness in leading citizens to behave morally, so too is Japanese societal pressure. Interviewees spoke of growing Japanese individualism, and indeed, this can be seen in numerous aspects of Japanese society today, which is freer in its possible ways of life than it was 40 years ago.[3] But most Japanese continue to live more or less within these pressures, however restrictive they may be. It is in this context that Japanese envisionings of life after death take the form for many not of moral guidance, as in the United States, or moral loss, as in China, but of moral escape, as if to say, "In this world I must perform in accordance with the expectations of others. But as for the next world, I can imagine whatever I want!" This is the stance, for example, of the Japanese man who loves thinking about the occult and reincarnation, who exclaims, "I might be reborn as grass, or as flowers, or as an animal. That might be fun! I've never experienced it!" This is also the position taken by numerous Japanese books on life after death, which do not expostulate on a realm of life after death that one should believe in, but rather on a range of possibilities their readers might envision. Japanese society before death remains controlled; but life after death is a realm apart from that control, a world about which—although departed loved ones may beckon—you can be free to dream whatever you may choose.

These three portraits—life after death as moral guidance (the United States), life after death as a moral escape (Japan), and life after death as moral loss (China) provide a broad basis for comparing these three societies.[4] What life after death means in these societies is closely linked to what kind of societies they are before death. The United States is a society without a common overarching moral vision, as is reflected today in such diverse areas as American politics and its extraordinary divisions in worldviews, and American senses of life after death. Japan continues to be a society of great social pressure, although somewhat less so than in the recent past, but this does not extend to senses of life after death:

freedom reigns in envisionings of the next world, as it does not much exist for social life in this world. China had a moral grounding in the secular religion of communism, but this has been lost in capitalism: Chinese today may look back on China of 60 years ago in its promise of atheist utopia and see a moral loss, and so some turn to individual senses of life after death, and to religion more generally, to make up for this loss.

We have compared our interviews for the differences they reveal in senses of life after death and life before death in the United States, Japan, and China. Let us now consider our interviews for their commonalities, social and existential: what can they teach us about senses of life after death today?

Universal Questions: Social

Why Do We Live As We Do?

As discussed in chapter one, the question "Why do we live as we do?" had a religious answer for societies around the world through the past several thousand years. "Live in the right way and you'll go to heaven/go to the Pure Land/ be reborn as a human or a god; don't live the right way and you'll go to hell/ be boiled in oil/ be reborn as an insect" was the standard teaching. Not everyone necessarily believed this within a given society, but teachings such as these provided a common framework as to how a person should live. Today, however, there is far more variation; with a variety of different views of life after death available in the three societies we have examined, people are able to take a critical distance from any or all of them.

Underlying this is the fact that life now seems for many in the developed world to be worth living in and of itself, with no need for a promise of a world beyond. To put a Marxist spin on the matter, religion as an opiate has lost its narcotic effect for many people. Life itself may now seem worth living as it did not in the past simply because it is so generally comfortable, at least in the developed world; it seems that life for most people is pretty good, even if many of us believe that we only live once. As an American retiree maintains,

> I don't know if I believe in life after death, or if I care. If I was born in a poor country and had suffered greatly…I would want an afterlife really badly....[But] in this pretty good world, we don't need the promise of an afterlife.

This view was at least implicitly held by people we interviewed in all three societies.

This optimistic view was disputed by some Chinese interviewees; as one older woman exclaims, "Human life is so bitter. I don't want to suffer anymore; I want to be with Buddha." China has been through much poverty until recent decades, and through much political turmoil as well, which views such as hers may

reflect. This sense of privation can also be found among some we interviewed in Japan and the United States, particularly among women and African-Americans, but was most common among the elders we interviewed in China. Aside from economic pain, there is also emotional pain, the pain of loss, grief, miscommunication, and failure—this seems an essential part of being human.

However, at least in terms of life expectancy, this pain has lessened: life today is unimaginably longer and healthier than it was in centuries past. The large majority of us in the developed world—and increasingly in the developing world as well—can expect to live beyond childhood, beyond youth, beyond many decades of work, and eventually well into retirement. Most of us in the developed world can expect to live into our seventies or eighties or even nineties, as was unthinkable in earlier eras of human history. We can also generally expect, very much unlike the past, that the children we bear will survive into adulthood and into old age themselves. This fact alone means that the terror of death is considerably mitigated—dying at twenty or thirty or forty, in the midst of one's life, is very different than dying at eighty or ninety. Death at an old age, after one has lived a long life through life's different stages, may not seem to be a terrible tragedy, but rather the natural course of things for many although certainly not all old people. As a Japanese interviewee tells us, "if you can die at eighty, you've died at an old age. If someone dies at 45, on the other hand, it's tears and tears at their funeral. We're supposed to live long!" As an American in his nineties maintains, "I've come to recognize…that death is not an enemy, it's a friend."

The fact that death is so distant for most of us until we are elderly leads to its own problems. Because death is at such a remove for most of our lives, we may not experience the world with as much intensity as those who directly face death. As the Japanese writer Kamiya Mieko has noted, people who are facing death, without the ordinary concerns of this life, can directly experience nature, and can directly understand the preciousness and fragility of being alive, in a way that other people typically cannot.[5] The rest of us put it off, checking the text messages on our phones as we walk obliviously past rainbows, cloudbanks, and the moon. If we truly knew that we were going to die—if to the marrow of our bones we knew that we would only vanish in the blink of an eye and it will be as if we had never existed—would we live differently? We probably would, spending less time pursuing monetary or other forms of success and more time experiencing the world in all its splendors. But in any case, life, for most of us, is now sufficiently filled with ease, pleasures, and rewards—unlike life up until the recent past—to make it worthwhile on its own for many people, with no need for any promise of a reward beyond, although innumerable hopes remain. Because life for most people is reasonably long and comfortable, there is no need, many feel, to give the prospect of a world after death much thought.

This is one answer to the question asked in this book's first chapter. We live as we do without adhering to any sense of life after death because for many people, life no longer requires any extra-world justification beyond itself. Life may be pointless beyond itself, but so what? Who needs a life after death when

life before death is pretty long and pretty good? Of course, for many people, life may not seem so good. But for the many people who fit this category, there is a second, important answer for why we live as we do. Given the current privatization of senses of life after death, anyone who seeks to adhere to a sense of life after death can do so more or less without social consequences. The fact that senses of life after death have become privatized for most people means that there is little social pressure (for all but Christians and communists and other social groups of the committed, groups that may indeed provide pressure). The people around you may have no idea what you think happens to you after you die, or whether you believe in heaven, reincarnation, multiple dimensions, or the illusion of time's linearity, and in any case, they may not care in the slightest. This may be somewhat less true in China than in Japan and the United States, as we've seen, because of Communist Party ideology. Beyond this, the United States and Japan provide somewhat more cultural resources for imagining a multitude of kinds of life after death than does China—although China has been gaining such resources in recent years because of the internet. But despite this, in all three societies, one is generally free to believe whatever one wants, with others often neither knowing nor caring what you think.

There are certainly exceptions to this. These include, as we've seen, marriages in the United States where one spouse prays that the other will accept Jesus Christ into his life, or in Japan, where a wife may imagine being in an afterlife not with her husband but with her own family. These also include families in which parents lament their children's lack of belief, as we saw with an American evangelical Christian who lamented that her children had rejected the Christian message that she had tried to instill in them. The opposite is apparent in a Chinese Bahá'í believer's words, with her parents rejecting not her lack of faith but her abundance of faith. These conflicts are real; but in many other cases, life after death is simply beside the point. As an American non-believer in life after death says, "If my wife said, 'I believe in heaven,' I'd think that's fine. We don't have to agree on whether there's an afterlife or not"—it is not a vital cultural issue, he tells us. A Japanese non-believer in life after death similarly tells us that the fact that his wife believes that she can communicate with her late father while he thinks the idea is ridiculous is unimportant: "It doesn't matter to me what she thinks. We argue about lots of other things, but not about this!"

Because of this general social irrelevance of beliefs in life after death, as Tony Walter has surmised (see chapter one),[6] people are generally free to believe whatever they want to believe. Those who feel the need to believe in life after death can find solace in believing in heaven or reincarnation or universal consciousness or anything else they may find appealing. This is why developed-world societies such as the United States, Japan, and China can so easily shift away from belief in life after death: simply, anyone who doesn't want to make this shift is free not to, and no one, in some cases not even one's parents, spouse, or children, may have any idea what one is thinking about such a matter. And if they do, it may simply be irrelevant to the key issues in one's social life—no more relevant, and perhaps

even less relevant, than one's taste in beverages, restaurants, or TV dramas. One's sense of life after death may be of considerable personal importance—it may matter greatly as one approaches death—but of only minimal societal importance: "think whatever you want!" Of course, we never know how our own personal influences may play out in the world: "the butterfly effect" in the social realm is indeed sometimes real. But not often—your beliefs about life after death probably won't have any large-scale societal influence whatsoever.

Why Do Some People Believe in Life After Death and Others Do Not?

We cannot conclusively answer this question based on our limited interviews, but we can discuss various factors that influence adherence to life after death. Probably the most obvious factor is religious belief: there are exceptions in our ethnographic chapters, but almost all adherents to religion also believe more or less in life after death (the only exceptions are several American Jews and Buddhists we interviewed). Of course, many Japanese and Chinese engage in religious practices but do not believe in any life after death. But those who do describe themselves as believing in religion generally do adhere to a sense of life after death. The converse, however, is not true—those who do not believe in any religion may indeed nonetheless adhere to a sense of life after death. This is perhaps the most remarkable spiritual feature of our contemporary age—the ease by which individuals can assemble their own versions of an imagined life after death apart from any particular religion.

A key factor in why some people believe in life after death and others don't is personal experience. Our interviewees who adhere to a sense of life after death often refer to their experiences convincing them that life after death is real. As a Chinese interviewee tells us, "I've seen ghosts, so I know that supernatural beings exist." As a Japanese interviewee tells us, "I've experienced evidence of that other world through my husband and also through my mother [when they died]." As an American interviewee maintains, "I've had some miraculous things happen to me that I couldn't attribute to anything but God working in my life." Objectively speaking, these experiences may not seem convincing to those who have not gone through them: one person's God may be another person's intuition; one person's perception of a ghost may be another person's shadow; one person's perception of a dying person's beckoning to the other world may be another person's view of an arm's random flailing. Personal experience alone cannot really explain why some people adhere to life after death and others do not. Still, to those who have experiences of the supernatural, they may be pivotal—although how much a given experience causes a person to adhere to a sense of life after death, and how much it is used instead as a latter-day justification for adhering to a sense of life after death remains an open question.

Family background is obviously a factor in shaping our interviewees' senses of life after death—American Christians often grew up in Christian households;

Japanese who believe that they communicate with their departed loved ones typically grew up in households that practiced ancestor veneration; and Chinese atheists and religious believers were also much influenced by family. On the other hand, many people we interviewed were given religious or non-religious training early in their lives and subsequently abandoned it, such as the Americans who went to Sunday School and quit, the Japanese who were raised to engage in ancestor veneration but abandoned it in the urban world they live in as adults, and the Chinese raised in their Marxist education to believe in no life after death who began as adults to believe in life after death. People are obviously not automatons; while some follow their family and educational backgrounds, many others do not. Family and educational background is one factor contributing to belief in life after death, but no more than that.

There is a very clearly social pressure to behave in certain ways with regard to death in these three societies, particularly in Japan and China. As a Japanese interviewee tells us, "In Japan, what society tells you to do and what you yourself want to do are often different. With funerals…you don't want to create quarrels, so if this is how something is done, you do it." This extends to communication with the ancestors. As a Chinese interviewee maintains: "It'd be strange if I didn't visit my parents' tomb during the Ching Ming Festival, since everyone else is visiting their family's tomb." But although behavior is shaped by social norms, these social norms need not extend to what people actually believe happens after death, which is private: these Japanese and Chinese interviewees do not themselves fully believe in life after death. The Chinese Communist Party member and believer in life after death we interviewed can go to temples and worship as long as she keeps quiet about what this personally means to her—she is free to think whatever she wants. If a person is a member of a certain group, as earlier mentioned, there may well be social pressure to believe in its tenets, and most members more or less will, but even here there is leeway, in that one's mind cannot easily be ascertained by others.

Some of the people we interviewed, particularly in China, offered a pragmatic orientation in adhering to life after death. As a Chinese interviewee tells us, "I'm skeptical about any life after death, but I tend to think, 'what if it's true?' I can't do bad things because, what if there is a life after death?" This is reminiscent of Pascal's famous 17th-century wager, whereby you might as well believe in God because the minor inconvenience of prayer if God does not exist far outweighs the catastrophic suffering you will go through if God does exist.[7] However, for many people today, as we've seen, this wager no longer seems worth making, because the possibility of life after death seems sufficiently small to make even a minor inconvenience not worth going through.

Another important variable separating believers in life after death from non-believers is their attitude towards science. A Japanese interviewee invoked science to explain why she cannot believe in life after death: "There's no evidence that there's anything after this biological life. Of course, I've never seen a black hole, either; but scientists say it's there, so I believe it. That can be proved

by science; life after death can't be." Many of the Chinese non-believers, in their insistence that matter is most important and consciousness simply its by-product, are saying, in effect, "I don't believe in superstition. I believe in science"; in one interviewee's words, "A lot of things people claim in religion are not scientific, like reincarnation. Some people still believe in these things, because it gives them peace of mind." On the other hand, several of the Japanese we interviewed mentioned the limits of scientific understanding—as they maintain, "science can't explain everything; there's more than that"; "it's not that science is wrong, but it's too small, in acknowledging only what can be proved"; "science doesn't understand 97% of what goes on in the universe!" As all these comments indicate, those who invoke science as the ultimate indicator of truth generally see life after death as fiction. Those who state that science is insufficient or too small to understand the human universe in all its complexities tend to believe in life after death, or at least are highly sympathetic to such belief.

Some of the more empirically-oriented interviewees in the United States, Japan, and China spoke of near-death experiences. An American interviewee tells us, "The commonality of near-death experiences—I think that there's a 50% chance, anyway, that it describes something real." As a Japanese interviewee maintains, "Near-death experiences provide hints that something survives. I can't say that I believe this 100%—maybe it's just that I hope 100%." Others were more skeptical. The Chinese cardiologist explained near-death experiences simply as a matter of brain waves and other physical processes that take place when one is close to death. Clearly, near-death experiences provide a degree of empirical support for something that may perhaps lie beyond this life, but can *prove* nothing, as most interviewees seem to recognize.

A number of interviewees used findings of contemporary science and speculations of science fiction to justify their senses of possible life after death. An American interviewee discussed how "I was recently reading a magazine article about how 'we are not alone,' saying that there are other beings out there in the universe. If that's true, then that really shakes up the whole story!" While science, for most interviewees, is cited as evidence for no life after death, those who read science fiction or popular science writings about the universe have grounds for thinking that there may be something beyond this world, however unimaginable that something beyond may be—even though they may be dismissive of science fiction. As a Japanese interviewee tells us, "I read lots of magazines and on the internet about ghosts, about extraterrestrials, about reincarnation. I believe only 30% because although I'm really interested, I just don't know. It's like science fiction to me."

There are thus a number of factors that correlate with belief in life after death, as we've seen, in terms of one's religious belief, personal experiences, family background, and attitude towards science. But there is, as earlier noted, no clear guide as to why some people choose to believe in life after death and others do not: this seems hidden within the mystery of individual character.

Why Are We So Afraid of Death?

As an American non-believer in life after death maintains, "there should be no reason that we fear dying. Why on earth are we all so afraid?" As another American says, "No, I'm not afraid of death, not at all. I don't believe that there's anything coming after, so why would you fear nothing?" If death, in this view, is simply nothingness, what could there be in death to be afraid of? It is merely a long sleep—and once one is dead, one will be aware of nothing, so why be afraid? If life after death is believed in, the great majority of believers in our ethnographic chapters believe that they are going to a good place, a place better than this world: only a few—more Chinese than Japanese or Americans—imagine themselves as possibly burning in hell. Given this, why fear death?

Clearly, many of us are afraid—and it may well be that those among our interviewees who confess their fear are only a fraction of those who actually do feel fear. There are Chinese potential interviewees who refused to be interviewed about the topic of life after death, so unpleasant was the subject; as one interviewee said, "People avoid this topic [death] because they feel that something bad might happen to them if they bring it up"; there are the Chinese war veterans who describe vividly how they were constantly in fear of death in wartime—"I saw dead bodies on the ground, and they were terrifying." There is an American interviewee who states, "I'm still afraid of death. I'm just as neurotic as the next guy. When I go, it'll be 'Not now! Not yet!'" There is the Japanese interviewee who exclaims, "After I die, where does the self that is thinking and worrying go to? What happens when a person never wakes up? That's why it's so frightening! Where on earth do I go?" The fear of death discussed by the people we interviewed in our ethnographic chapters includes (1) fear of a painful death, (2) fear of parting from those one loves, (3) fear of entering the unknown, and (4) fear of being forgotten, and vanishing without a trace.

We saw in chapter one how Ernest Becker, and later Sheldon Solomon et al., have argued that fear of death is universal, and is a major subconscious factor shaping our lives; and we saw on the other hand how Phil Zuckerman argues that there are many people in the modern world who may feel a degree of unease at the prospect of death, but can nonetheless live their lives perfectly happily without entertaining ideas of life after death.[8] It seems clear that, at least within the limits of our interviews, not everyone is afraid of death. In part, this reflects cultural difference. As remarked upon earlier, the Americans we interviewed seemed less likely to speak of a fear of death than did the Japanese and Chinese we spoke with, partly because of the ongoing strength of Christianity in the United States, a religion based on the triumph of everlasting life over death, and also perhaps because the pride of some American interviewees may have led them to not readily speak of such fear; this is not something that in an American context most adults want to admit to. In any case, many people we interviewed in all three societies did not believe in life after death and also expressed no fear of death. Reversing our earlier question, we may ask, why are they not afraid?

We mentioned in chapter one the philosopher William James's distinction between "the tender-minded" and "the tough-minded"—between the idealistic and the materialistic, the religious and non-religious,[9] and, we speculated, believers in life after death and non-believers in life after death. But the equation is complicated when it comes to fear of death. A tender-minded person may perhaps be able to believe wholeheartedly in life after death and thereby overcome fear of death. But of course, some of those who believe in life after death may still fear death and its aftermath: consider the Chinese interviewees who seem afraid of the punishments they may suffer in the afterlife, such as the woman who exclaims, "I haven't harmed anyone; I really don't want to be sent to hell or be tortured!" Fear of death may stem from the inability to resign oneself to death's inevitability, coupled with the inability to fully believe in a joyful life after death; it is this middle state that might perhaps be the most predominant source of fear of death today. But of course, this lack of certainty may also be seen a source of hope rather than fear. As an American maintains, "I don't really think that anything is going to happen after I die, but if there was a world after death, it would be awfully nice."

Some we interviewed counseled fully living now, before death. As a Chinese interviewee tells us in chapter four, "It's not much use thinking about what happens after we die. Why spend time thinking about that when you can enjoy your life now?" As a Japanese interviewee tells us in chapter three, "For people who are afraid of death, I'd say, 'Everyone dies. So just accept it. And live well in the meantime!'" As an American interviewee tells us in chapter two, "We truly don't know what will happen to us after we die; if we really are engaged in living, then does it matter?" These are all wise words. But their acceptance of death seems available to some more than to others today in the three societies we've examined. This may be a matter of hard-earned wisdom, but it may also be a matter of the luck of one's upbringing and one's genetically shaped level of happiness and optimism.[10]

Are People Happier if they Believe in Life After Death? Would Societies Be Better if Most of Their Members Believed in Life After Death?

In an individual sense, we have no evidence on the basis of our interviews in three societies that people who believe in life after death are happier than those who do not. Our interviews did not directly address happiness, so we can judge this only indirectly. But it nonetheless seems evident that belief in life after death does not necessarily create a greater sense of happiness in individuals—it certainly may for specific people, but not in general. The Christians portrayed in our American chapter do not seem appreciably happier than those who believe in no life after death; although there are individual exceptions, the Chinese believers in life after death do not seem appreciably happier than those who are atheists. The exception to this may be in Japan, where not belief but hope may indeed create happier individuals—the people who hope that maybe they can indeed

see their departed loved ones again do indeed seem to be happier, as opposed to those who merely despair. This is hope, not belief, but it does seem real for those who can maintain it. Of course, many individuals we interviewed have no such hope and seem perfectly happy, but those people generally did not speak of lost loved ones. The general principle seems to be that if belief in life after death does not necessarily create happiness, hope probably does, at least in those individuals who have suffered adversity: the loss of a loved one they desperately want to meet again.

The most direct discussion in the preceding pages concerning happiness and its relation to life after death was that of the non-believing Japanese woman who maintains that she would not be happier if she believed in life after death. She might be happier if she had a sense of larger meaning to her life, she tells us, but this need not be life after death but rather any larger meaning that can give life a sense of purpose, whether creating a sense of community, as discussed by some of the Americans we interviewed, or creating a legacy of values that last beyond one's life, like the filial piety mentioned by some of the Chinese we interviewed. People do often need a sense that their lives have a meaning,[11] and this might indeed be linked to metaphorical immortality: "I will die, but that which I have lived for will live on"; but this need not involve a sense of life after death. Phil Zuckerman has argued that individuals do not necessarily require a sense of life after death in order to be happy, as we've seen, and the interviews in this book have at least indirectly supported this view.

But if individuals do not necessarily require a sense of life after death in order to be happy, what of societies? This question resonates in different ways in the different societies we have examined. American Christians may say, as one maintains, "The US wouldn't necessarily be better if everyone was Christian….But the world would be better if everyone believed in God." An American atheist tells us that most people should believe in religion and in life after death because they do not have the ability to develop their own system of ethics, as he himself claims to have done. The former governor tells us that it would have been easier to govern if 95% of his constituents had believed in heaven and hell. As an American minister-turned-professor asks, "Can we be free, civil and democratic without a common cultural reference, whether it's the 'In God we trust' God, or whatever?" Few Japanese spoke this way—only the Buddhist priest we interviewed, who tells us that Japan should be a leader in creating world peace, in part through its belief in life beyond this one. But several Chinese interviewees sound like the Americans quoted above. As a Chinese doctor and secularist tells us, "It's important to construct a purpose for people to come together"; as a Chinese party official and believer in reincarnation maintains, "I think it's good for people to believe in karma and reincarnation, because it can teach them not to be greedy and to have a conscience when they are alive."

Others we interviewed stressed how belief in life after death deceives people. As an American atheist tells us, "Yes, I believe that if people were more rational and didn't believe in religion, the world would be a better place." As a Japanese

non-believer says, "Basically, everyone is afraid of death, and so they created religion. And they're fooled by religion." As a Chinese party member tells us, "If I think about the idea of afterlife, it's probably something created to make us more obedient to social rules." A Chinese religious believer maintains that belief in heaven and hell "is like a bedtime story to make children behave well." These people from three societies are all saying, from various perspectives, that belief in life after death may delude us.

Those who say that a belief in life after death is good for society also believe, in some cases, that it is an illusion but a necessary one, unlike those skeptics who believe that all such illusions should be banished because they are illusions. We interpret this difference as follows: A broad collectively held belief may be essential in a society, but it cannot be one that many people in that society view as fictional. What kind of belief can hold a society together? As the comments above reflect, it depends on the society. In Japan, even in a society that is to some extent loosening in its social strictures, there may be little need for a common belief in life after death; rather, let individuals believe as they may choose. In the United States and China, on the other hand, there is a fraying common social framework, with American belief in a common God giving way to a great diversity of beliefs, and with Chinese communism's eclipse leading to a loss of common moral values. Belief in life after death may never return in a collective sense to these two societies, but the ongoing question remains, what will hold these two societies together? Nationalism in China or radical individual diversity in the United States is probably not a sufficient long-term answer. So, again, what can hold these societies together? These are questions that both societies will need to address in some way in their futures; here we only pose the question.

Universal Questions: Existential

Is There Life After Death?

Who knows? The testimonies we have heard in our three ethnographic chapters offer a range of possibilities, from eternal heaven, to reincarnation, to returning to nature, to merely dying and perhaps being remembered for a time. Considering this variation, there is a large question worth considering: might a single one of these answers be correct? If we live in a common human reality, then we presumably share a common human fate when we die. What is that fate? Many readers of this book probably believe that the non-believers in any life after death are most likely to be correct in their views. This follows the narrative of "once human beings believed in religious meanings, but now they increasingly believe no more," as science and relativism come to eclipse religious meanings and beliefs in life after death. We three authors of this book suspect to varying degrees that this may indeed be the case. But who, after all, knows?

Mathews has long led a weekly discussion class of African and South Asian asylum seekers in Hong Kong, and the Muslims and Christians in class regularly

warn him, "you will die and find out to your great regret that you have been completely wrong about what you think happens to you after you die" (although whether Christianity is true or Islam is true is a question they cannot resolve among themselves). Some of the American Christians we interviewed maintained complete certainty as to the universal truth of their beliefs, as did the Japanese Buddhist priest. It may seem unimaginable to many readers of this book, but maybe, just possibly, one of them is right.

If there is but one ultimate reality that all of us share, then it would be intellectual arrogance to merely scoff at the views of religious believers such as these. Readers of this book who think that ideas about life after death are worth considering might be more comfortable with envisionings of a collectivity of awareness transcending ourselves after death, a universal consciousness of some sort, or perhaps of an ongoing narrative of collective influence that survives our individual demises, or perhaps of reincarnation and growth over many lifetimes, or of a loving God transcending all particular religions. But we do not know, and of course, whatever we think may be wrong. If there is a single reality that will occur to all of us beyond the grave, then what it might possibly consist of will almost certainly be far beyond our ability to imagine such a thing. David Eagleman's wonderful work of fiction *Sum: Forty Tales From the Afterlives* offers depictions of afterlives far stranger and more provocative than those offered by this book's interviewees[12]—but who can possibly say what might be true in the end? It is within the realm of imaginative possibility that we are absolutely, spectacularly wrong in whatever we may think, and we would be fools to categorically deny this possibility. As Mathews' Muslim students occasionally remind him, he may die and find himself face-to-face with Allah. It is within the realm of imaginative possibility that they may be right; or also that we are all totally wrong in whatever we may imagine.

Other than a single realm of life after death, there are also other possibilities. An idea expressed from time to time in the foregoing chapters is that of radical subjectivity. As an American Christian tells us, "I think heaven is the environment each person would be best in. I can't imagine that with the differences in people, that heaven would be the same for everyone." As a Japanese practitioner of ancestor veneration states, "Of course, no one knows if heaven or paradise are real—it's OK if people have their own different beliefs"; as a Japanese graduate student states most directly: "If you think there's reincarnation, then that's what will happen to you. If you believe in heaven or hell, then that's what will happen to you. If you think there's nothing, then that's what will happen to you." It may be only a coincidence that several of these commentators are Japanese, but it may also reflect Japanese society today. In the United States, Christianity remains dominant, with its single reality postulated as true (or false) for all. In China, Marxist atheism remains dominant, with its single reality true (or false) for all. But in Japan, ancestor veneration is somewhat different in its particulars in each family—few people think of a common "heaven" where everyone in common will intermingle. Beyond this, Japan, more than the United States or

China, allows for a high degree of imagination and flexibility as to senses of life after death, as we've seen.

As to the underlying issue of whether such subjectivity might indeed be the case, how much do we ourselves subjectively or intersubjectively create the reality we may find ourselves in after death? As a Japanese woman in her seventies maintains, "If I suddenly died now, I wonder what would happen? I haven't been there [to any other world] yet, so I don't know!" As an American man in his nineties tells us, "I have no idea what the hell happens after I die, and nobody, absolutely nobody, has ever come back to tell us." We absolutely do not know.

Why Do We Exist?

Is our existence simply due to dumb chance, or is it evidence of something more? The American Episcopalian writer quoted in chapter two believes that we exist because of cosmic love. As she puts it, "We are the grass, we are stardust recycled….I do believe in an ongoing love. It is a love in the universe; we would not exist without love." Skeptics will claim that views like this are anthropomorphizing the universe: "what does love got to do with it?" We are alive and conscious, they would say, because of the luck of matter's permutations as played out over the course of billions of years of evolution. The Chinese atheists in chapter four espouse this view, in maintaining that matter is everything and consciousness a mere byproduct of matter—any discussion of purpose is thus no more than idealism to be abhorred. However, as against this view, a number of people in this book argue in various ways that dumb chance is insufficient to account for the miracle of why we happen to be here, living, dreaming, and speculating.

This is perhaps the deepest, most intractable question that can be asked. Like the question of life after death itself, it is a question that no one can conclusively answer, but that can hardly stop us from asking. Are we here as the product of some form of purpose—perhaps an evolution of the totality of matter from insentience to sentience, as matter becomes aware of itself? Or are we here only out of dumb circumstance, the product of "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? The 18th-century German philosopher Leibniz is famous for asking "Why is there something rather than nothing?" and positing God as the answer; later philosophers such as Heidegger rejected such an explication.[13] But clearly, we cannot know, and won't know at very least until we die: a time at which, if there is any larger reason for our existence, we just might find out. Meanwhile, can the universe, with its extraordinarily wasteful evolutionary processes, and their reliance on death over life, truly be based on love? If the universe is indeed based on love, why is ongoing life the product of death? Why is the natural world so imbued with suffering, as Annie Dillard has so eloquently discussed?[14] Or is this revulsion over suffering only so much anthropomorphizing of a process so far beyond our comprehension that we should not bother to even try to understand its logic? Again, why on earth do we exist? Unless one

follows the teachings of any of various religious doctrines or the materialistic doctrines of some strands of science, we cannot possibly claim to know; but being human, how can we not wonder?

Does Death Conquer All?

Some of our interviewees, particularly Japanese, sought to explore the question of why we are here in a much more personal sense, in imagining that they might meet their lost loved ones once again after death, even though this went against their logical sense that this is impossible. The widowed Japanese computer programmer is completely convinced that she will see her husband after she dies, despite also being convinced that there is no life after death. "I definitely will meet my husband when I die. Basically, I think that there's only *mu*—nothingness…. That's a contradiction, but….No, it's not just that I want to meet my husband—I *will* meet him, I'm sure." The Japanese bartender discusses how, when he talks to his father at the Buddhist altar, "I have doubts as to whether he hears what I say, but if he answers me, I wouldn't be surprised. Well, I guess I would be surprised, but it's my father, so I'd think, wow, great!" The graduate student with his grandfather's watch says, "Yes, I think that my grandfather is listening to this conversation. Whether it's a 1% or 60% or 100% chance of that, I can't say. But I think he's listening." A Chinese mother is convinced that after she dies, she will be able to come back to visit her son as a spirit or a ghost: "My son is the only reason I might want to linger around after death. I have so much love for him." The question addressed here is most basically, does death conquer all? This is the question of why we exist felt on a deeply personal basis—a question we might frame as this: "Is the extraordinary love my lover/spouse/parent/child and I have felt for one another simply the by-chance attachment of two mortal animals? Or is it something more, a linkage of two beings that, in its connection of spirit, transcends mortality?"

A few of the Americans in chapter two and Japanese in chapter three argue in different ways that even though the sense that love transcends death is an illusion—one's spouse or children or parent dies, and then they are only dead and gone—we should nonetheless do what we can to enable this illusion for those whose lives would be emptier without it. Logic may tell us that this is wishful thinking, but who knows? Can we say, unequivocally, that the computer programmer quoted above is merely deluded? Is the trope "love conquers all" a lie? Perhaps a comforting lie, but a lie all the same? Or, within our intersubjective world, might it somehow and in some way be true? If we are animals with oversized brains living in an objective world in which death befalls all of us, then of course love doesn't conquer all, at least not if linear time is real. Death, in the end, conquers all, with love but a passing interlude. However, if reality is intersubjective as well as objective, if it is in part something that we ourselves create, then just possibly, the widowed computer programmer may be right. Just maybe, she will indeed see her husband again when he dies, and who of us can

say with absolute certainty that she will not? Or that we will not see our own loved ones? As with all of these questions, who knows? As human beings, we of course think about these questions—probably every reader of this book has thought about them in their own unique ways and come to their own personal conclusions.

In considering these questions, it is worth remembering relativism, particularly in the context of history. A thousand years ago, the wisest people in all these societies believed in different forms of life after death, and often fervently disputed the minute details of such doctrines. Today we may look back uncomprehendingly at how they could have devoted so much of their energies to such strange religious speculations. A thousand years from now, if human beings still exist, no doubt our descendants will look back at us with the same degree of amused incomprehension. And of course, whether that world a thousand years from now will be more rigorously materialistic in its orientation than the world today, or will have embraced an entirely new version of what happens after we die based on new sets of scientific findings or speculations infinitely beyond what we can comprehend today, very much remains to be seen.

Past, Present, and Future

We have seen the particular situations of three societies, with the United States turning away from Christianity and its envisioned heaven, with Japan celebrating diversity, and with China turning to senses of life after death more than in the recent past. However, this is apparently taking place within a larger-scale global trend, whereby people in the past more or less adhered to senses of life after death, and now seem to be moving, in much of the developed world, from collective adherence, to individualized adherence, to eventually, for many, no adherence at all.

The ideas of the afterlife expressed by interviewees in this book can be seen as belonging to a particular historical period during which religion is fading in the developed world as a collective source of meaning. The individualization of beliefs in the afterlife apparent in our ethnographic chapters may represent a historical blip before some new collective meaning emerges. Some scholars of death have postulated that many societies today are moving away from religious beliefs and towards ecological burial, becoming one with nature. This is indeed happening in the United Kingdom and also to a small extent in Japan.[15] If this will indeed come to take place on a large scale, it may mean a new consciousness of belonging to nature among human beings.

There is also the argument of Yuval Noah Harari in his *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, that while earlier in human history, the major religions provided the meaning of life and death, today, life and death are increasingly becoming no more than technical problems to be overcome: "Modernity is a surprisingly simple deal…Humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power….No paradise awaits us after death—but we can create paradise here on

earth and live in it for ever, if we can just manage to overcome some technical difficulties"—namely, death, which future medical technology presumably can solve.[16] Harari is arguing that human beings are moving from an age in which we find our sustenance in a meaning beyond our mortal lives, the promise of heaven or in reincarnation, to an age in which meaning is no longer necessary since we ourselves increasingly will have the medical capabilities to render us immortal. I am skeptical that this will come to pass any time soon—life expectancy is clearly being extended, but immortality seems to be a stretch, given all we know into the foreseeable future (although recent writers, such as Peter Ward's *The Price of Immortality: The Race to Live Forever,* take the possibility quite seriously[17]). In any case, it does seem clear that we are in a transitional age, of a passage from collective senses of life after death to individual senses, and no senses at all in much of the developed world. This is the age that this book has examined through three societies in all their particularities: an age of transition.

What remains an open question is how we are to interpret this age. Was the belief in life after death that almost everyone adhered to in the past simply a relic of past peoples' lack of understanding of how the world really works, an understanding that we are now progressively gaining? Is science progressively leading us to greater truth, causing us to outgrow our religious certainties of the past? This is the view of Sigmund Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* when he writes that "it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an afterlife; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be"[18]—this is the illusion that Freud seeks us to outgrow. More recently, Carl Sagan has written that

> I would love to believe that when I die I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue. But as much as I want to believe that, and despite the ancient and worldwide cultural traditions that assert an afterlife, I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking.[19]

This is the view more or less held by the non-adherents to life after death in all three of our ethnographic chapters: belief in life after death is a myth and a crutch. Many of those profiled in this book's pages have not dismissed believers in life after death in such stark terms, since they themselves live among believers in life after death; but this is the implication of their view of life after death.

But there is another view of this transition from adherence to senses of life after death to non-adherence. Perhaps rather than simply gaining progressive insights into truth as we shed our illusions, as Freud and Sagan have it, we have also lost some form of truth. This is what Peter Berger argues:

> Our ancestors didn't know about particle physics, but they spoke with angels. Let it be stipulated that through the knowledge of particle physics

> we have gained a new measure of *truth*. But could it be that we have *lost* a truth when our conversation with angels came to a stop?….It is quite possible that in the dawn of its history the human race had an access to reality that it subsequently lost, as it is possible that this reality is briefly accessible in childhood and then lost in the basically depressing process of growing up.[20]

In this book, we have encountered a number of people who can indeed "converse with angels" or their own equivalent of such, from Americans experiencing God, to Japanese communing with departed loved ones, to Chinese encountering ghosts. No doubt some readers of this book have rolled their eyes upon reading such descriptions; but is it not possible that maybe these people in three different societies have experienced a world that most of us are blocked from but that just might have its own reality? When certain people among us "converse with angels," are they talking to their own fantasies, or are they perceiving a reality that most of the rest of us have lost the ability to behold? Obviously, we cannot judge—this is a central mystery at this book's heart—but we can at least entertain the possibility that just maybe there is indeed a reality beyond ourselves that these people are able, in their own ways, to touch upon. (This argument is apparent within anthropology. E. E. Evans-Pritchard declared in his classic book *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* that "witches, as the Azande conceive of them, clearly cannot exist"; witchcraft is not an objective reality but no more than a cultural belief among the Azande, he asserted. Some 45 years later, Jeanne Favret-Saada (1981), doing fieldwork in rural France on witchcraft, found herself bewitched, with, eventually, fatal consequences.[21] Is witchcraft thus "real"?)

There are large implications to this question of reality. If Freud and Sagan are correct in their views, then we are indeed emerging from an age of ignorance during which we believed in God and spirits, into an age in which we know better. From this perspective, was Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, Jesus Christ rising from the dead, or Muhammed being visited by the Archangel Gabriel, a matter of schizophrenic delusions on their part? Were they simply insane, accepted by the gullible people around them as receiving divine messages, but today we know better? Or might they indeed have been in contact with a divine reality that today, caught up in our rationalistic world, many of us can no longer think of as anything but an illusion because we ourselves are trapped in an illusion?

Is reality something out there, beyond different cultural perceptions, or is it something intersubjectively created by human beings? If the former is the case, then Freud and Sagan are right, and in our growing secularism, we are coming closer to understanding what reality really is. If the latter is the case, then there is room for Berger in his argument: In our current constructions of reality emphasizing rationality over all else, we may be impoverishing ourselves. (One effort

at apprehending reality beyond the purely rational is represented by contemporary interest in psychedelic drugs, as discussed in Michael Pollan's remarkable 2018 book *How to Change Your Mind*.)[22] How reality might be transmuted in the decades and centuries to come is the ongoing question here. Will we continue becoming ever more secular and rational? Or will science itself, in the infinite universes today speculated upon by physicists, completely shake up everything that we now think we understand?

What is our place and purpose in this world, in the universe? Perhaps there is a slow growth into universal consciousness, the universe waking up from its slumber at some point in the universe's expansion to recognize itself; we are each and every one of us an infinitely tiny part of this. Perhaps there are indeed multiple universes, infinite universes, in which every imaginable eventuality comes to pass, including our own existences in endless forms. Or perhaps, as animals with brains that can't stop imagining things, we merely die and vanish like any other animal: we are merely mosquitos with oversize brains. We who write this book are looking forward to dying, and just possibly seeing what happens—what it all truly might mean. Meanwhile, in an echo of a number of our interviewees, we can only say that it is miraculous to have the chance to be alive.

Notes

1 See Mathews 2000.
2 See https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1101-zuckerman-violence-secularism-20151101-story.html.
3 See Mathews 2017.
4 An earlier version of this typology is in Mathews and Kwong 2017.
5 Kamiya 1980: 156–159.
6 Walter 1996: 192.
7 See https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/.
8 Becker 1971, 1974; Solomon et al. 2015; Zuckerman 2014; Zuckerman, Galen and Pascuale 2016.
9 James [1907] 1981: 10.
10 See Layard 2005: 55–75.
11 See Mathews 1996.
12 Eagleman 2010.
13 See, for a philosophical overview of this question, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nothingness/.
14 Dillard 1974, 162–184.
15 See Davies 2005 discussing the United Kingdom, and Boret 2014 and Kawano 2010 discussing Japan.
16 Harari 2015, 233, 235.
17 Ward 2022.
18 Freud [1927] 1961.
19 Sagan 1998, 214.
20 Berger 1992, 13, 157; italics in original.
21 Evans-Pritchard, 1976 [1937],18; Favret-Saada 1981.
22 Pollan 2018.

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