Death and the Afterlife: A Brief Study on Personal and Institutional Beliefs

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ABSTRACT

American society veers away from discussions of death and what may come afterwards; we are afraid to discuss it because it creates a feeling of existential dread and fear within us. We are afraid to discuss it in our homes, our schools, and some would argue within our churches. So how do we combat this fear? For many Christians, a belief in life after death brings comfort in the knowledge of their death and the death in their loved ones. As an academic community, we have shied away from looking at the topic of the afterlife for the common person. This exploratory research strives to look at how individuals understand the afterlife in their own lives through the use of interviews and compare those beliefs to their denominational institution through the use of semi-structured interviews.

Introduction

Death is inevitable, we will all meet it at some point in our lives and is one of the few experiences which we will all share; yet death is also a mysterious and, in some ways, mystical event in our lives about which we know very little. This uncertainty and opacity around death is something that has the potential to terrify us because we do not, and cannot, know through logic or empirical evidence what, if anything, awaits us post mortem. Historically, religious traditions have attempted to assuage fears of death by providing devotees with discussions of the afterlife. While there are numerous characteristics that define what it means to be a religion, an answer to the question, “What happens when I die?” is one of the common features associated with religion within the western world. However, notwithstanding this fact, death and the afterlife seems to be one of the least discussed topics within U.S. Christian communities today.

As a devout Christian and future seminarian, my own experience with discussions of death and the afterlife within Christian communities has been a puzzling void of discussion; for example, other than events such as funerals, I don’t recall ever hearing or partaking in a discussion of death within the church. Pastors only briefly glossed over these topics with surface level phrases about how the deceased is in a better place now and how Jesus conquered over death, and public speakers said even less on the subject. Why was this the case? Was my
experience an exception, a unique aspect of the churches that I have attended in my life, a unique aspect of the United Methodist Church I have belonged to since I was a child? Or was this a common occurrence for United Methodists or even across Christianity as a whole? If my own experience was relatively common, I question whether individual Christians are even aware of their own Church’s or denomination’s beliefs about the afterlife, given the rarity with which they are discussed. In addition, if a large portion of devoted self-identifying Christians don’t know their Church’s official teachings on death and the afterlife, how can they be expected to follow these beliefs? In communication with one another, denominational names are used to categorize people based on their religious beliefs within Christianity; however, if Churches aren’t effectively teaching people about their official doctrines and stances as an institution, or if devoted Christians don’t follow their denomination’s beliefs, then what value do denominational labels have in identifying people’s ways of seeing and responding within the world?

**Review of Literature**

A review of academic literature shows that there is limited research looking at individual Christians’ beliefs in the afterlife, and the studies that do exist are limited in scope.

One study related to this topic was published in 1981 by Nelsen Hart. Hart’s research used data pulled from Gallup polls between 1944 and 1978 to discuss whether U.S. citizens have a static and unchanging level of belief in the afterlife, or if the percentage fluctuates over time. Hart found that there has been a steady decline of belief in the afterlife among Americans age 35

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2 Hart, 109-118.
and older. However, belief in the afterlife among citizens age 21-34 has fluctuated, with an increase in afterlife belief between 1944 and 1960 with a slight overall decline in afterlife belief between 1944 to 1978. Hart was uncertain whether this decline would end once the age categories were roughly similar to one another in terms of percentage, or if the decline would continue into the future. Later research conducted using the General Social Survey as a source of data for analysis suggests that U.S. citizens’ belief in the afterlife has gone relatively unchanged between 1973 and 1991, supporting the idea that the belief in the afterlife would remain constant after the different age groups within the U.S. had similar percentages of people who believe in the afterlife.

One of Hart’s collaborators, Bradley Hertel, was also discussing Americans’ beliefs in the afterlife during this time period. Hertel analyzed data from the 1968 Gallup poll to determine what factors (if any) were the greatest predictor of whether people believed only in Heaven, only in the concept of life after death, or in both. Hertel’s study concluded that people who believe in Heaven only were more likely to be of a somewhat lower social class than those that believe either in both or in afterlife only. The study also concluded that those who believe in Heaven only attended church less often. However, researchers denied the claim that the people who stated they only believed in Heaven did so due to a misinterpretation of the question due to a lack of education. Finally, it was found that those that believe in Heaven alone were the least

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3 Hart, 115.
4 Hart, 117.
7 Hertel 171-183. Hertel was unclear on what this distinction meant beyond stating a discrepancy within the GSS results.
8 Hertel, 180.
9 Hertel, 180.
predictable of the three groups, suggesting a great deal of variance and inconsistency within the group.\textsuperscript{10}

Separate from the work of Hart or Hertel, Flynn and Kunkel worked to learn whether factors like social and economic status (SES) affected the way people imagined the afterlife\textsuperscript{11}. The co-researchers used data from the 1983 GSS (the first year they ever asked people questions about the way they picture the afterlife) to determine if there was any sort of correlation\textsuperscript{12}. While they did not find any correlation between SES and whether people believe in the afterlife or not, they did find that an individual’s SES affected how they understood the afterlife.\textsuperscript{13} From their data, Flynn and Kunkel found that those in a lower SES were more likely to picture life after death as a more pleasant version of life on earth, though there was a sizeable sub-group of low SES participants who believed that the afterlife would be devoid of earthly joys\textsuperscript{14}. It was also found that individuals who reported suffering one or more traumas were more likely to see the afterlife as a place of “intense action”\textsuperscript{15} and of pleasure and delight, and those who had been hospitalized within the last four years were likely to see the afterlife as only involving the mind and not the body.\textsuperscript{16}

People’s beliefs about the afterlife can have a profound impact on how they interpret and handle grief over the death of the living, even family pets. One study, conducted in 2016,
surveyed 219 individuals through a website dedicated to grieving the loss of pets. Researchers found that a majority of participants included their pets into their religious beliefs (meaning they believed that their pets were sent to an afterlife) and were also a part of their prayers. For these people, the way they interpreted the death of their pet and where they believed their pet’s soul resided drastically shifted the way that they coped with the loss of their pet. For those that believed their pet was in a positive afterlife (e.g. “heaven”), participants engaged in “positive expressions of religious coping” (i.e. seeking refuge and care in G-d); while those who believed their pet was in a negative afterlife reported engaging in more “negative forms of religious coping” (i.e. believing that they were being punished by G-d for being impious). These examples highlight the importance of the afterlife for those who believe in it. Afterlife beliefs can dramatically shift the way that one interprets what the loss of a loved one means and whether they should be at peace or distressed for their loss.

Finally, organizations like The Pew Research Center perform regular surveys on topics such as belief in the afterlife. From the 2014 data, a slight incline in Christian belief in Heaven and Hell is apparent, but as age increased the belief in Hell and Heaven decreased over most of the broad Christian traditions (Evangelical, Mainline, and Historically Black Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons). However, the research failed to go further than such broad categories as Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, and Historically Black; creating issues by clumping large numbers of denominations together with very different beliefs and statements on what comes

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18 Lee, 126.
19 Lee, 126.
20 Lee, 126.
22 “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious.” 53-56.
after death. Furthermore, the research shows the importance of specifying to your audience when discussing the afterlife, for example, Buddhists had the most significant increase in belief in Heaven over the seven years\textsuperscript{23}; though what is meant within this context versus the Christian or even Abrahamic context is drastically different.

While each study discussed offered some insight into the topic of death and afterlife beliefs, there were significant limitations in their questions or structure. First, with the exception of the Pew Research study, the reviewed research did not specifically state or observe participants’ denominational identities; as a result, they offer limited insight on the examination of Christian beliefs and their congruence and incongruence with denominational teaching. Second, the usage of survey data in all of the studies mentioned creates concern given the finite responses on the part of the participant and their inability to elaborate further on their answers. The discussion of death and the afterlife is complex and requires nuance in order to capture what it truly is that someone believes, the nature of a survey makes capturing that nuance difficult due to the fact they can only give a finite number of answers and cannot ask for elaboration and explanation of the answers given. So what does Heaven look like for the fifty people that answer a survey? Are they fifty different conceptualizations, one shared conceptualization, or somewhere in-between? This kind of data is lost within a survey format. In light of these limitations, the present study utilized a semi-structured interview format to focus on the death and afterlife beliefs of self-identified Christians.

This present study considered a small sample of participants in order to perform an inductive and explorative look into Christians perceptions of death and the afterlife. Its results

\textsuperscript{23} “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” 53-56.
hope to generate a more in-depth account of how Christians understand death because it allows researchers to dig deeper than a yes or no answer to questions such as “Do you believe in Heaven”, allowing participants to provide nuanced discussions on their beliefs about the afterlife and the causes that lead up to it. It will also allow us to examine which ways individuals adhere to and differ from their denomination’s official stances. In addition, this preliminary data enables us to begin examining how accurate the current definitions of the denominational labels we have created are to the beliefs of its practitioners, and whether we need to reevaluate the meanings we give these labels.

As such, this research helps to update, deepen, and contribute to the discussion of people’s beliefs about the afterlife, as well as to assess in what ways, and why, those who are part of a religious institution adhere to or differ from their institution’s official statements on the afterlife.

Methods

This study employs in-depth interviews in order to collect data; however, prior to any data collection, I studied the official doctrines of both the Catholic and United Methodist traditions to determine what their official stances on the afterlife were and how detailed they were in their discussion of the topic. Second, Data was gathered from participants through the use of both preliminary surveys to provide basic demographic information (see Appendix A) and utilized semi-structured interviews in order to obtain as much depth of information as possible. The guiding questions for the interviews are listed in Appendix B below.
To gather my participants, I reached out to several local churches and, as a result, the four interviewees live in Metropolitan Chicago. Interviews were scheduled with participants and performed wherever the participant felt the most comfortable. Interviews were then recorded using a recording app and transcribed; all interviews were deleted from the app after transcription to minimize risk of exposure to the general public and tarnishing the individual’s anonymity. Individual interviews were compared to the statements of their denomination to look for consistencies and inconsistencies between the personal and institutional beliefs. Once this was completed, interviews were compared with others within the denomination to look for trends within the laypeople of the denomination in terms of death and afterlife belief. Finally, interviews were compared to interviews within the other denomination observed in order to look for any interdenominational trends among laypeople.

Prior to conducting interviews, I had to immerse myself in the official texts of each denomination as well as some commentary from officials within the institution if I wanted to compare them to the beliefs of my interviewees. Discussions of death within the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* were read and analyzed as well as discussions from church officials within those denominations to observe what these beliefs looked like and sounded like in practice.

**Catholicism Introduction**

Death is, in Catholicism, merely an end to life on earth and a fulfillment of the symbolic death and rebirth of humans in Christ.24 The Catholic Church believes in bodily resurrection on

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the end of days,\textsuperscript{25} when The Kingdom of Heaven will come down to earth and create “A new Heaven and a New Earth.”\textsuperscript{26} When a person dies, their soul is judged and is sent to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. Contrary to popular conceptions of Hell, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that Hell is only for those who choose to turn away from God and do not return; it is where people who do not believe in Christ find themselves after death.\textsuperscript{27} For those who believe in Christ and embraced Christianity, but did not lead perfect or saintly lives, Purgatory is a place for souls to be purified so that they may eventually enter into Heaven\textsuperscript{28}. While in Purgatory, individuals can be aided in their journey to purification by the payers of Christians who are still living.\textsuperscript{29}

Once the End of Days occurs, and the world as we know it ceases, those that are in Heaven will be resurrected into new, spiritual bodies and live without sorrow or death forevermore, while those who find themselves in Hell will live in eternal torment\textsuperscript{30}. From what I could gleam from Chaplin Ruth (a pseudonym utilized for a Catholic Chaplin), one’s placement into Heaven or Hell is eternal, it is impossible for someone in Hell to turn back to God and it is likewise impossible for one in Heaven to turn away from God.\textsuperscript{31}

However, among some officials within the Catholic Church, there has been concern as to whether followers are sufficiently knowledgeable of these denominational beliefs and whether they understand the importance of, and partake in, rituals such as praying for the dead. Denis O’Callaghan, a Catholic priest in Ireland, states that “ordinary people” lack the strong belief in

\textsuperscript{26} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd. ed., 1042, Accessed 1/12/2019.
\textsuperscript{27} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd. ed., 1037, Accessed 1/12/2019.
\textsuperscript{28} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd. ed., 1030-1032, Accessed 1/12/2019.
\textsuperscript{29} Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd. ed., 1032, Accessed 1/12/2019.
\textsuperscript{31} Personal Conversation with Chaplin Ruth on 12/03/18.
the afterlife that previous generations possessed, and that, broadly speaking, Irish Catholics have stopped performing prayers for dead family members.32 O’Callaghan further suggests that, while rural communities are likely to continue these practices, especially if a cemetery is nearby the church, urban communities are unlikely to pray for the dead and view the practice as pointless since they are already dead.33 He responds to this trend by stating that the purpose in praying for the dead is that, unlike us, G-d is not bound to a linear timeline and that our prayers affected the individual at their time of death.34 From his experiences and explanations, questions arise regarding whether Catholics know or follow the Catholic understanding and rituals of the afterlife. O’Callaghan’s claims also communicate that Catholicism views G-d as a being beyond the concept of time who acknowledges our love and compassion for the deceased even after their death.

**United Methodist Introduction**

The United Methodist Church is a unique denomination in that they do not have a formal statement on what happens after people die. Sources provided on the United Methodist website, simply state that G-d does not cause us harm or death, but that death is a sad inevitability given our broken and imperfect world.35 The *Book of Discipline*, the United Methodist official book of guidelines on its ethical and theological stances, only has two clear statements on death and the afterlife. The first statement is that Methodists reject the concept of Purgatory, and view it as a

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33 O’Callaghan, 611.
34 O’Callaghan, 611.
35 “Ask The UMC: Is our time of death predetermined?” United Methodist website. 08/21/2019.
“Romanish doctrine… a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but repugnant to the Word of God.”

The second explicit claim on the afterlife is that United Methodists do believe in a resurrection of the dead, eternal life, and eternal condemnation. This limited set of claims provides a sharp contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition and is a core reason why I chose to select this denomination for research. What happens to personal statements on the afterlife if there is little in the way of official church doctrine on the matter? As a United Methodist myself, I wanted to hear some of my fellow member’s statements to understand what these beliefs look like within our own denomination. It also seems unfair of me to be critically analyzing the beliefs of other denominations without doing the same for my own; otherwise, the study may quickly descend into criticizing other denominations for their beliefs and their followers’ understandings while leaving my own perceptions of my denomination unchallenged. So, inclusion of my own denomination was both to sate my own curiosity and to try to maintain fairness and open-mindedness regarding analysis of the denominations.

This lack of a doctrinal statement is by no means a statement of uncaring. For, example, The United Methodist website includes several articles with advice on ministry and services for the dying, dead, and those who mourn, how lay people are called to care for the dying rather than just pastors and church officials, discussions on why the death penalty is against their values as United Methodists, and the church’s stance against assisted suicide. Similarly, from the articles one can find on the Global United Methodist website, the denomination stresses an

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37 The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 76.
38 “God is with us: Blessing the dying and those who grieve” United Methodist website. 4/18/2019.
41 “What is the United Methodist stance on assisted suicide?” United Methodist website. 4/18/2019.
emphasis on the idea that humans lack the information necessary to make any sort of meaningful doctrine on what happens after death.\textsuperscript{42} While there is uncertainty of what lies beyond death, United Methodist theologians believe, as their founder John Wesley did, that there is some sort of state between a person’s death and the Final Resurrection, but it is not the Catholic Purgatory (which is the only thing United Methodist theologians feel comfortable outright rejecting) and its exact nature is still uncertain.\textsuperscript{43}

**Discussions of Death**

One of my major questions and concerns for this project was where people go to gather their information about death and the afterlife. The answer to this question is crucial to understanding the rest of the data because it tells us how a church or denomination handles the topic of death and from where people are gathering their views of death and the afterlife.

Of my four participants, none of them said that their church really talked about the topic of death or dying within the traditional worship service. Their pastors and priests rarely ever brought up the topic of death, and even when they did (usually in a funeral) it was in very vague terms such as “they’re in a better place” or “they’re with G-d now”. The only place anyone said they had deep discussions on death were in a college Bible study group. Joan (Catholic) said that she has had in-depth discussions of death and the afterlife in a group Bible study, but only when the topic was specifically brought up by someone within the group.

\textsuperscript{42} Joe Iovino, “What Happens After a Person Dies?” United Methodist website. 1/19/19.
\textsuperscript{43} Iovino “What Happens After a Person Dies?” United Methodist website. 1/19/19.
This lack of discussion on death by pastors and priests both supports the idea that the majority of modern Christians are afraid of discussing death and suggests a certain breakdown of the chain of learning that we so often take for granted within a church setting. The concept of the afterlife is an important part of Christianity and can be a source of comfort for some, but talking about the afterlife also requires one to confront the idea of their own mortality, fragility, and the aging process. By not talking about these concepts, people lack a space to think about their own mortality, the inevitable fact their lives are fragile, and that death can come by accident, illness, the aging process, or other means. Through this lack of discussion, we also deny individuals the opportunity to wrestle with an inevitable aspect of their life and faith, and to come to any thoughtful and peaceful relationship with their mortality. Furthermore, we deny people the potential comfort of understanding their denomination’s concept of the afterlife and leaving them to construct their own beliefs, no matter how different they may be from their own denomination or the ramifications their personal beliefs may have on how they view their own faith, how they evaluate the faith of others, and how they treat the people around them.

The lack of discussion of death from a pastoral perspective also suggests that the traditional understanding of how knowledge is passed within the church either does not apply to the topic of death, or that something is interrupting knowledge transferal on this topic. It is normally expected that a pastor goes and receives an education from a seminary which they then use to teach people within the congregation about their religion, their faith, and who G-d is. While a pastor is unable to teach every aspect of what they know to a congregation, this complete lack of discussion on death and the afterlife goes against this system of knowledge transference.
Catholic Afterlife Results

Our Roman Catholic interviews allow us to discuss a topic that we were unable to determine from our Methodist participants, are people following the official doctrine their churches give on the afterlife? In line with what we had originally thought, people do differ from their church doctrine, but what we hadn’t anticipated was how their differences came to be.

Within our initial discussions, we hypothesized that those in denominations with official doctrines would lack a deep understanding of these doctrines because church leaders are not talking about death and the afterlife beyond superficial statements like “they are in a better place.” While it is true that there is a lack of discussion around these topics, some church members do know what their church doctrine is and understand it deeply.

Joan is a strong example of this finding. When asked about her church’s views of death and the afterlife she began discussing how they are a self-avowed nerdy academic who goes straight to the Catechism, looks in the index, types the term they are looking for in the search engine, reads what it says, and if they still don’t understand what is being said, goes and asks their Chaplain for more details. From this understanding of the Catechism, Joan goes on to create their own understanding of death and the afterlife guided by the Catholic teachings, but not identical to them.

Perhaps one of the biggest differences is the level of detail Joan is willing to understand the afterlife in. When asked about how they picture death, they stated that death is an “unknown factor”, and when further asked about death being unknown, stated:

“I think Catholicism has a lot on these concept of Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and the 2nd Coming, but, like I said before, I really think of these terms as being very vague. So what that actually means, I don’t think
anyone really knows, so that’s the part I just find really uncertain about it...the Catechism and the church
is extremely detailed in what that means, and I think that’s WAY too detailed for....MMMM....how do I
say that?...It’s too much detail for something like that. So I believe in the concept, but not in the detail in
which the church lays it out”

So, while Joan believes in the basic concepts of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, they are
uncomfortable describing these concepts thoroughly because it is impossible to know what
comes after in depth.

Joan sees Hell as being completely separate from G-d, but voiced uncertainty as to what
that means.

“What does it mean to be separated completely from G-d? I don’t KNOW, and is it possible to be
completely separated from G-d if I believe in him being connected to everything and created everything?
All I can think of is nothingness, but I don’t believe in Hell as a concept of nothingness, so I don’t know.”

In contrast, Mary, a devout Catholic who has been involved in numerous aspects of her
church since birth, gathered her information on death and the afterlife primarily from daily
devotional newsletters and scriptures. When asked if she looked at the Catechism for guidance,
she expressed unfamiliarity with it. For her, the concepts of Heaven and Hell are very real, but
the level of detail in what they look like was vague. Mary believes the afterlife is something that
we could never fully grasp because “only G-d can know”; similarly, while she firmly believes
that to enter Heaven one must accept Christ as their savior, she expressed no further criteria
regarding what one must do or how one must be to enter Heaven because “only G-d can judge,
not us.”
Contrary to our earlier beliefs on the nature of discussing the afterlife, for Mary the purpose was not so much to provide a firm understanding of what happens when we die, but to comfort those who were living.

“I would say that it’s more of an assurance conversation that G-d has promised a place for us after life, that there is a Heaven, and that, again, I would say that a pastor would say that, to comfort a family ‘we know that there is a Heaven and that G-d loved so and so’”

She discussed how, for the friends and family of the deceased, complex discussion of the afterlife isn’t beneficial, but that she believes the use of the vague discussions provides comfort and assurance that their loved ones are doing well in the afterlife and are at peace.

Methodist Afterlife

The Methodists that I interviewed had drastically different understandings about death and the afterlife from one another, but they all agreed that it is impossible to know for certain what lies beyond death. While such a thought may be strange to some, John felt that this was completely normal. In his mind “I don’t think that it matters, because even if I know what comes after, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s still going to happen to me. I’d rather focus on what needs to be done here and now.” Our Methodist sample suggested that their willingness to say “I don’t know” was not a statement of uncaring, but rather a statement that they were comfortable and confident in the uncertainty of the afterlife because there was too much work to be done on earth, and trusted that the G-d of unfailing love would care for them after death, whatever the details of that care may be.
This comfort with the unknown doesn’t mean that they were without their own thoughts on what may lie after death though, and our participants had different broad understandings of what may come afterwards. For example, Ham (a young adult within the Chicagoland area) stated that they didn’t like to think about the afterlife in very concrete ways because we as humans can’t fully grasp the concept; but believed that the afterlife would have “the interaction among souls or beings. A chance to connect with past loved ones” and that we will “have some form and not just be abstract energies, but that’s mostly because I personally rely on physicality and don’t deal with the abstract…so my person bias may be seeping into my beliefs there” souls will have a chance to be their “truest selves, regardless of what that means to them in terms of personality or characteristics” and that we will be able to interact with G-d in some form. It is also important to note that, in Ham’s perception, many parts of what makes a person who they are, like sexuality or physical/mental disabilities won’t be removed because they are characteristics of the individual rather than a flaw that needs to be fixed. When asked if they believe in any sort of negative afterlife, Ham said that they don’t believe in any sort of eternal punishment because it “doesn’t really mesh well with the idea for redemption. I’m not opposed to the idea of purgatory or an opportunity after death to atone for mistakes made in life and become a better person.” And that they would like to believe that there is a chance for everyone to be in relationship with G-d, even after death.

In contrast, John does believe in Hell. For John, Hell is a place that it is hard to make your way into. While John doesn’t know what qualifies one specifically to be deserving of going to Hell (and believes no human really does since it is up to G-d to judge us), they do believe that it exists and that people do go there because “I can’t believe that Hitler is in the same place as my grandmother.” For John, Hell is “a place completely separated from G-d, whatever that looks
like” and that once we are there, there is no going back because we have made our choices already (though they did specify that this was not something they had thought of prior to this interview). They also stated that this belief was drastically different than their mother’s, who believes that Hell is earth and that we will all be redeemed to go to Heaven, but they are unable to accept this belief as their own due in part to that statement that it is incompatible in their mind that Hitler and their grandma would be in the same place; and that all of the horrible things they see in the world makes it difficult for them to accept their mother/pastor’s beliefs.

To pull from my own experiences as a United Methodist, I admit that I am quite happy within my uncertainty about anything concerned with the afterlife. While I believe that it is an important topic to discuss and be informed, in the end I don’t believe there is much use in speculating what comes after because it really is just that, speculation. What difference does it make if there is a Heaven or a Hell? Or what it may look like if there are? To me, being Christian shouldn’t be focused on what I believe happens after death, but to focus on making the world we live into a better place and to live this life like Christ asked us to.

Vagueness of Afterlife

A major component within these interviews is the vagueness with which people describe the afterlife. Most of the participants stated that they were uncertain of what came after death and weren’t comfortable thinking of the afterlife in concrete concepts. If this trend is prevalent within the communities our participants are from, then it is possible that we need to rethink what purpose the afterlife has in the mind of churchgoers and what is required to make a concept firm in someone’s mind. Prior to this research, we had assumed that churchgoers desired well-
thought-out and in-depth understandings of the afterlife from their tradition, because doing so left little to the imagination and reduced the fear of the. However, in these interviews we are seeing that not only do people not think of the afterlife in such detailed forms, but that they don’t believe that these are a helpful or comforting way to conceptualize the afterlife. Such detailed descriptions felt disingenuous to the interviewees who voiced that it was impossible for us to understand the afterlife in great detail when it will be so drastically different from our own world. Ham, Joan, and John also discussed how being able to think about and conceptualize the afterlife in their own way allowed them to feel more at ease with death because they were comfortable with what was there, rather than being at the mercy of a system of denominational teachings with which they did not agree. In the case of Mary however, this vagueness was a symbol of humility and acknowledging that humans are below G-d and cannot fathom what G-d’s design for us after death is; thus, vagueness in Mary’s case does not give the ability to conceptualize death however she wishes, but as a way to acknowledge our place, and limits, within G-d’s design.

Another surprising result of this study was the knowledge that the United Methodist Church’s lack of a formal teaching on the afterlife does not create drastically different comprehensions around the afterlife. Growing up in a United Methodist Church, I had heard stories of, and lay people discussing, the idea of whether reincarnation is viable with Christian teachings and being uncertain of whether it is or not. However, in these interviews, our participants all held the mainstream understanding of eternal life after death and the concept of a good afterlife. However, the presence or absence of Hell is a major difference among these interviews and shows the persistence of “negative afterlife” beliefs among modern Christians;
point to an important discussion within Christianity of whether there a limit to redemption and forgiveness?

**Can We Be Saved Post-Death?**

Perhaps my favorite question within this project was whether or not Christians believe it is possible for us to change our place in the afterlife after death. For example, if I led a bad life and was sent to Hell (if it exists), would I be able to repent and make my way to Heaven? Or is it possible for me to stray from Heaven and fall into Hell? For me, this question centers on basic claims about human freedom and agency. Until at what point do we still have the freedom to change our eternal destination and how far can redemption (or corruption) go? At what point have our actions sealed our fate in the afterlife? Is it the moment we die? Or does G-d’s love and mercy extend beyond death to our life after death? Similarly, the issue of agency after death asks whether we must continue to strive to be good, or whether our actions in life have guaranteed us a place in a positive afterlife. Is the afterlife static or dynamic? Can we stray from the path after death? If the “Children of G-d” can stray and create the Nephilim despite their divine status (Genesis 6:2-4) can we to stray from the path of a holy life after death?

This question didn’t apply to every situation, Ham for example doesn’t believe in a negative afterlife, so it is impossible to change one’s place. However, for those that did believe in multiple realms within the afterlife, there was a disagreement on whether human beings still have free will after death. John stated they believe we make our decisions in life, and that that our agency ends with earthly death, while Joan had stated that “on a first glance” that they don’t believe a change is possible because the Catholic church doesn’t, but further in the interview said
that if angels are capable of falling, then we might have some sort of free will post-death, and left it at “So who knows?”

Conclusion

From this first foray into the discussion of how individual Christians understand death and the afterlife, we have made several interesting observations, though further research needs to be conducted before any overarching claims can be made. As we had expected prior to our research, our participants reported a distinct lack of discussion around the topic of death and dying within their church settings.

While death and the afterlife seem to be rarely discussed within the Roman Catholic and United Methodist Churches within the U.S., participants in both denominations cited this lack of discussion as giving them the ability to create their own understandings of the afterlife that better fit their own understanding of G-d and Christianity. Furthermore, none of the participants voiced concern that developing their own unique beliefs about death and the afterlife might negatively impact their relationship with G-d or their own status after death.

We also found that the majority of participants in both denominations favored imprecise language and vague understandings of what comes after death compared to complex and highly structured understandings of the afterlife. These results differ from the researcher’s previous beliefs that people seek structured understandings of the afterlife in order to feel confident and assured that they know what occurs after family members or they themselves inevitably perish.

This research suggests that there is value in looking more in-depth at people’s views of death and dying because of the diversity of thought in what a belief in the concept may look like
even within the same religious tradition. Further research may also be done in what participants
desire from their view of the afterlife and what function it serves within their personal lives and
how it affects the way they interact with the world around them.
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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. How long have you been a part of your current denomination?
   a. Less than one year
   b. 1-5 years
   c. 6-10 years
   d. 11-20 years
   e. 21+ years

2. How often do you attend church?
   a. 3 or more times a month
   b. 1-2 times a month
   c. 4-11 times per year
   d. 3 or less times per year

3. Which of the following statements best describes your involvement in the church?
   a. I am not involved beyond my church attendance
   b. I am somewhat involved within the church
   c. I frequently do work within the church

4. Do you believe in Heaven?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Unsure

5. Do you believe in Hell?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Unsure

6. Do you believe in a bodily resurrection after we die?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Unsure

7. Would you be willing to be interviewed for an anonymous study on people’s views of death and the afterlife?
   a. I would be willing to be interviewed for this study
   b. I would not be willing to be interviewed for this study

8. Do you believe that your views on death and the afterlife are in-line with your church’s official doctrine?
   a. I believe my views are completely in-line with church doctrine
   b. I believe my views are fairly in-line with church doctrine, but there are some differences
   c. I believe my views are not very in-line with church doctrine, but there are some similarities
   d. I don’t know my church’s doctrine well enough to answer
Appendix B

1. How did you come to this denomination?
   a. (If Applicable) What do kinds of work do you do in the church?
   b. What does religion mean to you?
2. Everyone has some belief or understanding about death, would you be willing to discuss some beliefs you have on the subject?
   a. Is it a positive or negative thing?
3. Is there an afterlife in your opinion?
   a. What is the meaning behind the way and time that one dies (if there is any)?
   b. If so, what do you believe it look like?
4. How often does your pastor discuss death and the church’s views on death?
5. What would you say influences your understanding of death?
6. Have your views of death ever changed?
   a. Where did you go for guidance when changing your understanding of death?