



# Positive Youth Development & Spirituality

*From Theory to Research*

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## From "Worm Food" to "Infinite Bliss"

### *Emerging Adults' Views of Life after Death*

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

Religious beliefs serve many positive functions, from psychological security to community solidarity, but perhaps religion's most important function is to take the sting out of death. The evolution in humans of a substantial frontal cortex resulted in a uniquely human existential predicament. The capacity to anticipate the future is a valuable ability for enhancing survival, as it allows us to foresee perils such as food shortages and attacks by enemies, but it also allows each of us to foresee that we will die one day, as have all others before us. Faced with this disagreeable and inevitable prospect, human beings have long looked for a way to avoid its implications of extinction and nullity, and they have developed comforting answers through religious beliefs. All the major Eastern and Western religions include beliefs about some type of life after death, ranging from reincarnation to heaven and hell. In addition, innumerable tribal religions, although fabulously diverse, have in common that they include some type of belief about the continuation of life after death.

In the United States, beliefs about life after death remain strong in the early twenty-first century. According to research by the Gallup organization (Gallup and Castelli 1989), 71 percent of American adults believe in some kind of life after death, and 81 percent believe that "we will all be called before God at Judgment Day to answer for our sins." A national Harris poll (2003) of American adults found that 84 percent believed in "the survival of the soul after death," 82 percent believed in heaven, and 69 percent believed in hell.



Adolescents' afterlife beliefs are similar to adults' beliefs in many respects. The National Study on Youth and Religion (Smith and Denton 2005) found that 49 percent of 13–17-year-olds believe there is "definitely" life after death, with another 37 percent responding "maybe." Thirteen percent reported believing "definitely" in reincarnation, 36 percent "maybe." Seventy-one percent responded that they "believe in a Judgment Day when God will reward some and punish others." There seems to be a contradiction in 71 percent's believing in a Judgment Day and only 49 percent "definitely" believing in any kind of life after death, suggesting that adolescents' afterlife beliefs are still in flux and may not be internally consistent.

Although there has been substantial research on the religious beliefs of adults and adolescents, less is known about the religious beliefs of emerging adults (roughly, age 18 through the mid-20s), including their afterlife beliefs. Research on college students has shown that they are quite religious (Bartlett 2005). Seventy-nine percent believe in God, and 81 percent report attending religious services at least occasionally. However, only 42 percent of college students categorize their religious beliefs as "secure," with the rest describing themselves as "seeking" (23 percent), "conflicted" (15 percent), "doubting" (10 percent), or "not interested" (15 percent). Furthermore, most emerging adults are not college students, so college-student surveys leave many questions about religious beliefs among the majority of emerging adults.

In one of the few studies of religious beliefs among a noncollege sample of emerging adults, Arnett and Jensen (2002) found that this group's beliefs were highly diverse, falling into four roughly equal categories: conservative believers, liberal believers, deists, and agnostics/atheists. Surprisingly, little relation was found between their religious training as children and adolescents and their current beliefs. The data used in the present chapter are taken from the same study as Arnett and Jensen (2002).

To date, few studies have been published on emerging adults' afterlife beliefs, and none with noncollege samples. There are several reasons to anticipate that the afterlife beliefs of emerging adults may be considerably different from the beliefs of adolescents or adults. First, in contrast to adolescents, emerging adults are more cognitively mature and, hence, more likely to think critically about the religious beliefs they have been taught by their parents (Labouvie-Vief 2006; Perry 1970/1999). This capacity for critical thinking may influence how they think about afterlife questions. Second, in contrast to adults, emerging adults have not yet entered family roles as spouse and parent, and

taking on those roles tends to lead to higher religious participation (in order to provide religious training for the children), which may have an influence on afterlife beliefs. Third, emerging adulthood is a period when identity explorations are heightened (Arnett 2004, 2006), and one aspect of these explorations may be reconsideration of religious beliefs, including afterlife beliefs. Finally, emerging adulthood is a period of learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person (Arnett 1998), independent of parents, and part of this process may be reconsideration and perhaps rejection of parents' religious beliefs, including afterlife beliefs. In studies of criteria of adulthood, "decide on own beliefs and values" has consistently ranked near the top in importance (Arnett 1998, 2001, 2003). This suggests that emerging adulthood may be a time of reconsidering afterlife beliefs and establishing beliefs that are one's own rather than those of one's parents.

In this chapter, I present the results of a study that included questions on emerging adults' afterlife beliefs, focusing on qualitative interview responses. This will be followed by some thoughts on the relation between afterlife beliefs and positive youth development.

#### STUDY BACKGROUND

Data for this study were taken from a larger study of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004). Data were collected in New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Columbia, Missouri. In Missouri, participants were found through addresses from high school enrollment lists from three to thirteen years prior to the study. At the other sites, potential participants believed to be in the age range for the study were approached in public places and asked to fill out a brief survey. At the bottom of the survey, they could indicate whether they would agree to participate in a more extensive study. They were offered \$50 for taking part.

Participants were ages 20–29. They were diverse in ethnicity: 31 African Americans, 33 Asian Americans, 26 Latinos, and 127 whites. Their social-class backgrounds were similarly diverse, as indicated by their mother's educational attainment: 36 percent high-school degree or less, 20 percent some college, and 44 percent college degree. They were also diverse in their own educational attainment: 18 percent high-school degree or less, 44 percent some college, and 39 percent college degree.

The study included questionnaires as well as an extensive interview. The interview included several questions on religious beliefs, including, "What do



you think happens to us when we die?" The material in this chapter is based on responses to this question.

### FINDINGS

Responses were coded into the following categories: (1) no afterlife; (2) don't know; (3) something, but not clear what; (4) heaven only; (5) heaven and hell; (6) other (mainly reincarnation or return to an energy source). Overall, 11 percent believed in no afterlife, 21 percent were coded "don't know," 15 percent believed there was some kind of existence after death but were unclear as to the nature of it, 15 percent believed in heaven only, 25 percent believed in heaven and hell, and 13 percent were coded as "Other." The responses were consistent across ethnic groups. A chi-square test of afterlife beliefs in relation to ethnicity was not significant. Similarly, chi-square tests showed no relation between afterlife beliefs and educational attainment or socioeconomic status (as represented by mother's education).

To obtain further insights into emerging adults' afterlife beliefs, below I explore their responses for each category.

#### No Afterlife: "When you die, you die."

Eleven percent of participants did not believe in any kind of afterlife. Often this observation was made with mordant humor. "I think we either turn into ashes when we're cremated or we become worm food," said Andrew (age 22). "We push up daisies," said Loren (age 20). "I don't believe in reincarnation. I don't believe in the heaven or hell at all, and I don't really think that a soul lives on, either." "I think we just become fertilizer," said Tracy (age 24).

Others had a more sober perspective. "I really think there is only one life and that's why you have to make the most of it," said Lindy, age 22. "If there is an afterlife, I'll find out then, but right now I don't believe there's an afterlife. I really think that when you die, you die." Kim (age 26) wistfully imagined heaven but ended up coming down to earth:

I mean, the concept of a heaven is a beautiful concept, in that, if you accept that, at some point you can get in touch with your family and other people and so on. I think that's a beautiful idea, and having a community who's just all for one, a truthful, honest community. That's a great concept, but I don't think I believe it. I mean, I do believe that you're just going to be fertilizer.

Kim's comments are useful for drawing our attention to the fact that the promise of something desirable after death exerts an extremely strong psycho-

logical pull, even for many people who believe in no afterlife. Although the existence of life after death is impossible to prove, it is also impossible to refute, leaving considerable space for the imagination to create something alluring out of our desires. Coming down definitely on the side of no afterlife is rare, as we will see in the sections below.

#### Don't Know: "No one has the right answer."

The "don't-know" responses, 21 percent of the total, fell into four subtypes: confirmed agnostic, uncertain, avoidant, and oblivious. The confirmed agnostics believed that an answer to the question of what happens after death was simply unknowable. For the living, there is no way of answering that question, in their view. "I'm one of those people that, you know, there's got to be some kind of proof," said Keith, age 24, "and if there's no proof, then you can't make a judgment." They had considered the claims and the possibilities and concluded that none of them was valid. Kent, age 28, reflected:

I think that we're all going to die and what happens, nobody knows. I mean, does this electrochemical thing just quit and that's the end of it? Or does it actually go somewhere? Because that's all it is is electricity. So what happens to it? Does it just stop? Is it like a battery? What happens? Nobody knows, because once you die, you can't come back and tell anybody. I mean, sure, you might see this white light and go towards it, and there might be power in that white light. But who knows?

Others in the "don't-know" category grappled with the question of life after death and ended up uncertain, unable to answer it. "It just scares me to think about death, like, where do we really go?" wondered Helen, age 20. "Do we reincarnate or is there a heaven? And then I think, if there is a heaven, how can it hold all of us? There are just so many beliefs that I don't know which one to believe in." Arthur, age 20, found himself similarly baffled: "It's just too confusing to even dwell on it, because you'll never get an answer, right? I mean, you can speculate and speculate, and no one has the right answer. So I don't even bother."

Some in this category were avoidant, i.e., they found the question terrifying to contemplate and so tried to avoid thinking about it. "That's a terrible thing to think about now!" exclaimed Korena, age 23, when asked the question about what happens when we die. "I don't want to think of what happens when I die!" Tammy, age 21, also tried to avoid the topic. "I don't really think about it. It's too morbid for me. I'm too much of an optimist to think about it. I mean, I choose not to think about it."



There were also some who were oblivious, dismissing the question as irrelevant to them in their youthful time of life. "I don't think about dying," said Jeff. "I'm 24. I don't think about that stuff." Frances, age 24, also preferred to focus on the here-and-now: "I don't really give it much thought, because it's not really that important to me," she said. "When I'm gone, I'm gone. I don't really care what happens to me when I'm gone."

In sum, there was a variety of different "Don't Know" responses from the emerging adults, but all of them had in common that they neither believed nor disbelieved in life after death.

#### Something, But Not Clear What: "I think that we kind of go on."

Fifteen percent of emerging adults believed in some kind of afterlife but were unclear what it might entail. The emerging adults in this category were similar to those in the "don't know" category in that they were uncertain about what lies after death and skeptical that anything could be known for certain. However, unlike those in the "don't know" category, they had at least tentatively decided that there is some kind of life after death, although they remained vague about the nature of it. "I don't think we know," said Jonna, age 24. "I believe that there's something there, but I don't think we can know exactly what it is." "I don't know exactly," began Karen, age 21, but she added, "I definitely don't think that it's just, like, the end. I think I believe in people's spirits like remaining somehow and maybe having a sort of impact on life, like mortal life. I guess I don't want to believe that that's just it, and I don't. So something with like spirits being around. That's pretty much like the vague idea that I have about it."

Often, the emerging adults in this category conceded that their belief in some kind of life after death was motivated by fear that there may be nothing and the wistful hope that there might be something after all. They found the prospect of personal extinction unpalatable and the belief in some kind of continued existence more appealing, but their beliefs were tentative at best. "Selfishly, I think that we kind of go on, and our spirit goes on," said Jennifer, age 22, "just because it's kind of a depressing thought to think that it just ends there. But I don't know. I guess I've always just kind of believed that our spirit continues in some other place." "I mean, no one on earth has any concrete evidence," Brian, age 21, admitted, "but I hope and what I believe is that there is something after. I'm not sure what it is, but I don't think it's that you just don't exist anymore."

Hopeful agnostics, you might call the emerging adults in this category. They were uncertain about what lies beyond death and concerned that there might be nothing after all, but they persisted in the vague belief that there might be some kind of continued and hopefully pleasant existence.

#### Heaven Only: "Infinite Bliss"

Fifteen percent of the emerging adults believed in heaven only. Some of them sounded close to those in the "something-but-unclear-what" category, in that they sounded uncertain about what to believe, but they ultimately decided that there must be some form of heaven after death. "I don't know," answered 27-year-old Joni at first when asked about life after death, but she continued, "The thing is you get to have it, and you live life in heaven. That's my afterlife. That's what I would want. That's my perception. I would want to make it to heaven. You know, be a part of the riches and all that." "I believe your soul goes to heaven," said Jeff, age 24. "I'm not quite sure where it is or what form it is or how it works, but I believe it's out there somewhere."

Others in this category were more confident that heaven awaits after death. "I think that we go to heaven," said Miriam, age 23. "I think that we are united with God in infinite bliss." Some were confident that heaven awaits not only for themselves but for all. "I think everybody goes to heaven because everybody is God's children," said Alisha, age 22. "And even those criminals who go around killing people are forgiven because I think God forgives everybody. Sometimes it's hard to believe, but I really do think God forgives everybody for what they do, and I think everybody deserves, in some way or another, to go to heaven." Similarly, Marita, age 21, believed in an inclusive heaven. "I believe that there is a heaven, and I think that most people are there, despite what they've done or what they think they've done. I think that there are very few people so evil or so awful to others that they wouldn't be worthy of some type of heaven."

However, some in this category were reluctant to believe that everyone would make it to heaven. They did not believe in hell, but they found the concept of heaven for all problematic in some ways. "That's something that I struggle with," said Stacey, age 23. "I'm not a 'fire and brimstone' Christian, but there are evil people in this world. I'd hate to think that I'd be walking around in heaven someday and run across Adolf Hitler and give him a high-five, you know. It's a difficult question."

Stacey described herself as a Christian, and some of the emerging adults



who believed in heaven for all mentioned aspects of Christianity, but more often the belief in heaven only was not phrased in any particular theological language. It was simply a hopeful belief that death would be followed by something good, "infinite bliss" or at least something more pleasant than the struggle of life on earth.

### Heaven and Hell: "You're gonna bust hell wide open."

Unlike any other category of afterlife beliefs in this study, the belief in heaven and hell was drawn from a specific creed, the Christian faith. However, even here there were variations on the theme. Some stated standard Christian beliefs in heaven and hell, but others modified the standard beliefs in individualized ways.

Some of those who embraced the standard Christian beliefs in heaven and hell were blunt and direct. As Brenda (age 22) put it, "I believe if you're saved, you're goin' to heaven. If you're not, you're gonna bust hell wide open." Angie (age 23) voiced a similar view. "I think of what's in heaven. They've got mansions in heaven and don't die, don't get sick, don't be sad. [But if you're not a Christian] you're going to hell. You're going to burn forever. People don't realize that they're going to hell, and they're going to be tormented forever." For some of these emerging adults, the firmness of their beliefs in heaven and hell inspired an urgency to try to convert others to the faith. Wynne (age 27) was a Christian, but her parents were not. "That means if we don't save them before they die, then they will end up going to hell, unfortunately. And that's a problem."

Others admitted their belief in heaven and hell more reluctantly and cautiously. They recognized that this belief may be offensive to non-Christians who are deemed to be going to hell. Stuart (age 22) observed, "I believe you'll go to heaven if you're a Christian. If you're not, then you go to hell. But I don't tell that to people, you know, because that's just very unpleasant to hear. That's what Christianity is, though." Chris, age 24, recounted an interaction with a Jewish friend. "He asked me one time, 'Well, according to what you're saying, if I died, I'd go to hell. Do you believe that?' And I had to answer 'Yes.' And it's tough; it really is, because you don't want to believe that, but according to what I've read in the Bible, that's the way I believe it's going to be."

Even for Christians, the destination of heaven or hell was not necessarily tied to faith but rather to whether a person lived a good moral life. "I do believe that you're judged on what you do in your life," said Laura, age 23. "If you treated people badly, I think you're going to get paid back for it some day;

I really do. . . . I think that, if you don't make the peace with him, you're going downtown." Simon (age 25), although Catholic himself, did not believe that being Catholic was an important criterion:

I think it has a lot to do with what you do with your life. You don't have to be a Catholic; you don't have to be x religion. There are different ways to get up to the mountain, and I think every faith is seeking to get to that metaphorical top of the mountain. There's different ways to go about it, but whether you get up there depends on how you live your life. [What if you live a bad life?] I don't think you get there. [Where do you go?] You take the down button! And you go to a bad place.

It is interesting to note that some emerging adults in this category used morbid humor, as Laura and Simon did, with euphemisms such as "going downtown" and "take the down button." This is an element of similarity between them and the emerging adults who believed there is no afterlife. Perhaps in both cases the humor is used to conceal anxiety and discomfort, in the "no-afterlife" emerging adults due to the prospect of extinction and in the heaven/hell emerging adults due to admitting a belief that many of those deemed to be going to hell may find offensive.

### Other Beliefs: Reincarnation and Energy Forces

Thirteen percent of emerging adults stated afterlife beliefs that did not fall into any of the previous categories. About half of the responses in this category concerned reincarnation, and most of the rest concerned some idea about an energy force to which the soul returns. When reincarnation was mentioned, it was not in the context of Buddhism or Hinduism, the two major religions that hold reincarnation as their afterlife belief. Rather, it was a vague belief that we return to earth in some form. "I don't know, for some reason I sort of believe you come back again," said Elias (age 20). "Because I have dreams where I see myself, like, being in a place, my first time there, like I've been there before. Like a *déjà vu* sort of thing." Travis (age 23) stated his belief in reincarnation only half-seriously: "I think it's more fun to believe in reincarnation. Like, you can come back as somebody at any point in time in history or in a different world. Who knows? I think it's a lot more fun to believe in that one. I hate to think you just die and that's it." Scott (age 26) at first seemed more certain. "I always thought that there was obviously reincarnation. Your soul, the older it is the more wise it is." But then he added, "Who knows?"

Beliefs in returning to some kind of energy force were diverse. "I believe you just go back to the One," said Tina, age 27. "I think we are just fragments of



the light and that at some point you go back to that." Some of these beliefs were drawn from popular culture. "I feel that there is a Star Wars thing, 'the Force,' there's just this planetary aura, that everyone's thoughts and actions and feelings generate this energy," said Charles, age 24. "And when you die, the energy that you are, the nonphysical part of you, is dispersed back into that aura and kind of gets recycled. It becomes part of a million other people that are being created at that time or a little bit later." In general, however, unlike their religious beliefs more generally, emerging adults' afterlife beliefs tended to follow one of the major categories above, rather than being highly individualized.

#### AFTERLIFE BELIEFS AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The framework of this book is "positive youth development," and, at first glance, afterlife beliefs may not seem to fit very well with this theme. The literature on positive youth development tends to focus on this-worldly topics such as close relationships with parents and the benefits of involvement in youth organizations (Lerner, Bretano, Dowling, and Anderson 2002). Afterlife beliefs seem to be a long way from such topics.

However, afterlife beliefs have definite benefits, at least for those who have some kind of firm faith that something exists beyond this world. Although this was not a specific topic of my interviews with emerging adults, it was evident in many responses, underlining the salience of it. Elaine (age 22) answered the question about afterlife beliefs this way:

When I was a little girl I'd be like "Oh my gosh! They'll put me in a box and put me under the ground and I'll never be able to wake up!" In high school, too, I was afraid of death. It was so scary to me. So I was fearful when I was younger. And then with Christianity, I know that there is more and I know that there is a new life afterwards, so I don't have to worry about that. It's supposed to be a fabulous place. We'll live with God for the rest of our lives. I know it will be great.

For some, the promise of some kind of afterlife was necessary in order to bear the suffering of this world. "I hope there is some kind of life after death," said Mike (age 24). "I mean, if this whole rat race is all it is, then that's going to really suck." Chris had a similar view, describing his afterlife in practical rather than ethereal terms. For him, a wonderful afterlife is something humans need in order to give meaning and purpose to their lives. "I hope most of us go on to heaven," he said. "I think that, if we were just to die and that would be the end of it, just fertilize the ground, . . . there's little hope for what we're doing here, you know, why we're here."

For Dylan, the hope of an afterlife relieved the pain of losing someone he loved. "I hope for a lot of reasons there's a higher place," he said. "I hope my grandfather is there. I mean, certainly he deserves to be there about as much as you could deserve to be there." In future research, it would be good to explore this theme further, to see if there is a relation between afterlife beliefs and experiencing the death of a loved one. It may be that losing a loved one promotes reflection about afterlife beliefs and increases the likelihood of believing in some form of afterlife.

Emerging adults who believed in both heaven and hell saw benefits from their belief on earth as well. They took seriously the peril of going to hell for those who do not believe, and they thought that, if they lived right, they might be able to save others through example. "I don't try to push it because I think you can turn people away like that," said Chris (age 24). "I try to live a life that will make other people go 'Hey, what's he got that I haven't got?'"

In contrast, for those who have no definite belief in an afterlife, the absence of belief was sometimes a source of anxiety and distress. "I've always been really afraid of death," said Russell (age 22). "It just scares me to think, to really stop and ponder the fact that someday I won't exist. . . . If I could believe in something, I would because I think I would be a lot happier person if I believed in an afterlife."

#### CONCLUSION: AFTERLIFE BELIEFS AND DEVELOPMENT IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

In sum, emerging adults' beliefs about life after death are diverse, as their religious beliefs are (Arnett and Jensen 2002). Their beliefs span a wide range, from no-afterlife beliefs to certain heaven and hell, with a wide range of variations in between. Nevertheless, their afterlife beliefs are more conventional and less individualized than their overall religious beliefs. Arnett and Jensen (2002), working with a different set of interview questions on this sample, found highly original, "do-it-yourself" religious beliefs among many emerging adults; but, for afterlife beliefs, nearly all held fairly conventional views of either believing in heaven and/or hell or not believing in them.

What are the implications of the findings here for development in emerging adulthood? First, the richness of emerging adults' qualitative interview responses to the afterlife question is notable. Whatever their views about life after death, emerging adults nearly always have something interesting to say in response to the question, and their responses are often rich in insight and irony.



This is in contrast to the responses of adolescents to religious questions. Smith and Denton (2005), who included interviews with hundreds of adolescents as part of their National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), concluded that adolescents are "remarkably inarticulate" (27) on religious topics. Emerging adults' afterlife beliefs are often tentative, as they grapple with the enormity of the question; but, even in their uncertainty, they often exhibit a capacity for mature self-reflection.

A second, related implication of the findings here for development in emerging adulthood is that they demonstrate that many emerging adults are engaged in forms of identity exploration (Arnett 2004, 2006; Côté 2006). Erikson (1950, 1968) specified love, work, and ideology as the three pillars of identity formation. The identity explorations of emerging adults in love and work are clear, since most of them change love partners and education/work directions several times from their late-teens to their mid-20s. However, less attention has been given to the identity explorations of emerging adults with respect to ideology, including religious beliefs. From the responses of emerging adults presented here, it is evident that many of them are still in the process of forming their beliefs about life after death. Twenty-one percent of their responses were coded as "don't know," and another 15 percent were in the "something, but not clear what" category, for a total of over one-third whose afterlife beliefs seemed unsettled. In addition, many in the other categories stated their beliefs tentatively and with qualifiers: "I think . . ." "I'm not sure, but . . ." "I don't know, but I guess I believe . . ." The pervasiveness of their uncertainty appears to be much higher than for adults overall. In a 2002 survey by the Pew Research Center, only 3 percent of adult respondents identified themselves as agnostics or atheists (Kohut and Rogers 2002).

Of course, this contrast may be sharpened by the difference between asking people to choose one of several preordained responses, as in the Gallup and other surveys, and asking people open-ended questions about their beliefs, as was done here. Hopefully, this chapter demonstrates the value of a qualitative approach to investigating religious beliefs. There are complexities and subtleties to people's religious beliefs that cannot be captured from surveys but that are necessary for understanding what they believe. Furthermore, interviews allow people to express insights, observations, and even humor that illuminate their beliefs and also connect them to the interviewer and to readers as a fellow human being. For investigations of the question of life after death, a quintessentially human existential question, this connection is crucial to a complete understanding.

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