What Happens After We Die? Millennials and Nonreligious Outlooks on Death and Afterlife

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Abstract

The exponential growth of the nonreligious population in Canada presents new social, ethical, and institutional challenges that require scholarly attention. Despite this rapid growth, relatively little is known about this group and their perspectives on the afterlife. Far less is known about how these perspectives reflect broader ethical, moral and lifestances on death and dying. Among all demographic cohorts in Canada, millennials are the first generation for whom identifying as "nonreligious" constitutes a majority (36% identify as nonreligious). As they age and continue to consolidate their position as a leading demographic group within Canadian society, their beliefs, moral frameworks, and existential orientations will increasingly shape broader cultural, institutional, and policy landscapes.

This thesis explores the intersection between the nonreligious millennial demographic, death and afterlife by asking: how do the nonreligious millennial population in Canada experience and make sense of death, dying, and the afterlife? The research draws on 35 interviews conducted with Canadian individuals who identify as nonreligious. Their ages ranged between 28 and 43 years. Participants' feelings and perspectives on death, dying, and afterlife are presented in four chapters, each describing distinct aspects of a reflexive thematic analysis.

My analysis lays the groundwork for future research that can begin to address the emerging needs of a growing nonreligious population. What nonreligious individuals value can inform the provision of care and policy decisions surrounding illnesses and death. And beyond practical considerations, this study shows how examining emerging afterlife narratives can also help bridge the gap between immanent and transcendent ways of understanding life and finitude, as well as demonstrates that nonreligious populations maintain deep and structured moral stances. In sum, this thesis examines how nonreligious millennials experience and perceive the afterlife. In doing so, it sheds light on broader questions of morality, identity formation, and meaning-making outside religious frameworks.

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Introduction

O May I join the choir invisible

Of those immortal dead who live again

In minds made better by their presence: live

In pulses stirr'd to generosity,

In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn

For miserable aims that end with self,

In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,

And with their mild persistence urge man's search

To vaster issues…

– The Choir Invisible, by George Eliot (1819 – 1880)[1]

As a nonreligious person growing up in Mexico, it was common to be considered the "odd one". Religion is still an integral part of social life there. Yearly, both public and private schools put their "Pastorelas" (a traditional Christmas folk play about shepherds journeying to Bethlehem). We take the Virgin of Guadalupe day off work. Easter break is widely referred to as " Vacaciones de Semana

[1] **A Note on the Use and Translation of Poetry:** The poetic excerpts that follow were selected for their resonance with the themes explored throughout this thesis. Two of the excerpts are drawn from the poetry of Jaime Sabines, a Mexican poet whose work repeatedly engages with death. Three other excerpts are drawn from George Eliot's well-known poem "The Choir Invisible." Both poets were selected because they reflect on death and on the possibility of persisting beyond it in meaningful ways, just like participants do throughout this work. Where necessary, I have translated the excerpts from Spanish into English.

Santa" (Holy week vacations) and over 90% of my friends and relatives were baptized (even I was, and we did not grow up religious!). I am the only one amongst my friends who got married outside of a church setting, and also the only one amongst them who did not complete their first communion (I'm still curious to find out what a communion wafer tastes like, but will probably never know). On a macro level, our previous president (2018-2024) would often go on national television and sing praises about the importance of the figure of the Virgin as a symbol for all Mexicans. The president before him (2012-2018) famously attended several religious ceremonies in public to try and show how "catholic" he was (to be fair, he probably was trying to compensate for the multiple corruption scandals his administration was involved in).

All this to say, I grew up very close to religion. But it never really sounded convincing. I even went through all stages of "disbelief". I tried to get closer to religion at some point, but rites and ceremonies were too boring for me (picture a 10 year old staring up the face of a bloody Christ while older people continually sang in Latin for an hour straight). In my adolescent years, I became a recalcitrant atheist and tried to prove to everyone I knew how wrong they were for being religious (that didn't last long; nobody likes a know-it-all). Finally, I decided to simply call myself nonreligious (mostly because of the lack of a better word), but religion was always on my mind. When it came to deciding my major, I knew I wanted to study sociology and religion because I *needed* to understand how it is that people believe in a religion. As it turns out, I found much more than that in sociology.

Religion is important for many people. It is a way of making sense of the world. It explains the unintelligible and speaks to the ineffable. At the same time, though, it means different things to different people. Sociology is but one of the social sciences that has provided definitions of religion that seek to make it "researchable". Most notably, Emile Durkheim defined it as:

> A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim 1995: 44).

As the father of the sociological current of structural functionalism, Durkheim wanted to look for the functions and roles that all parties take on in society. Religion is a collective phenomenon for Durkheim, "comprised of shared beliefs, values, and practices, which act as a glue that binds society together" (1995: 44).

Max Weber, another notable social scientist from the 19th century, went the opposite direction. He claimed that a definition of religion was *only* possible well after carrying out a study on a particular social group. In his book *Sociology of Religion*, he stated:

> The external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behavior's "meaning" (1965: 1).

Weber belonged to a completely different school of thought from Durkheim. He was part of the interpretative hermeneutic tradition, and thus paid closer attention to personal meaning-making processes and personal social actions. Where Durkheim saw the social structures and functions that make up religion, Weber saw the meaningful social actions carried out by actors. Nevertheless, both Durkheim and Weber laid the groundwork that categorically makes religion an intelligible and researchable aspect of society. A sociological degree cannot be considered complete without a comprehensive understanding of their theories.

It was precisely this dual theoretical inheritance that shaped the way I initially approached religion as an object of study. I later learned of social constructionism[2] and began to understand the diverse ways in which current researchers are able to make sense of social action and social structures through a unified sociological lens.[3] It was then that it started to make sense why people believe in religion.

The prospect of moving to Canada, however, inspired me with research avenues I thought were unavailable. The Nonreligion in a Complex Future Project[4] seemed unthinkable to my Mexican mind. Studying the nonreligious phenomenon? I thought I was part of a very small minority of the world's population. Up until that point I had been studying the figures of the Black Christ in

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[2] I will discuss Social Constructionism as a sociological tradition during Chapter 1, and will later engage with its concepts in Chapter 2 of this study.

[3] For some examples of sociological research grounded on social constructionism, see: Berger and Luckmann (1991), Bourdieu (1977), Beckford (2003).

[4] The Nonreligion in a Complex Future Project is an international, comparative, interdisciplinary research project which identifies the social impact of the rapid and dramatic increase of nonreligion in Canada, Australia, the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland), the United States, the United Kingdom, and Latin America (Brazil and Argentina). For more information, refer to: https://nonreligionproject.ca/.

Mexico. Why would researchers devote significant time and resources to studying individuals who identify as nonreligious? Shortly after arriving it all clicked.

Canada is often imagined as a site of religious diversity, situated within a context of rapidly shifting religious identities. The most recent Canadian Census (2021) considered 24 different religions. Considering that some of them were lumped together in more "general" categories like *Traditional (North American Indigenous) spirituality* (0.2%) and *Other religions and spiritual traditions* (0.6%), it is still a large number of active religious traditions coexisting in one country. Out of the 24 religions listed, 16 were part of the broader Christian traditions (some examples are Anglican with 3.1%, Christian Orthodox with 1.7%, and Jehova's Witnesses with 0.4%). Unsurprisingly, the Christian religion represented 53.3% of the population. However, more than one third of Canada's population reported having no religious affiliation (34.6%). What does that mean for Canada?

It is not an overstatement to claim that Canada's religious landscape is changing incredibly quickly. Canadians are leaving religion, and most are not coming back (Clarke and Macdonald 2017). According to a report from the Canadian Census, the proportion of Canadians identifying as Christian has declined, falling from 77.1% in 2001 to 67.3% in 2011 (Statistics Canada 2022a: NA). In stark contrast, the proportion of Canadians that identify as nonreligious "has more than doubled in 20 years, going from 16.5% in 2001 to 34.6% in 2021" (Statistics Canada 2022a: NA). In just two decades, Canada has seen a proportional increase of 20% of people who identify as nonreligious. A similar survey carried out by the World Value Survey (Wave 7, 2017-2022) asked: "Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are…". The survey found that 44.5% of Canadian respondents identified as nonreligious, 19.4% identified as atheists and only 36.1% identified as religious. The nonreligious appear to play an important role in these rapid changes, but who are they, and what exactly is "nonreligion"?

Defining the term "nonreligion" continues to be a point of contention within religious studies (Zuckerman et al. 2016). Is it more than the absence of religion? How can the nonreligious be identified? Multiple answers to these questions have emerged, and I will engage with these in due course. For now, the initial definition provided by Lois Lee (2012) will suffice: "Non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion". (131) Thus, the nonreligious can briefly be defined as individuals whose beliefs are marked by a relationship of difference to religion.

The rise of the nonreligious is also accompanied by rapid declines in religious affiliation (see: Voas 2025; Kasselstrand et al. 2023). As a brief example, that same wave of the World Values Survey also asked: "could you tell me whether you are a member, an active member, an inactive member or not a member of that type of organization? Church or religious organization…". The survey results revealed that 66.4% of Canadians claimed they do not belong to any religious organizations.[5] It is now a known fact through numerous census and survey studies that Canadians are increasingly identifying as nonreligious, and now, more than ever, Canadians are establishing a clear separation from religious organizations.

We know the nonreligious population is on the rise. Who they are and the values that they hold have been a topic of interest for researchers for a few years now (Quack 2014; Lee 2015; Cragun 2016; Brown 2017). This study is part of this shared academic interest. With all these rapid changes, it's also natural to wonder how certain beliefs and meaningful questions (often answered through religion) are negotiated and understood by the rapidly emerging nonreligious population. For example, how are the nonreligious dealing with death? Do they have a conception of an afterlife? Social sciences may be able to provide an answer.

One of the wonders of sociology, as Bourdieu (1999) puts it, is that it "takes the biological and the psychological as a 'given'. It [instead] tries to establish how the social world uses, transforms and transfigures it" (15). What's more biological than death? And what's more psychological than facing it? These topics have long been of interest to researchers. Berger and Luckmann (1991) realized this early on, and proceeded to give death the center stage, arguing that it is the foundation upon which we build entire belief systems. Back in the 1960s, they argued that "the experience of the death of others and, subsequently, the anticipation of one's own death posit the marginal situation par excellence for the individual" (118). Death is certain, the uncertainty emerges from what comes after. Yet, somehow, some nonreligious individuals are able to make sense of the death of a loved one without the need to place them in the Christian Heaven (or any other separate space, for that matter). Some others may actually fear death, but do not yearn for an "eternal life" in

[5] Of course, the process of disaffiliation and the increase of nonreligious identities are not exclusive to Canada. The World Values Survey also found that 39.1% of people from the United States do not belong to any religious organization. Mexico's survey data also showed some interesting results: 44.4% of respondents claimed to have no religious affiliation. In terms of religious identity, 29.6% of people from the United States and 29.6% of Mexican respondents identified as nonreligious. Only 7.9% of people from the United States and 0.6% of Mexicans identified as Atheists.

another plane to make their lives meaningful. One thing is clear, the nonreligious create meaning outside religious frameworks and live meaningful lives with a clear recognition that death is inevitable. There is indeed an underlying sense of continuation amongst nonreligious narratives, but it does not necessarily come from religion. How do these other meaning-making narratives emerge, then?

I am by no means the first researcher to become interested in these topics. A number of studies have successfully captured the perspectives of nonreligious people on death, dying and the afterlife. Recently, Gaudette et al. (2025) carried out a study that explored the relationship between soul and afterlife beliefs. They found that "belief in a soul is no longer necessarily tied to religious belief or the supernatural" (13). Frost et al. (2025) also found that "many of the same factors that predict wellbeing among the religious—shared group identities, positive affect, and organisational participation—have secular correlates that can bolster wellbeing among the nonreligious" (11). It seems that the nonreligious can find wellbeing amongst their communities and create meaningful relationships without religion. They can even make sense of concepts such as "souls" and a "higher power" without religious frameworks. Much like what I will share in the findings of this research, Frost et al. (2025) also demonstrated that experiences of comfort and anxiety surrounding nonreligious identity evolve over time and are influenced by various societal factors. How the nonreligious position themselves as they go about their daily lives is subject to change, and is influenced by the constant reconfiguration of the relationship between their subjective meanings and the world that is presented to them as objective (the "real" world). More on this later.

Other studies have also addressed the specific dimensions of these phenomena: What do these emerging understandings of death and dying look like? What can they tell us about how the nonreligious perceive and experience the world? Some examples of these studies are Miller and Beaman's study (2024) on Death Cafes[6] in Canada, in which they develop four main typologies of (nonreligious) afterlife imaginaries. Another example is Miller et al.'s (2024) study, whose analysis of six Canadian newspapers over 120 years revealed that the content of obituaries has significantly

[6] Death Cafes are community driven spaces where people get together to discuss death. Their main objective is: "to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives". For more information, see: https://deathcafe.com/what/. Some studies have recently taken up the task of studying death cafes and its relationship to the death-positive movement (see: Koksvik and Richards 2023). For more information on the death-positive movements, see: Incorvaia (2024).

shifted over time. They concluded that "people commemorate their loved ones through a focus on the immanent: the people they connected with, activities they enjoyed, and causes they supported" (21). Other researchers have also explored how nonreligious people approach death from a variety of angles. From nonreligious elders (Manning 2018; 2023) to nation-specific demographics (Haimila and Muraja 2023), a variety of studies have already laid substantial groundwork that merit further consideration. The changes researchers are signaling are not to be taken as a premonition of what is to come, but as a snapshot of the fast social changes within Canada's own current social reality.

On the matter of death, dying and the afterlife, studying the nonreligious has become more than a recent trend. To figure out how the nonreligious population find value in death, dying, and how they develop afterlife imaginaries (if any) is now an active concern. These questions matter because they are relevant to the daily lives of the nonreligious in at least one clear realm of Canada's current social reality: end-of-life care and decision-making. Research shows that some services provided by hospital, hospices, funerary homes, as well as other end of life rituals and death related services tend to prioritize majoritarian religion (Padela 2012). Chapels can be found on hospitals, and there is always an easy access to a priest in a hospice, yet there are still no structures or provisions in place for the nonreligious individuals, even though they already represent a third of the population amongst one of the largest demographics in Canada. We are not even sure what those needed structures or provisions may look like. Additionally, some research has also shown that addressing religious – or in this case, non-religious – needs may have a positive effect on the patient as a whole (Gad et al. 2022).

In order to broaden the emerging conversation around these issues, this study captures some of the ways in which the nonreligious population coexists with and makes sense of death, dying and afterlife imaginaries. In doing so, I intend to help pave the way for future research that can better address the emerging needs of an increasing nonreligious population. What they value and care about may also reveal how to better address the needs of nonreligious individuals when they face illness or approach death. Beyond that, understanding emerging afterlife narratives can help bridge the gap between immanent and transcendent ways of understanding life and finitude. As this study will show, immanent and transcendent stances can coexist within one person's lifestance (meaning

how a person orients itself towards life).[7] The nonreligious in this study show that this arbitrary binary limits how researchers can approach afterlife imaginaries and other death-related meaningful events, be it the death of a loved one, a serious illness or acts of remembrance.

The study of afterlife imaginaries among the nonreligious also shows that meaning-making processes around death, dying and afterlife extend beyond religious frameworks. The participant narratives in this study shed light on larger questions surrounding morality, identity formation and meaning-making outside religion. The "simple" question of what happens after death is necessarily intersected with ethical, moral and epistemological stances. As this study will show, what type of afterlife participants imagine is often a result of multi-layered social processes and interactions that are constantly occurring outside religious frameworks. Meaning-making[8] around death does not disappear with declining religious affiliation, it is instead *reconfigured*. This reconfiguration marks a shift in societal structure and thus urges researchers to continue to explore what these changes mean for Canada and the rest of the world.

And what role do the millennials play in all of this? The millennials are the demographic cohort born between the late 1980s and 1990s, usually understood as the first generation to come of age in the new millennium. Coincidently, they are also the first generation in Canada in which identifying as a "nonreligious" could (arguably) be presented as a majoritarian identity. According to the 2019 Millennial Trends Survey (MTS) 36% of the millennial generation in Canada think of themselves as nonreligious, making it the largest category in relation to religious association and identity in that demographic. This category, at the same time, is not homogenous in nature, but varies significantly according to regions (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022a). While the idea of an afterlife is often associated with organized religion, an interesting trend has also been identified amongst millennials: lack of belief in an afterlife has not diminished considerably, with some researchers even suggesting that it has increased slightly (Bibby et al. 2019). Wilkins-Laflamme (2022b) also notes that the non-religious millennial demographic both in Canada and the U.S.A. includes many who think about the afterlife. These findings suggest that meaning-making amongst the millennials

[7] The meaning of the term "lifestance" is borrowed from Beaman et al. (2025a). See chapter one for an accurate definition.

[8] Meaning-making refers to the socially and culturally embedded processes through which individuals construct interpretations of the social world, including death, dying, and the afterlife. For a comprehensive review of models for understanding meaning-making processes, see: Park (2010).

escapes binary interpretations of religious and nonreligious frameworks. Instead, they call for a nuanced understanding of the factors and social influences that determine how the nonreligious imagine afterlife and position themselves around death, all while marking a clear separation from religious frameworks and institutions.

When I set out to capture "nonreligious" narratives for this study, I didn't intend to look for an answer to what happens after death. I simply thought it would be a catchy title. Answering these questions is often a point of wonder; they're personally pondered and rarely shared, often answered by our deepest thoughts, fears and hopes. In doing this research, however, I've quickly come to realize that there are more certainties than uncertainties around death and what comes after. In many ways, the people who took part in this study showed that they know a lot about what happens after they die. We all live with death as part of life and we prepare for it since the moment we're born. As it turns out, we do know a lot about what happens after death.

Naturally, answering these questions also required considering the possibility of an emerging framework through which death and life are reimagined outside of religion. Rather than simply categorizing different afterlife imaginaries, I sought to understand and capture the underlying framework that enables such imaginaries to emerge. What became evident through multiple conversations was that participants were indeed thinking about death and the afterlife, but that these reflections were grounded in understandings of life and death developed over time and from diverse sources often outside established religious frameworks. Although millennials occupy a life stage typically associated with economic activity and, statistically, earlier phases of the life course, all participants, without exception, had encountered death in one way or another. Many had been raised within religious traditions, while others had not; however, all had, in different ways, learned to engage with death outside of established religious frameworks. Uncertainty was a big component on a personal dimension, yet there was tremendous amount of certainty on a social dimension. The things they did know about death came from the social aspects of it (death of a loved one, a close encounter with death, etc.), which in turn helped form the ways in which they personally thought about death and afterlife.

Participants' accounts of death and the afterlife were marked by an overall sense of certainty regarding what they believed would occur after their death. Death was consistently understood as the end of the individual aspect of "being," while a social dimension of the self was seen to persist.

This social dimension appeared embedded in participants' broader understandings of life and death, and emerged as something that extends beyond formulations of "symbolic immortality."

Building on these insights, the present research seeks to examine more closely how such understandings of death and the afterlife take shape among nonreligious individuals. This study draws on 35 interviews conducted with Canadian participants who identify as nonreligious. At the time of the interviews (August 2024–April 2025), participants ranged in age from 28 to 43. Participants' narratives on death, dying, and the afterlife are examined across four chapters, each structured around a central thematic category. The study is guided by the following main research question: How does the nonreligious millennial demographic in Canada experience and perceive the idea of an afterlife? A set of secondary research questions further structures the analysis in relation to death and meaning-making: How do participants position themselves in relation to death? How do they confront, experience, and ascribe value to it? And what meaning-making processes shape imaginaries of death, dying, and the afterlife?

The first chapter of this thesis contains a detailed look at the most relevant and recent research related to sociology of religion, social constructionism, death, the afterlife, and the millennial demographic. The first section of the chapter discusses social constructionism's history as a theory both inside and outside the fields of religious studies and the sociology of religion. The second section offers a general articulation of current discussions surrounding the nonreligious phenomenon, including nonreligion as a conceptual category and the ever-challenging task of identifying the nonreligious population. I also discuss the nonreligious population in the third section of the chapter as it relates to the study of death and the afterlife. That same third section also offers a brief recapitulation of previous alternative approaches to the study of death and dying (such as Terror Management Theory). The last section of the chapter covers the millennial demographic as an object of study. The intention here is to offer deeper insights into millennials as a demographic, both in terms of their beliefs and the diversity of identities, as well as their social attitudes, inclinations, and challenges within Canada and the broader North American social context.

The second chapter focuses on the theoretical and methodological foundations of this research as specifically deployed in this study. The chapter is first structured around a discussion of my ontological and epistemological positioning, followed by a detailed articulation of how social

constructionism is employed as both a theoretical framework and an analytical lens. The chapter later turns to a detailed explanation of my methodological approach. In it, I outline the qualitative methods employed and the rationale behind their selection. I also give particular attention to the research design towards the end of the chapter. This final subsection outlines the process of participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

Chapter three of this thesis offers a first look at my particular deployment of the conceptual category of habitus as understood by Bourdieu (1977), as well as the socialization process outlined in Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality (1991). The chapter captures participants' personal belief trajectories (related to death and the afterlife), with a specific focus on their continuous engagement with social reality as a clear marker of changes in meaning-making structures and lifestances. This chapter also contains a small set of descriptive quantitative data meant to provide additional context for understanding the dynamic nature of participants' current beliefs and (non)religious identities. The Identity–Belief Trajectory theme, after which this chapter is named, functions as a broad thematic category that captures participants' narratives of continual reconfiguration of belief and identification over the course of their lives.

The fourth chapter engages with participants' reflections on death and mortality. It offers a detailed analysis of how participants position themselves in relation to their own mortality as well as the death of others. The chapter also suggests a reevaluation of the notion of "certainty" in relation to death. Rather than being experienced as a source of uncertainty, death emerges in participants' accounts as a site of relative certainty. What happens to the individual self after death may be unknown in some cases, but the more "knowable" aspects of death provide a source of ontological certainty. This chapter shows that the ways in which participants articulate their understandings of death outside of religious frameworks have significantly reshaped how they perceive life, the death of others, and the afterlife. These dynamics are captured in the theme of Immanent Certainty, which emphasizes how participants locate certainty and create meaning and knowledge about death within the immanent, independent of whether they ascribe a sense of transcendence to their imagined afterlife.

Chapter five explores participants' narratives on the afterlife. The theme that structures this chapter, Beyond the Self, captures the overarching narratives across all participants in this study. I find that, regardless of whether participants believe in a transcendent afterlife, a sense of existence beyond

the "self" is common throughout the data. To help make sense of this, I briefly examine the notion of the "social self" as an ancillary concept, intended to highlight how participants situate themselves within their particular understandings of the afterlife. The chapter also considers participants' narratives on higher powers in relation to their own afterlife narratives. Finally, I present findings indicating that, across all narratives, the afterlife is consistently described in relational terms: as a form of connection involving the maintenance, expansion, or creation of new ways for participants to continue engaging with their world after death.

The final chapter of the thesis expands on the finding that the afterlife is primarily understood in relational terms, as a source of continued connection after death. The chapter shows how participants express a shared sense that aspects of the "self" persist after death, while simultaneously demonstrating an inclination to perceive and accept death as the end of individual consciousness, independent of religious frameworks. Three main findings support this argument: (1) being remembered and remembering are forms of social orientation for participants; (2) participants act, remember, and imagine in ways shaped by the deceased; and (3) while participants recognize that death ends subjective experience, the "presence" of the deceased continues to influence the living. From these findings, I argue that a reconfiguration of social continuity, grounded in an immanent frame, is actively taking place. The data also show that immanent forms of transcendence exist among participants, and that they do so entirely outside established religious frameworks. To make sense of this phenomenon, I develop the concept of *Echoes of Memory*, which captures how the deceased continue to shape participants' social reality, while also encompassing narratives that point to a relational persistence after death. A final conclusion section recapitulates the main findings that emerge from each of these thematic categories and offers additional insights, as well as possible avenues for future research grounded in this study.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

As a sociologist trained in classical theory, it is difficult to resist the urge to mention August Comte (1798 – 1857) and his positivism as one of the first "formalized" attempts to incorporate religion into a broader conception of social reality.[9] His theory of the three stages of human development, while long disregarded by modern social science, has nonetheless left a legacy that ties into the birth of sociology as a discipline. Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) holds a similar place for me with his theory of "Nouveau Christianisme".[10] These early thinkers were often detached from empirical data and tended to speak from a distinctly western standpoint. Still, they were influential in that they began to question religion's role at a time when thinking about the social world without reference to God was, to put it kindly, highly controversial.

Nonetheless, for someone who wants to discuss the history of religion and social sciences, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber are, inevitably, the most influential early researchers. Their terms, approaches and ideas have a lasting impact on the way in which we approach the social phenomena. I dare not delve much into their thinking and approaches here because that work has been extensively covered; their influence is unquestionable.

As the world continues to undergo significant transformations, new and more contemporary approaches to the study of religion have emerged. Some researchers from the mid to late twentieth century have now been established as classics in the sociological study of religion (see, for example: Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967; Bellah 2005; Beckford 2003), and have paved the way for studies that reimage the social world as a dynamic field in which religion is continuously transformed, negotiated and enacted.

Within that same understanding that social reality is constantly changing, the sociological study of nonreligion has recently surfaced as an intriguing and increasingly demanding one. The field is still in its early days, with an ever-growing body of literature. Contemporary scholars in Sociology of Religion and Religious Studies (Smith and Cragun 2019; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020;

[9] For more information, see: Lenzer (1998).
[10] Saint-Simon proposed "Nouveau Christianisme" as a new "secular" religion, based on morals alone and the improvement of the poorest social classes.

Brown 2017; Beaman 2017; Quack 2014; Lee 2015) have now identified the phenomenon of nonreligion as a field of study that demands its own methods, approaches and theories.

The following chapter is intended as a brief exploration of some of the key themes and scholarly debates around religion and nonreligion. Throughout the chapter, it will become clear why the study of nonreligion requires the understanding of religion as a social phenomenon. The underlying intention is to show why understanding broader social theories give way to the sociological study of nonreligion as an integral part of the larger social processes, as opposed to a separate social phenomenon. Furthermore, given that my research topic discusses the social nature of death and dying, alongside a specific population group (millennials), this literature review will also capture some of the most important studies that have advanced our collective knowledge on these matters. Ultimately, my intention is to situate this research amongst the broader fields of social science and religion, but also within the particularities that entail the study of death, afterlife and millennials.

1.1 Sociology of religion and social constructionism

The disciplines of sociology of religion and religious studies find themselves at an important turning point. As suggested by Williams (2016), these fields have increasingly pursued an intellectual trajectory focused on individual practices, at times losing sight of the broader social dimensions that ultimately ground their relevance. At the same time, the interdisciplinary nature of religious studies allows it to contribute forms of critical analysis and cultural interpretation that are distinctive to the field. In turn, religious studies benefits from the sociology of religion's capacity to foreground the social dynamics that permeate religious phenomena. This research is situated at the intersection of these approaches. The analysis presented in this thesis draws on the critical, interdisciplinary insights of religious studies alongside the diverse methodological and theoretical toolkit developed within the sociology of religion.

Central to these intersections are also enduring theoretical and methodological debates about how to approach social phenomena. Until recently, the deterministic nature of certain sociological theories[11] has been pushed to the sidelines in favor of a sociology that accounts for agency and does not spend too much time thinking about larger social structures. The main argument that

[11] One could think of Durkheim and his research (see Durkheim 2008), but perhaps the clearest example of this would be Talcott Parson's General Theory of Action (see Parsons and Shils 1951).

permeated these trends is that spending too much time thinking about the larger social structures meant erasing the social actor all together.[12] Ammerman (2021), for example, argues instead for a lived religion approach as a way to move past traditional and institutional definitions of religion. McGuire (2008) exemplifies this when she argues for a rethinking of the institutional model of religion as a starting point that allows for a "better appreciation of the many and complex ways those religions are the products of considerable human creativity, cultural improvisation, and construction from diverse elements, only some of which were inherited from the same tradition" (186).

There is definite value in the lived religion approaches proposed by Ammerman (2021) and McGuire (2008). How the individual experiences religion often differs from what institutionalized religion proposes. The lived experiences narrated by the participants in the study alone prove the value of highlighting individual practices and beliefs as a way of making sense of (non)religious lifestances. Nonetheless, an excessive focus on individual-level approaches risks sidelining the sociological analysis of the structural and institutional forces that shape religious life. Altglas and Wood (2018) critique approaches that focus too extensively on individuals rather than the social institutions and processes that shape, constrain, and give meaning to social practices. For these authors, an emphasis on personal practices risks obscuring the structural conditions within which social life and practices unfold. Instead of an individualistic approach, they argue for a return to "reintegrating the social – power and authority, social classes, ethnicity, embodiment and emotions, interactions and practices – into the study of religion" (27-28). The authors argue against McGuire's lived religion approach alongside Rational Choice Theory (Stark and Bainbridge 1987), individual spirituality as religion (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005), religion as consumption (Gauthier and Martikainen 2013) and post-secular perspectives (Bosetti and Eder, 2006) as swinging the pendulum too much in the direction of an epistemological distinction between the self and society (2). They note: "These re-orienting attempts have had significant impacts on the sociology of religion, but we argue that each impact has, to a greater or lesser extent, been detrimental to the sociological understanding of religion." (2018: 2) For Altglas and Wood (2018), as for Williams

[12] Not to say this critique is not valid. One of the largest criticisms of Berger and Luckmann's theory is their lack of attention to the agency of social actors and their direct influence on the social reality around them.

(2016), the excessive focus on social actors has contributed to a detachment from the structural and relational dimensions that constitute sociology's core concern.

These critiques have also been framed through different optics. Neitz (2014), for example, tackles the concept of the "autonomous individual". Like Altglas and Wood, and Williams, she argues for a relational approach, but one grounded on feminist theory that incorporates the social, cultural and political forces that have historically shaped our understand of social theory and the autonomous individual. She has also critiqued the partialized and patriarchal notions of individual and agency that have long affected the way in which we develop Social Science.[13]

The overall call to action made by these researchers is, to some extent, grounded on previous social theory. It references a theoretical approach that recognizes the importance of the social actor and its agency while looking at broader social structures. The authors propose engaging in a sociology of religion that places the social dimension at the forefront of the discipline once again, but with the understanding that the social actor has an impact on the way in which the world is configured. In many ways, these authors advance a sociology that draws on the principles of *social constructionism*. And it is this orientation that is foundational for this research.

The theoretical roots of this perspective can be traced back to Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1991), which in turn provides a theoretical framework for understanding how knowledge, including religious beliefs, is constructed through social interaction. Their discussion of the process of socialization alone allows for an in-depth exploration of how shared societal understandings shape individual viewpoints. Furthermore, their concept of "symbolic universes" is instrumental in determining how knowledge, including beliefs surrounding the afterlife, is generated through social interaction. The authors' exploration of the dialectical relationship between subjective (individual) and objective (societal) knowledge provides a valuable lens for examining how people construct beliefs and perceive their world. *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) by Peter L. Berger is perhaps the first attempt at translating this theory of social construction of knowledge to the realm of religion. Berger's conceptualization of religion as an "all-embracing sacred order" further develops an understanding of religion that is often informed by social structures but is mediated by intersubjective relationships.

[13] See Neitz (2004).

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann largely provide the conceptual work upon which this thesis is built. Their theory allows for an understanding of the dynamic interplay between structure and agency and provide an analytical lens through which to examine how participants articulate, negotiate, and stabilise their understandings of death, the afterlife, and morally charged decisions related to death and dying. Still, their theory faces valid critique well in and outside of social constructionism.

Pierre Bourdieu's research (1971) challenges the assumption that symbolic universes are coherent and integrative. Instead, he argues that symbolic systems are structured by power and capital, and that religion is a field of struggle, not just shared meaning. Bourdieu's theory is also a part of the broader *social constructionist* approaches as it allows for the possibility of bridging the gap between structuralist and agency-centered approaches. His concept of *habitus* (1977, 2002) expands sociological analyses of social constructionism and examines how social structures shape individual dispositions. The notion of *fields*[14] also directly explains how individuals position themselves in the contemporary social world; it speaks to social structures as embodied by individuals, and prompts the reader to reflect the dynamics between subjective and objective inside larger and locally situated social contexts.[15]

Beckford's theory (2003) also critiques overly totalising accounts of religion and stresses contestation and social differentiation instead. His approach challenges Berger and Luckmann in that it emphasises the diversity of religious experience and the ongoing negotiation of meaning within social groups, rather than assuming a stable, coherent social reality maintained primarily through shared symbolic universes. Much of his theory emphasizes the importance of understanding religion as a social force that is shaped by, and in turn shapes, social contexts. One of his central arguments in *Social Theory and Religion* (2003) is that religion is not a monolithic or static entity but is constantly shaped by social processes, including globalization, secularization,

[14] I will expand on Bourdieu's concepts of *fields* and *habitus* in chapter 2.
[15] The distinction between the larger social structures and the more locally situated social interactions has also been discussed by authors like Habermas. Most famously, in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1987), he draws a clear distinction between the micro and macro levels of social analysis. He defines "lifeworld interactions" as part of the micro level of analysis, meaning everyday communication grounded in shared meanings and mutual understanding. At the macro level, he distinguishes "systemic structures", understood as larger meaning structures that operate through broader social processes (legal systems and the economy are some examples of these).

and the shifting dynamics of modernity. In *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (2019), for example, he examines how the processes of modernization, secularization, and globalization have reshaped religious beliefs, practices, and institutions in industrialized societies. For Beckford, religion is not disappearing but continues to shape social life. Its forms and expressions have evolved in response to the social, economic, and cultural shifts of advanced industrialization.[16]

Perhaps a more direct critique of Berger and Luckmann's research is their lack of explicit attention to power and ideology (Hjelm 2019). This lack of attention to language and discourse as foundational elements of social reality construction can devolve social constructionism into nothing more than a purely descriptive epistemological tool. Hjelm (2019) critiques Berger and Luckman's theory, and argues that "[s]ociology of religion would do well to look at how "religion" itself, and its variations ("spirituality", "sects", "cults", good religion, bad religion etc.) are increasingly negotiated and struggled over in political, media and private discourse" (236).

Social Constructionism as an epistemological approach also faces critiques outside of Berger and Luckmann's theory. Researchers such as Brehen (2016) reveal the need of integrating power relations into the analysis of social constructionism as a way of overcoming some of its limits. Broader critiques of social constructionism similarly relate to its lack of empirical references and that it denies the existence of objective reality (Ramaioli and MacNamee 2021).

The critiques outlined by researchers foster a reevaluation of social constructionism, and have prompted researchers to more closely question the role that empirical data and power structures have when engaging with this approach.[17] This thesis finds itself well within the confines of a social constructionist approach, and employs empirical evidence from interviews, as well as the epistemological offerings and critiques against Berger and Luckmann's theory as a way to overcome some of these challenges.

[16] Building on these broader theoretical interventions, other authors have exemplified more specific dynamics in which religion has been reconfigured in the modern world (see: Bellah (1985), for an example situated in American social life). Beyer (2000, 2006) has studied the influence of globalization in religion, studying how religious ideas are transmitted, transformed and adapted in a world with ever changing boundaries. Much like Beckford (2003), Beyer's research aims to demonstrate that globalization has profound social and religious dimensions that affect the way in which our world is actively socially constructed.

[17] See, for example: Fraser and Turcan (2025).

Still, one could argue that nothing is static in the realm of social sciences, not even concepts or theories. As Bourdieu would come to realize in *The Weight of the world* (1999), concepts and sociological analyses are "snapshots" of their time. The critiques put forward by researchers (Altglas and Wood 2018; Williams 2016; Neitz 2004; Meyer 2022; Hjelm 2019;) are largely a realization of the inability that certain "snapshots" have about accurately representing the current social world. Nonetheless, I argue that the continued (and renewed) interest in social constructionism approaches is a testament to the value of considering social reality as an ever shifting edifice, both produced by and producer of social relations.

1.2 Defining nonreligion

The sociological study of nonreligion is still taking its first steps. Yet, the rapid increase in nonreligious populations in multiple countries has quickly forced social researchers to become aware of the paradigm shift that it represents.[18] Most recently, the 2023 Furfey lecturer at the *Association for Sociology of Religion*, Penny Edgell, said: "It is time for a new framework that accounts for religion and spirituality and nonreligion as phenomena that make sense only in relation to one another, and to examine how all three shape the way people imagine—and fight for—the society they want to live in." (2024: 395). Bourdieu has famously said that "the function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal that which is hidden" (2011: 17). Thus, the challenge of revealing and defining nonreligion has taken center stage since social sciences acknowledged its ever-increasing presence in our contemporary world.

The task of distinguishing what was "other" to religion can be traced back to the 1970s,[19] though it is only in the past two decades that genuine interest emerged in academia (Smith and Cragun, 2019).[20] Until recently, the majority of the literature available encompassed nonreligion with the

[18] In 1971, 88% of Canadians identified as Christian, while only 4% reported no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2013). By 2011, 24% of Canadians reported having no religious affiliation. Furthermore, regular attendance to church in Canada dropped from 55% in the 1960s (Brown 2012) to just 23% between 2017 and 2019 (Cornelissen 2021).

[19] See, for example, Demerath (1969) and Campbell (1971), who were among the first to point out that the sociology of religion was overly preoccupied with religion itself and often neglected the equally complex social phenomenon of alternative beliefs and nonbelief.

[20] This is not to suggest that nonreligious people did not exist prior to the emergence of academic interest in the field. Rather, it may be more accurate to say that they were erased or left unaccounted for in the social sciences and religious studies. Zuckerman et al. (2016) have pointed out that "there have always been nonreligious men and women. There exists evidence of skepticism, naturalism, secularism, and anticlericalism from thousands of years ago in ancient India, China, Rome, and Greece. And there were

study of Atheism and Agnosticism (Lee 2015; Cragun 2016; Brown 2017). Nonreligion was considered more of a "catch-all" category, employed as a concept that broadly defined individuals who did not hold a supernatural belief or adhere to an institutionalized religion (Frost and Edgell 2017; Woodhead 2017). It was considered a "negative" category, defined by what it wasn't rather than what it was. Certain terms, such as irreligion, freethinking, atheism and secularism, were interchangeably used alongside nonreligion (Zuckerman 2008; Zuckerman et al. 2016). As Lee (2015) would later point out, these approaches painted nonreligion as a residual category "devoid of anything meaningful or substantial" (61).

Researchers have now taken on the task of conceptually clarifying the nonreligious as a distinct group with distinct characteristics. Quack (2014) and Lee (2015), for example, have offered distinct approaches on how understanding the nonreligious phenomenon. At the heart of their arguments stands the notion that nonreligion must have an explicit relation to religion.

Quack (2014) considers nonreligion more than just the absence of religion; instead he conceives it as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by social practices, historical contexts and power structures. He argues for a relational approach, considering nonreligion as contingent on various contexts and shaped by multiple social forces. Lee (2015) recognizes the need for a nuanced understanding of the nonreligious and argues that their identities and practices are marginalized in discussions of secularism and religion. She develops the concept of the *substantial secular* as a way of challenging the notion that secularism is viewed as more than just the mere absence of religion. She notes that nonreligion is a positive and substantial category that shapes identities and practices.

The conceptual dichotomy between religion and nonreligion has been studied by authors such as Cragun (2016). Similar to Quack (2014) and Lee (2015), he emphasizes that secular ideologies such as atheism, humanism, and freethought are not simply "other" to religion, but are rich belief systems in their own right, each with historical, philosophical, and cultural implications.[21] Beaman

clearly doubters and nonbelievers in medieval Europe as well, even when the power of the Catholic Church was at its apex… irreligion and secularity have been sorely neglected by the social sciences for some time" (6).

[21] Ammerman (2013) notably expands on the binary between religion and its absence by arguing that the intermediary space is populated by intersubjective formations of complex meanings that warrant attention in their own right. She approaches the notion of spirituality and argues that it is not a diffuse individualized

(2017) also argues against the oversimplification of nonreligion as merely an absence of religion. She frames nonreligion as a distinctive, deeply held worldview that influences ethics, social responsibility, and human relationships. Her research suggests that the increasing prominence of nonreligion is not a crisis of religion, but an opportunity for rethinking the ways in which societies are organizing around other values, ethics and practices outside of religion.

Other researchers have similarly shown that moral meaning and ethical dimensions persist beyond explicitly religious frameworks. For example, Montero et al. (2022), examined debates over same-sex marriage and law in Brazil and found that the decline of religious sacramental authority did not translate into a disappearance of the sacred or moral meaning in public discourse. Instead, it elevated "secular" legal arguments to a quasi-sacred level. Likewise, Vaggione et al. (2025), through an extensive analysis of debates surrounding marriage as a legal institution across six countries, show that the decentering of Christianity and the resulting diversification of moral and religious positions have enabled the emergence of new imaginaries through which moral claims are articulated in both religious and nonreligious ways. Beaman et al. (2025a) examined community gardens as sites where social life is organized beyond the binary of religion and nonreligion. Their findings across six countries suggest that practices often associated with religion (such as ethics, community formation, relationships, and ritualized practices) also emerge in explicitly nonreligious contexts. The authors argue, "in order to get beyond the binary of religion/nonreligion we need to think and write about the substantive or positive content of nonreligion… ethics, community, relationships, and rituals… have too often been conceptualized as the sole province of religion, [but] are also to be found in other contexts, outside religion, such as in community gardens" (Beaman et al. 2025a: 14).

Another central argument within the field has also been reaffirming that religion (and nonreligion) are an integral part of society, not a separate phenomenon that must be studied via specific methods and theories. Beckford (2003) defined the role of a social scientist as exploring how the boundaries between religion and nonreligion are "staked out, defended, deployed, attacked, smudged, re-defined or even dissolved. It is a boundary zone that is heavily, perhaps essentially, contested" (2003: 4).

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phenomenon or an alternative to religion. Instead, she notes that the relationship between spirituality and religion is a far more complex social phenomenon, with many individuals embodying elements of both.

Cragun and Smith (2019) explored the methodological challenges in carrying out the task of studying religion and looking at the various ways in which it relates to nonreligion. The recognition of religion as a constructive social force, alongside the growth of nonreligion as a field of study, has also emphasized the dynamic and constructive role that nonreligious identities play in shaping the social world. Certain lines of research that have historically been associated predominantly with studying the religious phenomenon (attitudes, ethics, social norms) are now being understood under the realization that these are not proprietary to religion.

The authors mentioned here have shown that nonreligion is a constructive social force. Nonreligious people did not come out of nowhere, nor do they only exist as a void that ought to be filled with methods and approaches that look to find the religion within nonreligion. Finding the "positive" substance of nonreligion is now the task at hand, and its content can, perhaps, be mapped out according to boundaries i.e. the spaces where nonreligion is deployed, redefined and considered, among others. Thus, researchers in nonreligion are not necessarily worried about finding a universal definition of nonreligion, but are much more interested in finding the ways in which nonreligion is being articulated and deployed. An overarching definition may just develop a conceptual edifice that marks unintended boundaries and establishes an unnecessary "binary" between religion and nonreligion.

1.3 But who is nonreligious?

Nonreligion is not only a conceptual category. It is embodied by individuals, ideas and worldviews.[22] The people who identify as nonreligious, as well as their beliefs and practices, are as varied as the definitions used to describe nonreligion itself. The category itself is "broad and inclusive of a diverse, even divergent, array of individuals with respect to beliefs and behaviors" (Smith and Cragun 2019: 322). When it comes to Canada, the unaffiliated population is "just as diverse as the religiously affiliated one" (Wilkins-Laflamme 2021: 155). People of all ethnic backgrounds are increasingly identifying as nonreligious (Wilkins-Laflamme 2021; Statistics

[22] A more accurate term may come in the form of "lifestances". Beaman et al. (2025a) have addressed the advantages this term may have over "worldview" moving forward. They argue that lifestances represent a "new framework for thinking about who and what people are, what they do, what they believe, what they value, how they interact with others, and how they reflect upon and enact morality (37). The authors define lifestances as "the beliefs, behaviours, and relationships related to one's conception of life and existence" (38).

Canada 2023), and the diversity in their beliefs, practices and moral stances (see: Beyer 2015, 2019) are reflective of the diversity that exists within the population group.

Nevertheless, up until recently the nonreligious were considered a somewhat recognizable group. In the U.S. and Canada alone, males represented 54% and 57% of the nonreligious population respectively (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020). They were also less likely to be married, less likely to have children and more highly educated. Furthermore, they were also less likely to be foreign-born. In many ways, these demographic characteristics suggest that nonreligious identity has an indirect relationship to privilege.[23]

Smith and Cragun (2019) show that the nonreligious population in the United States has shed some of those previous characteristics. As the nonreligious begin to represent an increasing share of the population, they have become "less distinct from the rest of the population" (Smith and Cragun, 2019: 323). Canada is not much different. Wilkins-Laflamme (2022a), for example, has pointed out that the nonreligious are not necessarily a homogenous group. Her research alongside Joel Thiessen shows that the difference in terms of education and social context is not that different from that of the religious population. They argue: "almost as many religious nones are university educated, live in rural settings, or are visible minorities as those who affiliate with religion" (2020: 17).

The rapid increase in the nonreligious population in Canada has been consistent since the 1960s (Statistics Canada 2015). For over half a century, the nonreligious population has continued to increase. In census data from 1961, the nonreligious population in Canada represented roughly 0.5% of the population. By 1971, that percentage increased to 4.3% (Statistics Canada 2015). Fast forward to 2001, the percentage increased to 16.5%. By 2021, 34.6% of Canadians identified as nonreligious (Statistics Canada 2022b). The World Values Survey (Wave 7 2017-2022) also found that over half of the population in Canada do not consider themselves religious (44.5% nonreligious, 19.4% atheist). In that same survey, to the question of "How important is religion in your life?" 15.5% of Canadians answered "very important", 19.8% answered "rather important" 28.8% answered "not very important and 35.9% answered "not at all important". Most recently, a

[23] See, for example, Penny et al. (2017). Their study analyses the relationship between gender and nonreligion. They point out that factors such as social location, power and privilege influence women's nonreligious choices.

2025 report by the Pew Research Center on global religious change between 2010 and 2020 shows a significant shift in Canada: the proportion identifying as religiously unaffiliated rose from about 23.8% to 34.6%, while the share identifying as Christian declined by around 14 percentage points (Hackett et al. 2025). Contrary to what some researchers may have suggested in the past, religion is not coming back to the lives of Canadians (Clarke and Macdonald 2017). This shift is more than noticeable; it represents a structural change in the social fabric of Canada.

Researchers are also realizing that the nonreligious identity is more than a binary category. Within the self-identification of "nonreligious" comes a great deal of nuance. Beaman et al. (2025b) in their study of community gardens, found that "though participants sometimes utilize religious or spiritual language, they are frequently using this language to point to something that lies outside of, or beyond, the religion/nonreligion binary" (154). Beyer (2015) explored the possibility of having the nonreligious identity exist within a spectrum, exemplified and distinguished by several societal factors, but also a sense of meaning, purpose and connection to something larger than the self. These authors' conclusions are echoed by several other researchers that point out that the nonreligious individuals' beliefs are, at the very least, diverse (Cotter et al. 2013; Cragun 2016; Bramadat et al. 2022).

Diversity among those who identify as nonreligious extends beyond the categories researchers have previously used to classify religious identities. Researchers like Remmel and Uibu (2015), for example, explored the nonreligious identities in Estonia —the so-called "most atheist country" in the world. They found something similar to Beyer: the nonreligious population in Estonia expressed a nonreligious identity within a continuum or a spectrum. They often held beliefs that could be considered "religious", such as beliefs in an afterlife or an all-powerful God.[24] Joel Thiessen (2015) has also argued that the nonreligious are not a homogenous group. He says: "Some believe in God, in miracles, or in the afterlife, and they attend religious services, pray, or believe that religion is important" (95).

[24] The notion of identity transformation also surfaces in the research of Brown (2017), who links the rise of atheism in the west to a broader process of secularization. Similarly, Silver et al. (2014) argue that nonbelief is not a monolithic category but instead encompasses a range of individual experiences and worldviews. Their study outlined six specific types of nonbelief: Academic Atheists, Activist Atheist/Agnostics, Seeker Agnostics, Antitheists, Non-Theists, and the Ritual Atheists. Each type reflects different attitudes towards religion and spirituality, ranging from strong rejection of religious beliefs to a more agnostic or spiritual stance that does not align with traditional religious doctrines.

While beliefs and practices can be considered religious or spiritual in nature, a nuanced perspective in the study of nonreligion has to recognize that nonreligious beliefs do not have to be exclusively free of religion and spirituality (Manning 2015). Selecting "nonreligion" in surveys is often less an indication of the absence of belief than of identities formed outside established religious frameworks.[25] Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme's research, for example, revealed that many nonreligious individuals still consider religion to be important in their lives. In Canada and the United States, a almost a third of nonreligious individuals still consider religion to have a place in their lives (2020: 65).

It is clear that nonreligious beliefs exist within a spectrum and carry a wide variety of deeply meaningful practices, beliefs, and understandings of the world.[26] Furthermore, the absence of religion does not mean individuals lack meaning or value structures (Beyer 2015; Lee 2015; Quack 2020). On the contrary, as pointed out by Brown (2017), they carry their own moral outlook that is distinct from religious narratives. The nonreligious develop their own set of beliefs, practices, and moral stances.

Answering the question of "who is nonreligious?" prompts a reevaluation of the imagined dichotomy between religious and nonreligious perspectives. Some nonreligious may identify as atheists, agnostics or humanists. Others may instead choose to reject these and adopt the term "nonreligious" as a way to mark a distance from religion. They nevertheless "experience wonder, awe, and enchantment in nature, are committed to ethical forms of relating, articulate worldviews and self-understandings, engage in regular practices, and are entangled in communities – both with humans and other-than-humans" (Beaman et al. 2025b: 155).

Nonetheless, more research is needed to capture the complexity behind the growing nonreligious phenomenon globally. Dedicated sub-fields of study around nonreligion and the nonreligious population are taking form, with several international and nationwide projects and networks actively carrying out research on how nonreligious individuals experience the world and come to

[25] Beyer et al.'s study, alongside the NRNSS (2019), revealed the practical importance of researching nonreligious beliefs and practices, as well as the value that a nuanced perspective can bring to the field. Their research measured religiosity by focusing on what it means when individuals select the category of "nonreligion." Beyer and Ramji (2013) similarly found that "people who did not grow up in a religious household in which parents deemed it important that their children carry on the traditions were very unlikely to be religious adults" (15).
[26] See, Beaman et al. (2025a).

form their beliefs.[27] This research is but one small piece within the broader academic effort to expand the nonreligious category. The consolidation of the sub-field may just be a matter of time, yet in order to become a research area that stands the test of time, researchers ought to continue developing their understanding of nonreligious individuals, what they care about, and how they present themselves in the world.

Recent research has shown us that the nonreligious individuals constitute a complex and deeply heterogeneous group. They have different ethnicities, levels of education and backgrounds that further enrich the study of nonreligion.[28] Some of them continue to believe in God, spirits or an afterlife.[29] The fact that the population of nonreligious people continues to grow also means that intellectual challenges for researchers will continue to appear. It also means, however, that it is likely that academic interest is just beginning to grow, and that the field will continue to expand as the nonreligious population takes on a more significant place within the social and (non)religious landscape of the world.

1.4 Death and afterlife

At the heart of previous studies on death, afterlife and religion has traditionally stood one clear idea: institutionalized religion provides ontological certainty. In simple terms, having a religion makes us feel safer when confronted with questions about the meaning of death and what lies beyond. This notion, though not exclusive to Berger and Luckmann, can, perhaps, most clearly be seen through their words. In *Social Construction of Reality* (1991), they stated that death is the ultimate marginal situation for an individual, thus it also

[27] See, for example, the Nonreligion for a Complex Future Project (www.nonreligionproject.ca), the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (www.thensrn.org) and the Society for Historians of Atheism, Secularism, and Humanism (www.atheismsecularismhumanism.wordpress.com).

[28] Furthermore, the most Recent World-Values survey (Wave 7 2017-2022) has showed that the rising phenomenon of nonreligion is not exclusive to the United States and Canada. In Brazil, for example, 22.5% of the people answered “no” to the question of: “Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are a religious person?” 20.5% of Argentinians also answered “no” to this question. Some African countries like Morocco also had 35.8% of the people answer “no” to the question. 57.3% of the people in Vietnam also answered “no”.

[29] Of particular interest to my research is the fact that even though according to the World Values Survey (Wave 7 2017-2022) over half of the population in Canada do not consider themselves religious (44.5% nonreligious, 19.4% atheist), 58. 5% of Canadians still answered “yes” to believing in God and 56.9% answered “yes” to believing in an afterlife.

> *posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life. The integration of death within the paramount reality of social existence is, therefore, of the greatest importance for any institutional order (118-119).*

Berger (1967) defined religion as: "the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos" (47). For Berger, religion's main "appeal" lies in its ability to defend against marginal situations (or forces of chaos) that can threaten the institutional order. Religion provides stability, it gives institutional order, legitimizes it, and, most importantly, allows for a meaningful existence that provides clear answers to the uncertainties that death, dying and mortality carry at their core.

Beyond Berger and Luckmann, several researchers believe that religion has always played an important role in how people imagine and respond to death and afterlife (Davies 2005; Garces-Foley 2015; Cann 2023). The religious institutions have always played a major role in mortuary rituals and activities (Davies 2017) and throughout history, a vast majority of people have informed their understandings of mortality, death, dying and afterlife through religious narratives (Leong 2022).

It is indisputable that religion and death are entangled. One influential explanation for this relationship is Terror Management Theory (TMT). The argument behind this optic is centered on people's need to ameliorate confronting mortality through two main avenues: belief in literal immortality or "symbolic immortality"—i.e. living virtuously in the hopes of being remembered (Ai et al. 2014; Pyszczynski et al. 2015; Solomon et al. 2015). TMT's main argument is, much like Berger (1967) suggested, that religion aids in the process of confronting mortality. It ameliorates fears, anxieties and offers a clear symbolic edifice settled under a clear and structure promise of a literal afterlife. According to Terror Management Theory, the realization of mortality is a destabilizing force on its own, and needs to be explained and internalized through specific means (Pyszczynski et al. 2015).[30]

[30] A similar argument was first developed in Ernest Becker's (1973) influential work on the denial of death. Becker examined how humans construct symbolic systems of meaning to manage their awareness of mortality. His work remains foundational to broader studies of death and mortality, and anticipated the central premise of Terror Management Theory: that awareness of mortality is psychologically and socially destabilizing, thus requiring symbolic means of management.

This theoretical approach comes with its own set of limitations. As Christel Manning (2023) notes, studies of death and the afterlife have often been framed through an arbitrary dichotomy between "religion as normative belief" and "atheists' denial of that norm" (3). She further argues that this approach conceptualizes nonreligion as a negative category, thereby diminishing the value and depth of nonreligious perspectives.

Still, perhaps the most significant critique of this theory concerns the way in which religion is conceptualized. Definitions are often framed in an outdated manner that reduces religion to institutionalized forms of Christianity. As Miller and Beaman argue, "such classifications fail to account for how many religious individuals understand the world" (Miller and Beaman 2024: 4). In addition, Miller and Beaman note that nonreligious worldviews are frequently misrepresented or overlooked in these discussions. Scholars sometimes assume that the absence of belief in a transcendent afterlife necessarily implies the pursuit of nonreligious substitutes.[31] Connolly (2011) also suggests that some authors assume that because nonreligious individuals do not believe in "a heavenly paradise waiting after death", they must therefore seek to construct "a paradise on earth" (Connolly 2011: 129). Approaches based on Terror Management Theory portray the nonreligious as people with an ontological void that needs filling, and may ignore research that has realized nonreligious individuals develop deep and meaningful beliefs and practices outside of religious frameworks.

Scholars have also frequently distinguished between immanent and transcendent understandings of reality. In sociological discussions, immanence refers to meanings grounded within the natural or worldly order, whereas transcendence refers to realities understood to exist beyond the material world or ordinary human experience (Taylor 2007; Bellah 2011). Up until recently, research thought that classical religious traditions emphasize "transcendent" realms (such as heaven, rebirth, or spiritual continuation), and "secular" perspectives offered a "disenchanted" immanent version of our world.

Bentley (2023), for example, argues that religion and spirituality can promote well-being because they help people balance everyday life with beliefs about realities beyond the material world. He notes that "Religion/spirituality can therefore be the facilitators of holding in tension on the one

[31] See, for example, Cicirelli (2011).

hand, addressing material needs (immanence) and, on the other, the ideals of transcendence, by 'grounding' adherents through religious/spiritual practices that allow for perspective gaining" (7). Happiness is not found in transcendent or immanent aspects of reality, instead it "becomes manifest when these are held in tension in experiential reality" (7). Charles Taylor (2007) famously argued that individuals increasingly inhabit what he calls an "immanent frame," a social imaginary in which meaning is primarily understood within naturalistic and worldly terms. Yet even within this framework, recent studies challenge a strict opposition between transcendent and immanent orientations toward the afterlife. Instead of locating meaning exclusively in either domain, these studies show how individuals construct meaningful frameworks within the "immanent" conditions of human and natural life without positioning these *against* transcendent perspectives.[32]

Of particular interest to this research is Beaman's *Reclaiming Enchantment* (2021), where she directly challenges Taylor's notion of immanence. She notes: "Enchantment is not owned by religion. Wonder and delight belong to everyone, including to non-human animals… the focus here is on human capacity for enchantment as both immanent and transcendent" (9). Her insights find a particular resonance with much of the findings that have emerged in the studies surrounding nonreligion, death and afterlife. Beaman explores how the nonreligious and their perspectives offer a unique way of reengaging with the world through the notion of immanence. Nonreligious individuals experience deeply meaningful connections to this world through the realization that things end; a sense of wonder, awe, or experiential depth through immanence is not only possible, but is an active part of nonreligious lifestances.

Beaman's findings are supported by other studies in afterlife and nonreligion. McMurray and Fazzino (2017) conducted an empirical study on nonreligious understandings and coping strategies with which nonreligious people are able to confront death. They found that nonreligious respondents "typically described death as the end of individual existence" (286). They also noticed the inadequacy of theistic death discourses, as well as the emergence of death discourses accepting it as a final end, but also as a meaningful experience on its own. The notion of "symbolic

[32] See, for example, Cave (2015) and his study on death as annihilation. Copeman and Quack (2015) have studied atheist body donation practices in India. Also refer to: Engelke (2015) for a review of the nonreligious funerals currently taking place in England. Taves et al. (2018) explored meaning making narratives beyond religion, including life after death and end-of-life scenarios. Vail et al. (2020) studied natural immortality and its relation to reminders of death. They found that reminders of death tend to increase the need to defend an established worldview, be it religious or "naturalistic".

immortality", defined as "living on through the legacy one has created in life", was very common across their data, and was overall considered a deeply meaningful part of the journey between life and death (290).

The notion of "legacy", as shown by McMurray and Fazzino (2017), is a core part of the elements that make up the concept of "symbolic immortality".[33] There are, however, studies that have shown nonreligious afterlife beliefs extend well beyond it. Manning (2018) acknowledged the weight the idea of "staying alive through the memories of others" has on nonreligious people. In *Meaning Making Narratives among Non-Religious Individuals Facing the End of Life* (2018), Manning also found that rather than seeking solace in religious doctrines or afterlife concepts that non-religious individuals often turn to alternative sources of meaning, such as humanistic ideals, philosophical reflections, and social connections, to make sense of their lives and the inevitable reality of death.

More recently, in *Facing death without religion* (2023), Manning explored how non-religious elders conceptualize death and the afterlife, and how these beliefs and perceptions influence their lives, decisions, and coping strategies as they approach the end of life. She identified three specific ways in which participants imagine death: lights out, recycling and mystery. Lights out is described as "death as a final end" (5); Recycling considered mortality as "a reminder of our kinship to other life forms and that all life is transient and interdependent" (6); and Mystery described responses that "articulated death as unknowable" (8).

Similar to Manning's research, Miller and Beaman's article on Death Cafes (2024) also categorized emerging perspectives on death and afterlife while studying the nonreligious. Their study developed four broad categories based on their participant responses: cessation, energy, unknown and transition. The first category, cessation, is understood as the end of human experience and consciousness. The second one, energy, posited that human matter or consciousness has resonant effects after death. The third category, the unknown, referred to the fact that we cannot know what the afterlife is like or whether there is one. Finally, the fourth category, transition, asserted that human consciousness carries on after death.

[33] On this topic, Manning (2023) notes that establishing a legacy can help diminish concerns and anxiety surrounding death. Much like McMurray and Fazzino (2017), she found that death is not necessarily the end if you are remembered by your loved ones.

Haimila and Muraja's (2023) research on Finns' views on "afterdeath" is another study that links nonreligion to emerging perspectives on afterlife. The authors explored how science-oriented individuals described what happens to humans after death and whether identification with science entailed views on "secular death", meaning an individual is annihilated as the bodily functions cease. Their results revealed that science-oriented Finns mainly believed that consciousness disappears as bodily functions end. However, there was also a sense of continuity which, though mainly naturalistic, suggested that nonreligious conceptions on "afterdeath" may contain a sense of continuity founded in social bonds and nature.

Emerging nonreligious perspectives on afterlife do not lack meaningful content. The underlying goal of Beaman's arguments is to show that there is enchantment in a finite world,[34] that individuals can become enamored with, admire, and profoundly value their surroundings and relationships outside of religion. Profound and meaningful belief systems and moral stances can emerge from an immanent world; they transcend in that they orient individuals toward meanings, values, and relationships that extend beyond the self while remaining grounded in everyday experience. Within this renewed relationship to the world, beliefs such as "souls" and "God" can still develop and coexist outside traditional religious frameworks. Gaudette et al. (2025a; 2025b), for example, conducted studies that show how the concept of "soul" is reappropriated by nonreligious individuals, and that people can believe in their own version of a soul while not adhering to a religious institution. A recent study from Pew Research Center found that "[a]round the world, many people who do not identify with any religion nevertheless hold a variety of spiritual and religious beliefs, including the belief that there is life after death…" (Evans et al. 2025, NA). In Canada alone, 53% of the religiously unaffiliated adults surveyed still believe "there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it". Out of that same sample of respondents, 25% stated that "they believe in God", and 54% believe "animals can have spirits or spiritual energy". Much like Beaman et al. (2025b) suggested, to understand these phenomenon researchers need to move past beyond the binary of religion/nonreligion.

Meaning, moral orientation, and even spiritual language can emerge within an immanent frame, blurring the traditional distinction between religious transcendence and "secular" worldviews. Whether it's through cessation, energy, unknown, or transition as defined by Miller and Beaman

[34] See also Josephson-Storm (2017).

(2024), Manning's (2023) lights out, recycling and mystery, or the naturalistic yet social envisioning of "afterdeath" proposed by Haimila and Muraja (2023), researchers continue to find depth and uniqueness to nonreligious conceptions of death and afterlife. It is clear that facing death without religion does not mean facing death with an existential void. The same can be said about afterlife beliefs developed outside of religious frameworks. These beliefs are practiced and embodied, and are increasingly gaining traction. The so called "fear of death" that was only resolved through religious lenses is now a categorically outdated approach to the study of afterlife beliefs and death. The fact that nonreligious individuals face death without religion and are able to find meaning suggests that a nonreligious framework may be more than an emerging topic of interest in academia. It is now an active part of our current social reality.

It seems as though nonreligious meaning-making around death, dying and the afterlife is not only conceptually viable, but socially situated. Thus, specific demographical cohorts may play an important role in shaping researchers' understandings of how nonreligious outlooks of death and afterlife are articulated and sustained. And millennials are a key demographical cohort for understanding these emerging frameworks as they hold a unique position within the current Canadian (non)religious landscape.

1.5 Millennials

The millennials stand in a unique place within the rapid increase of the nonreligious population. They are not just another demographic cohort in this shift but are uniquely positioned to shape what comes next in the Canadian social fabric. As a demographic group, they make up the largest segment of the economically active population, while also representing a significant share of those identifying as nonreligious. Raised between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, millennials grew up during a moment of rapid cultural and technological change: they witnessed the expansion of the internet, the early days of social media (Myspace, Facebook), and an increasingly globalized cultural environment. They are the first generation to fully come of age alongside the time when digital life expanded considerably. They witnessed the death of Blockbuster and the rise of Netflix and Spotify. The first iPhone came about at the perfect time: just when the millennials where transitioning into their teenage years.

Their formative years were also marked by cultural references like *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of The Rings*; fictional worlds that brought fantasy into the mainstream in a way that made questions

of good and evil, destiny, and moral choice part of everyday cultural consumption. They were also influenced by the rise of Pop Punk and the Alternative music scene: Themes of frustration, disillusionment, irony, and resistance to authority were central in these genres, often paired with an emphasis on authenticity and emotional expression. This cultural environment provided millennials with a language through which to question inherited norms, be it political, social, or religious. The tone was not necessarily one of outright rejection, but of distancing and reinterpretation; it was about questioning and reframing "objective" social reality.

Empirically, their structural weight is clear. Pew Research Center (2016) found that millennials became the largest labor force cohort in the United States, and by 2017 they already made up 35% of the workforce (56 million), surpassing both Generation X and Baby Boomers. At a global level, the World Economic Forum (2021) estimates that millennials represent the largest adult cohort, accounting for about 23% of the world's population. In Canada, Statistics Canada (2021) reports that millennials comprise 33.2% of the working-age population, exceeding both Gen X (29.5%) and Boomers (19.7%), while the Human Resources Professionals Association (2016) highlights that they are now the largest cohort in the workplace and are steadily moving into leadership positions. At the same time, as Kurz et al. (2018) show, this prominence comes with important constraints: although millennials are, on average, more educated than previous generations, they tend to have lower earnings, less property ownership, and less accumulated wealth. Millennials live alongside an undeniable ongoing tension between demographic centrality and economic limitation. They are the main economic motor behind most of the countries in the world, yet they face structural constraints that have limited their ability to translate this centrality into long-term stability.

The millennials have attracted academic attention for a few years now. Studies covering many aspects of their education, work patterns, consumption habits, and cultural preferences have produced rich insights,[35] yet there is still much ground left uncovered, particularly when it comes to their intersections with religion, death, and afterlife. Recent studies have focused on mapping

[35] See, for example Berger (2018) for a study on millennials and their impact on American culture and society. See Dalessandro (2021) for a study on millennial romantic and sexual practices. See Garikapati et al. (2016) for a longitudinal analysis on activity patterns, time use and travel of millennials. Also see Wilkins-Laflamme and Thiessen (2020) for a study on organized and digital nonbelief activities amongst millennials.

out how millennials navigate their identities and beliefs. Some of them have placed a particular emphasis on the various social, cultural, and personal factors that inform their outlooks on life and death. Wilkins-Laflamme (2022b), for example, explored the evolving relationship between millennials and their beliefs. Her research analyzed how millennials shape the religious and spiritual landscapes in Canada and the United States, with a special emphasis on the significant shift away from traditional religious affiliations and practices. Her study found that millennials frequently merge secular and spiritual practices while distancing themselves from organized religion. She also found that "[m]illennials are the first generations where Christian affiliation has fallen bellow 50% of the general population" (2022b: 38). More specifically, 42.9% of millennials in Canada, according to the Global Social Survey 2018, stated they had no religion (39).

Wilkins-Laflamme also looked at the Millennial Trend Survey (2019), and found that some non-religious millennials both in Canada and the U.S.A. do think of the afterlife:

> *Levels of belief in life after death in the United States are quite similar among Millennials compared with those among older adults. Rates of belief in the supernatural power of one's deceased ancestors, a belief found in many Asian and Indigenous spiritual traditions as well as in many pop culture references (including ghosts), are substantially higher among the more racially, ethnically and religiously diverse Millennials (reaching 47%) than among older generations. (Wilkins-Laflamme 2022b: 49)*

Researchers have found that millennials do not simply reject religion; they reinterpret it, sometimes combining inherited religious traditions with personal meaning-making. Wilkins-Laflamme (2022), drawing on the Millennial Trends Survey (2019), highlighted that "secularization" processes and individualized "spirituality" are not opposing phenomena but complementary expressions of how young Canadians navigate belief. In other words, while many millennials may maintain nominal religious affiliations, their practices and self-understandings often differ from institutional expectations. Bibby, Thiessen and Bailey (2019) also found that 7 in 10 millennials in Canada reported an affiliation with a religious group, yet only 3 in 10 attended religious services at least once per month. Moreover, 37% described themselves as "spiritual but not religious," with 30% identifying as "neither religious nor spiritual" (Bibby et al., 2019; Schuurman, 2021). Overall, 67% of respondents did not explicitly identify as religious, yet they identified as such in a cultural sense. Being "culturally" religious while personally disengaged

seems to be a pattern of how millennials approach belief. They tend to emphasize autonomy, flexibility, and individual interpretation over strict adherence.[36]

Still, the trend towards individual interpretation over institutional adherence does not mean that millennials do not believe in the "supernatural". Herbert and Bullock (2020), for example, conducted a study with 67 nonreligious millennials across several European nations. They examined supernatural beliefs and what they considered a "sense of immanent connections to others" (163). A notable minority of millennials engage with paranormal, magical, or supernatural beliefs, not as a rejection of rationality but as a way to affirm individual significance and maintain a sense of control in an uncertain world. Herbert and Bullock (2020) found that a substantial minority of their interviewees (34%) believed in the paranormal, superstitious, magical, and supernatural (PSMS) beliefs:

> *Rather than PSMS and connective nonreligious beliefs filling a gap between scientific knowability and individual knowledge, it seems to us rather that the work done by these beliefs is one of affirming individual significance and some sense of control in a world that is perceived not as comprehensively knowable but as deeply opaque and uncertain, despite the rationalisation of fragments of it (175).*

Millennials' approaches to existential questions, including death and the afterlife, are less about institutionalized religious certainty and more about negotiating personal meaning within broader cultural frameworks. Their beliefs reflect a hybrid, pluralistic sensibility, and often combine elements of religiosity, spirituality, and nonreligion in ways that challenge binary understandings of religion and nonreligion. It is no coincidence that intergenerational disaffiliation is the most common trend among millennials in Canada today (Wilkins-Laflamme 2020).

Millennials' shifting beliefs have an ongoing and potentially long-term effect on Canada's religious and cultural landscape. For example, Strhan and Shillitoe's (2019) study shows that children encounter, negotiate, and sometimes challenge religious or spiritual concepts in everyday home and school life (6), while nonreligious parents navigate their identities within a predominantly

[36] This trend is not specific to millennials, but this demographic cohort may be especially illustrative of it, as they often combine personal spiritual convictions with minimal participation in formal religious institutions. These patterns may reflect the broader shift that Davie (1994) describes as "believing without belonging."

religious culture. Although their study focused on children aged 7–11 and does not specify parent age, it is reasonable to assume that many of these parents belong to the millennial cohort, indicating that millennials' approaches to belief are already influencing how the next generation understands religion, spirituality, and meaning.

The patterns and changes signaled above are significant for several reasons. First, millennials represent the largest economically active and culturally influential generation in Canada, and as they continue to replace older cohorts in leadership roles, their attitudes will increasingly shape social norms, policy perspectives, and cultural narratives. Second, their approaches to death, legacy, and afterlife (often flexible, individualized, and hybridized) may signal a broader societal shift in how existential questions are approached. Unlike previous generations, millennials are navigating mortality in a context marked by pluralism, digital connectivity, and declining institutional authority. At the same time, they are producing frameworks of meaning that are simultaneously personal, socially informed, and culturally mediated. In this sense, they may best exemplify the evolving dynamics of religion and nonreligion in contemporary society: their beliefs and practices do not simply reflect change but actively constitute it.

Millennial beliefs and practices cannot be easily categorized within the analytical binary of religion/nonreligion. Much like Beyer (2015) and Wilkins-Laflamme (2022b) suggest, these religious expressions are not binary opposites but interwoven elements of a broader social fabric. Instead, millennials embody a transitional and generative moment in the social life of belief, where institutionalized religion, personal spirituality, and secular worldviews intersect. For scholars interested in mortality, afterlife, and the ethics of dying, millennials provide a critical lens: their unique perspectives may just reveal how contemporary western societies are reconfiguring and renegotiating the meaning of death, afterlife beliefs and spirituality in a pluralistic and rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Chapter 2: Theory and Method

This research is grounded in a sociological analysis of (non)religion. I draw primarily on social constructionism, with influences from Berger, Luckmann, and Bourdieu, as well as some theoretical elements taken from Beckford's approach to the study of (non)religion. These authors provide conceptual tools rather than a single epistemological framework. In other words, they inform and nurture my own interpretation of certain social phenomena in relation to millennial experiences of death and afterlife.

Following Bourdieu, I treat theory and method as interconnected (Calhoun, 2011): theory guides how we interpret social phenomena, while method guides how we investigate them. For this study, this means that my theoretical approach directly shapes how I analyze millennials' beliefs about death and afterlife. My approach mainly draws on Berger and Luckmann's (1991) dialectical understanding of social reality and Bourdieu's (1977, 2002) view that social actors are embedded in a social reality shaped by 'dispositions.' I see the individual as situated within broader social structures that both constrain and enable their beliefs, practices, and interpretations of the world. Building on this, to explore millennials' perspectives on death and afterlife, I focus on the intersections of religion and nonreligion (Beckford, 2003) and analyze how these perspectives contribute to the formation of emerging shared social frameworks.

The following chapter shows how my sociological analysis is particularly developed and deployed for this research. It follows the logic that theory and method are part of a same continuum. As has been signaled up until this point, this study focuses on a single demographic (millennials) and a specific domain: beliefs about death and the afterlife. To craft this research, I adopt an eclectic, social constructionist approach, drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives as tools to understand this particular aspect of social reality. While each theory has broader applications, here I use them to analyze how millennials navigate and develop (non)religious belief frameworks.

In this chapter, I outline my ontological and epistemological approach to religion as a social and cultural phenomenon, and summarize how social actors create meaning and knowledge. I then explain my methodological approach, including how I locate nonreligion (Beckford, 2003), apply the concept of habitus (Schäfer et al., 2019), and conduct thematic analysis. Finally, I describe my

research design and how these methods were applied in practice to explore millennial perspectives on death and afterlife.

2.1 Ontological and epistemological approach

My methodological approach is closely tied to how I understand the social world, and more specifically, society and religion. I understand religion through a relational approach, meaning that what counts as "religion" or "religious" is shaped by the social and historical boundaries of a particular time and context. As several theorists have pointed out, concepts and categories are historically and socially contingent (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991). Religion, in particular, has often been defined from a western, colonial perspective (Fitzgerald, 2000) and remains largely a scholarly category embedded within specific historical and academic contexts (Smith, 1982).

With that in mind, I have chosen a definition of religion that can be applied within this specific historical and social context. This definition aligns with western academic frameworks and reflects the social constructionist approach that underpins my epistemological perspective. It is not the only possible definition, nor do I claim it should dictate how religion is understood more broadly. However, it is a definition that works well from a dialectical perspective[37] precisely because it emphasizes the interplay between social actors and institutions in shaping our social reality. The definition I use comes from Berger's *Sacred Canopy* (1967).[38]

At its core, a dialectical perspective invites the theorist to think about the social world as a synthesis of opposing forces (Marx 1977). From that synthesis, our social world is built, with its own set of conditions and contradictions. Under Peter Berger's framework, society is a "dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer" (1967: 3). Society and institutions are built by and determined by human actions. In turn, humans and their actions are determined by society and institutions.

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[37] At its core, a dialectical perspective views the social world as the product of opposing forces (Marx, 1977). These tensions create a dynamic social reality, with its own conditions, structures, and contradictions, shaping how social actors experience and interpret the world. Karl Marx's dialectical materialism (1977) was developed in opposition to Hegel's dialectical idealism, and it has been the foundation of the dialectical perspective for some time. Though I will not be discussing Marx's theory here, it's important to mention his influence on other perspectives, including Berger, Luckmann's and my own.

[38] See page 31 for a definition of religion according to Peter Berger.

Religion is another human enterprise. The caveat here is that religion is a human enterprise by which a *sacred*[39] cosmos is established (26). In other words, it is a humanly determined social enterprise that has the particularity of establishing a sense of meaning beyond our material world. Its existence as a human enterprise or institution is socially and historically contingent, but it is also the process of a synthesis that comes from opposing forces[40]. Under Berger's framework these opposing forces are humans and society. Our social reality arises from the encounter between these two forces. Religion is a historically contingent and socially dependent human enterprise that emerges from these two opposing forces; it is a product of the establishment of our social reality in a specific moment in time.

Beyond religion being defined as a "human enterprise" that seeks to establish a "sacred cosmos", Berger also defines it as "the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant" (28). Religion's ultimate purpose, at least according to Berger, is to provide meaning and sense to the world. To explain why things are the way they are, all within a single all encompassing perspective that provides certainty against the unknown.[41] I agree with Berger's

[39] Much like Durkheim (2008), Berger established a distinction between the "sacred" and the "profane". He defined sacred as "a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience —by objects of experience he referred to natural or artificial objects, such as rocks, animals, figures, etc." (26). He further argued: "The sacred is apprehended as "sticking out" from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life. Although the sacred is apprehended as other than man, yet it refers to man, relating to him in a way in which other non-human phenomena (specifically, the phenomena of non-sacred nature) do not (27)." He defined the profane as "the absence of sacred status" (27). Furthermore, "[t]he routines of everyday life are profane unless, so to speak, proven otherwise, in which latter case they are conceived of as being infused in one way or another with sacred power… (27).

[40] Under Berger's framework, there's a distinction between a "human enterprise" and an "institution". This distinction is derived from the "institutionalization" process, which in turn possesses a series of sub-processes. The most notable of these is the "legitimation" process, which I will discuss later on in this chapter. For the purposes of this study, I treat religion as a "human enterprise". Specific religions that have gone through the institutionalization process, such as Christianity, can instead be considered "religious institutions".

[41] This definition only makes sense contextually. It is a western definition of religion, built for the west from the western thought. It may be argued, justifiably, that this is not religion's ultimate purpose. Critics of religion as a category would argue against this definition (see: King [2022] for a detailed volume on the varied critiques and definitions of religion around the world). As mentioned earlier, however, I intend to instrumentalize this definition; in other words, use it to develop my own categories and analysis later on. The vast majority of participants who had a religious background came from a Judeo-Christian religious tradition. It only makes sense that I used a definition of religion that corresponds to the context in which my research was developed.

definition yet argue against religion being the only possible and established way in which the entire universe can be significant to humans. My findings point to another direction. Still, the relationship between religion and meaning creation is undeniable.

My epistemological approach builds on the idea that meaning and knowledge, like society, are historically situated, socially produced, and constantly reinterpreted. They are not neutral or detached but emerge within the historical and social conditions of the world. I see knowledge and meaning making as emergent products of social processes rather than fixed entities. Accordingly, the frameworks and methods I adopt are informed by a dialectical social constructionist tradition that treats knowledge and meaning not as fixed, but as emergent through social processes.

Drawing from Berger and Luckmann's theory (1991), I rely on the concepts of externalization, objectivation and internalization as the main processes through which reality (and to that same extent, knowledge and meaning) is constructed. Put simply, society is world building (4) and the fundamental dialectic process that comes with its world building endeavor is threefold: externalization, objectivation, and internalization (5). Externalization can be broadly defined as the turning of humans towards the world; the moment in which human activity is produced and projected outward into reality. This is followed by objectivation, the moment when "the externalized products of human activity attain the character of objectivity" (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 44). In other words, the point at which these objects and products of human activity begin to appear as independent from it, as objects. Finally, internalization, which consists of the subjective reabsorption of that world as something external that seeks to be reappropriated through subjectivity.

Knowledge and meaning creation are also a social product derived from a dialectical process. As Berger argues, "the world of social objectivations, produced by externalizing consciousness, confronts consciousness as an external facticity" (Berger, 1967: 60). When humans, or, *social actors,* project their activity outward, they create a world that reflects their needs, values and aspirations. This is where meaning first is produced; symbols, practices, institutions and cultural[42] demonstrations are all imbedded with particular interpretations of reality.

[42] It's worth mentioning here how Berger understands culture: "Culture is objective in that it confronts man as an assemblage of objects in the real world existing outside his own consciousness. Culture is there. But culture is also objective in that it may be experienced and apprehended, as it were, in company. Culture is

Once knowledge becomes externalized (through discourse, institutions and practices), it is understood as something exterior to humans. It becomes a part of the reality that is "out there". This is where the process of objectivation takes form. Meaning-making and knowledge production grapple with the objective reality that has become part of that reality "out there". Internalization then occurs when these objectivated meanings are absorbed into subjective consciousness. Berger describes this as "the reabsorption into consciousness of the objectivated world in such a way that the structures of this world come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself" (1967: 61).

But knowledge and meaning creation are not a one-way street. This reabsorption is configured beyond a simple acceptance of what has been said about our world before. As a researcher, I am not outside this process; I participate in it. The categories I use, the concepts I apply, and even the questions I pose are conditioned by the historical and social contexts in which I am embedded. Thus, I reject the notion of the neutral observer and instead acknowledge the co-constitutive relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. Instead, I acknowledge my position as a scholar largely trained in the global south. My decision to engage with theories developed in the global north emerges from the object of study itself: participants grew up in the global north, and their conceptions of religion and nonreligion are largely situated within this context. My positionality therefore reflects the interaction between a scholar trained in the global south and theoretical frameworks developed in the global north, as I interpret and work with these theories from my own situated position. Thus, my methodological choices moving forward reflect an epistemology that is reflexive, relational and, above all, historically contingent. What is known, and how it is known, is a product of the interaction between social actors and institutions; more concretely in this case, between researcher and the subject matter at hand. Meaning creation works in a similar fashion. It is not something that is "out there", it is produced by and for social actors, and is historically contingent. My method in this thesis is therefore guided by an awareness that social reality (and the knowledge generated from it) is contingent, historically situated, and open to contestation. Any "objective" insights drawn from this research must be understood in this context: as products of social processes that show how certain members of a generation navigate fundamental questions of meaning, ethics, and social belonging. Ultimately, I argue that just as

there for everybody. This means that the objects of culture (again, both the material and non-material ones) may be shared with others" (1967:10).

society emerges from the ongoing interplay of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, so too do knowledge and meaning-making arise through social processes.

Undeniably, millennial beliefs about death and the afterlife are expressions embedded within broader social, historical, and cultural contexts. I argue that the examination of these perspectives allow researchers to see that social actors (millennials, in this case) engage deeply with questions of meaning, morality, and value, and in turn construct coherent frameworks for understanding existence and ethical life outside institutionalized religion. I will show in the coming pages that nonreligious millennials are not lacking of structure and don't aspire to "fill an existential void". Instead, their perspectives reflect deeply meaningful, considered, and socially situated ways of interpreting life and death. The dialectical social constructionist approach detailed above makes it possible to trace these processes, and reveals how meaning and knowledge emerge through the interactions between individuals and the social worlds they inhabit.

2.2 A Socially constructed reality: The socialization process, habitus and social agency

The previous sections of this chapter have set out the conceptual framework for this thesis. I have also described the various processes that contribute to the formation of the social reality in which the participants in this study live and operate. This section focuses on one particular process that helps explain how such reality is apprehended, negotiated, and ultimately made meaningful at the level of lived experience.

Earlier, I provided brief definitions of the processes of externalization, objectivation and internalization. The first two processes are foundational to the social construction of reality, but they are not the primary concern of this research. Rather, the focus is on internalization, specifically, the subprocess of socialization. Socialization refers to the processes through which individuals reabsorb the objective social world, appropriating socially objectivated knowledge and making it subjectively their own. Its success depends "upon the establishment of symmetry between the objective world of society and the subjective world of the individual" (Berger, 1967: 61). During this process, the social actor must apprehend and confront this objective reality with their subjective reality; insofar as there is congruence between these two dimensions, the socialization process can be considered successful (61).

The present study relies on in depth-interviews. Thus, I emphasize the processes of socialization as a key dimension that reveals how individuals come to incorporate socially produced meanings into their own subjective frameworks. Participants' perspectives provide access to processes of socialization, as they capture how participants articulate, negotiate, and make sense of the meanings they have internalized in relation to death, dying and the afterlife. I argue the data collected from these interview does not merely reflect pre-existing beliefs, but reveals the ongoing process through which socially objectivated knowledge is taken up, reworked, and embedded within individual subjectivities.

Loosely, one can think of the socialization processes as the moments where individuals are presented with ideas about the way in which the world works. During these processes, individuals internalize or reject those ideas and develop their ways of understanding the social world. However, these ideas are as historically and socially contingent as the social actors themselves. How, then, do we identify what ideas are being presented? How or why are ideas changing? Why or how a socialization is or isn't "successful" in a particular moment in time?

The participants in this study are functioning members of our society. Many of them were brought up in a religious environment. They stopped agreeing with their religious teachings at some point, or never really agreed in the first place. Some of them had transformative experiences, some of them where socialized into the church, some of them simply stopped going when they left their parent's home. Can we really say that all of this happened due to "unsuccessful socialization" processes? No.[43]

It could be argued that socialization processes have a deterministic nature; either they work or they don't. Berger and Luckmann would disagree with this purely based on the fact that the individual and social reality constantly reconfigure each other. Their understanding of socialization processes, however, largely remains in the realm of consciousness; they pay less attention to the ways in which we embody what we learn and the unconscious structuring of actions. Recent work on intergenerational transmission has instead shown that continuity and change in belief systems cannot be reduced to success or failure. What is transmitted across generations is often

[43] Christel Gärtner (2022), for example, demonstrates in her analysis of a three-generation family that absence of religion can itself be the outcome of effective socialization.

reinterpreted, transformed, or even replaced by alternative frameworks of meaning, depending on both familial dynamics and broader social contexts (Silverstein et al. 2024).

These reinterpretations and adaptations unfold in everyday life. Meaning and world-building frameworks are constantly internalized, embodied and enacted. To understand how participants enact these frameworks in everyday life, I engage with Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as an additional analytical lens in this study. The concept presents a developmental understanding of the crossings between the individual's thoughts, ideas and beliefs, alongside the influence that the personal social context carries on one's own lifestance. More importantly, habitus introduces an embodied and pre-reflexive dimension to the socialization process. In other words, habitus illustrates how participants' daily practices (often performed without conscious reflection) both reflect and shape the social worlds they inhabit.

Habitus can be broadly understood as a learned set of dispositions by which a person orients to the social world (Bourdieu 1977). Calhoun would define Bourdieu's habitus as an idea that: "refers to the way we intuitively, unconsciously position ourselves in the world and relate to the world. It is formed through a learning process by which experience comes to be embodied so that it shapes our action unconsciously (like having a sense of how close to stand to someone else when having a conversation, or knowing how to swim or speak)" (2011; 378). The "dispositions", then, refer to the deeply held habits, skills, ideas and ways of perceiving the world that are acquired through socialization. More importantly, these are not consciously learned rules; they are a product of our social context. They guide how we behave in the world, how we think and feel and what and how we can perceive what's out there. They are the lenses through which we perceive the social world. As I will show in later chapters, these dispositions take different forms among participants; skepticism towards supernatural claims, a larger focus on legacy, naturalization of death, prioritizing life meaning over afterlife idealizations, as well as immanent forms of afterlife beliefs.

Ultimately, I argue that the dispositions that form habitus amongst participants are not fixed.[44] These may be adjusted over time as participants encounter new social contexts and occupy

[44] Bourdieu emphasized the coherence of habitus across an individual's life. He argued that habitus was largely static and determined. Authors like Lahire (2003) have criticized this assumption, arguing that individuals carry multiple dispositions acquired throughout time, often in conflicting social contexts. See: Lahire and Fernbach (2011) for an extended treatment of this critique. Recent scholarship has extended and refined Bourdieu's concept of habitus to address criticisms of determinism and to account for social change.

different positions within fields. In what follows, I adopt a dialectical reading of this relationship, emphasizing not only how habitus is shaped by social conditions, but also how, through practice, individuals may participate in the ongoing reproduction (and at times modification) of those conditions. As I will show throughout participant interviews, their habitus is historically contingent. Their set of tools (or dispositions) changed or adjusted as they navigated various fields,[45] such as the religious or medical fields, within broader social contexts.

Bourdieu would argue that habitus and fields interact; habitus helps individuals navigate a field (the religious field, for example), but is itself shaped by past positions in fields. How successfully they navigate said field depends on their own *habitus*, but also their particular social and cultural capital.[46] While Bourdieu conceptualizes fields as relatively structured social arenas with their own logics, I argue that the empirical material analyzed here suggests that actors, through their practices and meaning-making, participate in the reproduction and, in some cases, gradual transformation of these fields. Everyday practices contribute to the ongoing shaping of social life.

Bourdieu would also be critical of a notion of agency that adheres to an idea of absolute freedom. Human agency is restricted to the field and forms of capital individuals have access to. Individuals' meaning-making ability as social agents is restricted by fields and their own habitus. While I remain consistent with this view, I adopt a more explicitly dialectical perspective, in which social agency is understood as both structured by social conditions and implicated in their ongoing reproduction. I intend to extend beyond Bourdieu's framework in this thesis, and instead will focus on the constant interplay between structure and practice.

Habitus also provides an analytical bridge between social actors and their broader social contexts. It allows me to account for how socially produced meanings become embodied as durable

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For instance, Hadas (2022) argues that as social structures change, habitus evolves correspondingly, becoming plural and thus more suitable for studying social transformations. Similarly, Akram (2023) provides a critical realist reading of Bourdieu. The author emphasizes and expands on the ontological implications of habitus and field in order to address the long-standing critiques of determinism in Bourdieu's theory.

[45] Bourdieu would define a field as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97).

[46] I only mention social and cultural capitals here in reference to the author's ideas. I do not develop Bourdieu's concept of capital in the present study, though it could certainly expand the understanding of how social interactions are carried out in specific social contexts. Bourdieu's concept of capital can be broadly understood as any accumulated resource or power that individuals or groups use to occupy positions on a field (2002). See: Bourdieu (2002) for a complete analysis of the concept of capital.

dispositions, while also showing how these dispositions are enacted, adjusted, and at times reworked by the social actor. Habitus does not simply constrain action; it orients it, making certain interpretations, responses, and forms of meaning-making more likely than others. I argue that the data from interviews examined in this thesis captures this dynamic: participants articulate positions that reflect the ongoing influence of prior socialization processes as much as the continuous negotiation of meaning in relation to their present contexts.

Social agency, then, could be broadly understood as the capacity of an agent to engage with and act within specific fields, shaped by their habitus. It is highly influenced by one's social context, often regulated by social structures, and limited in specific fields, but transformative in that it shapes these structures even as it is shaped by them. The socialization processes that I mentioned initially are indeed part of the processes during which people absorb ideas about the world. These are not static, however, nor do they eventually stop and then become the only lenses for navigating the social world. Habitus evolves over time through continued engagement with different social contexts, all while remaining historically and socially situated. Participants' ability to act on certain fields and social structures is informed by their habitus. Through engagement with these fields, meaning is produced and negotiated. When such meanings become widely shared, they may contribute to gradual shifts in existing social frameworks or even the emergence of new ones over time.

This particular moment of our history has shown us that individuals are meaning-making agents (Miller and Beaman 2024; Manning 2018, 2023; Haimila and Muraja 2023) that configure and develop ideas and beliefs outside previously established social frameworks (Copeman and Quack 2015; Cave 2015). In the realm of death and dying, nonreligious individuals are already developing alternative funerary practices and new ways of attributing meaning to the deceased body (Engelke 2015). While these practices emerge within existing social conditions, they nevertheless contribute to broader reconfigurations of meanings, norms, and symbolic boundaries around death, dying and the afterlife.

Researchers know that ideas on death, legacy and afterlife are indeed being developed outside religious social structures and frameworks. By now, researchers also know that these new

interpretations are more than simple examples of a collective state of anomie.[47] They are signaling the emergence of alternatives social frameworks where nonreligious' perspectives are openly becoming part of our social reality. Our "world-building" ability as social actors means that we can deploy these new formations to develop new shared ways of making our shared world meaningful and significant. This thesis, in a way, serves as another example of the current changes in the Canadian social fabric that may just be foreshadowing impending developments in the social world.

2.3 Methodological approach

In the following section I explain how my theoretical approach meets method. In other words, it outlines the logical pathway from my ontological and epistemological stances up to my methodological choices.

As a brief reminder, my theoretical approach is founded on dialectical social constructionism. Social actors build worlds and are defined by them too. Knowledge and meaning are historically and socially contingent, and habitus mediates how individuals perceive, internalize and construct social structures. At the same time, habitus is not static and determined, but changes with time and in relation to an individual's life trajectory. Social agency emerges from the interaction between habitus and fields, allowing actors to reinterpret, contest, and even reshape broader social structures.

Up until this point, I have but briefly touched on (non)religious conceptualizations as parts of our social reality. This has to do with the intricacies that go into finding "nonreligion". As I have discussed in the first chapter of this work, this is no easy task. Human perspectives are deeply heterogeneous.

For the purposes of this research, I adopt the same relational approach of previous authors (Quack 2014; Lee 2015) in order to define nonreligion and find the nonreligious. Methodologically, this means that if I am to look for nonreligion I must do it in relation to what is considered "religious". Those edges, or boundaries, are typically marked by religious structures and institutions. Granted,

[47] See Durkheim (1893) for a definition of anomie.

these edges and realms of influence change with time. Still, looking outside of those edges is precisely where researchers can find nonreligion.

James Beckford (2003) suggests something very similar. He argues that our goal as social scientists is to look at how the edge (or boundary) between religion and nonreligion "is staked out, defended, deployed, attacked, smudged, re-defined or even dissolved. It is a boundary zone that is heavily, perhaps essentially, contested" (2003, 4). Cory Steele, discussing Beckford, argues that he "proposes an approach that calls on researchers to explore the multitude of ways and processes through which the categories of religion and nonreligion are constructed in the social world by social actors" (2024: 53).

These same edges or boundaries where nonreligion emerges are the spaces where researchers can identify and distinguish between nonreligious and religious outlooks on death, dying and afterlife. These concepts are developed within social structures and fields, and are then deployed and enacted by social actors in their daily lives. Their daily life actions, in turn, participate in their world-building endeavors. Thus, an empirical study of nonreligion should be seen as an unfolding, socially constructed process that emerges through dialectical intersubjective interactions with broader social contexts.

Beyond staking out these boundaries, I also track the specific aspects of participants' lives that help in their shaping and deployment. Schäfer et al. (2019) propose the idea of using habitus as a "third layer". They argue that habitus can be situated as a layer between the structural conditions of social space and the observable expressions of lifestyle and belief. This "third layer" is made up of people's dispositions (habits, feelings, judgments, and diverse ways of going about the world). And although these are not always conscious or logical, they shape how people make sense of their experiences. Under their view, habitus is not just a set of internalized dispositions, but a structuring network of perceptions that mediate objectivated social aspects of our reality and our own individual expressions of meaning. In other words, they argue that if we are to understand why people believe what they believe (independent of religious or nonreligious views), researchers need to look at how their experiences are *filtered* through their habitus, and treat these patterns not just as opinions, but as a deeper part of individuals' meaning structures and lifestances. In their view, an "in-depth breakdown of the semantics that correspond to a specific societal position can significantly augment our understanding of the actors in question" (2019: 426).

My methodological approach adopts the view that habitus is a methodological tool for identifying how meanings sediment and shift, not only across individuals, but also across broader nonreligious formations. I build on this and also consider Berger and Luckmann's theory by arguing that these same nonreligious formations are in the process of contesting, legitimating and potentially institutionalizing their place in diverse social structures across our world. The use of habitus as a methodological tool allows me to look at the internalization of meanings, but also the slow emergence of legitimated and potentially institutionalizing knowledge. Nonreligious meaning and knowledge making, then, are both constrained by and constitutive of the ever-shifting boundaries between religion and nonreligion. Particular nonreligious inclinations, sensibilities, tendencies or *dispositions* towards death, dying and afterlife might be reflecting broader social shifts, even if those shifts are not yet fully legitimated[48] and institutionalized.

To summarize, the way in which I locate, interpret and analyze nonreligion in this study is threefold: First, I identify it as a boundary phenomenon, meaning I locate it not by asking "what is religion?", but by observing where religion is absent or reconfigured (Beckford, 2003). Second, I see nonreligion as a contested but diverse groups of potentially institutionalizable emerging social frameworks, with ongoing legitimation processes (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). And third, I argue that nonreligion is experienced through habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and configured through narrations of life events, ideas and thoughts about social experiences (death, dying and afterlife included).

To explore these dimensions empirically, I conducted 35 in-depth interviews with millennial participants. During our talks, participants shared their reflections on death, dying, the afterlife, and related moral and ethical considerations during these conversations. My analysis drew on both the interview encounters themselves and their subsequent transcription. During the analysis phase, I engaged in a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2017, 2019, 2022) of our conversations. I selected this approach because it is particularly suited to identifying patterns within participants' narratives while remaining sensitive to context, interpretation, and theory. Broadly, thematic analysis can be understood as a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2017: 297). It can be

[48] I understand legitimation as "socially objectivated knowledge" that serves to explain and justify the social order. Put differently, legitimations are answers to any questions about the "why" of institutional arrangements" (Berger, 1967: 29).

used to "identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices; 'experiential' research which seeks to understand what participants' think, feel, and do" (297).

The main appeal of thematic analysis (TA) lies in that it identifies, analyzes, and interprets patterns of meaningwithin specific qualitative data. These initial patterns can be categorized into codes, which, in turn, are "the building blocks for themes, (larger) patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organizing concept —a shared core idea" (297). I found this method to be the best suited for a study that looks at how people make sense of their experiences, beliefs, ideas and thoughts through narrative and language. This method allowed me to approach the data inductively, all while still keeping theoretical frameworks in the forefront throughout the entirety of the coding phase. I worked iteratively, coding segments of the material, identifying patterns across participants, and refining themes through sustained, active engagement with the data.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) methodological approach was particularly well suited for my purposes given their recognition of the relational nature of meaning. Their perspective enables an exploration of the distinct discursive formations that participants draw upon to articulate their nonreligious understandings of death, dying and afterlife. It allows for a constant interplay between an inductive approach to coding accompanied by a theory-driven interpretation. Themes are not there to be discovered, but emerge as a result of the researcher's engagement with data. The aim of thematic analysis is "not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question" (297).

The flexibility offered by thematic analysis became crucial when considering that many of the emerging themes do not correspond to existing religious categories. Put differently, many of these themes (such as immanence and social continuity after death) are not fully articulated in our current social frameworks and imaginaries. They are, as stated, reflective of emergent social frameworks of meaning and knowledge, grounded in lived experiences, but not yet incorporated into recognized social structures.

In the following section I articulate how I designed this research project. I will explain the structure and content of my research design, as well as the data collection and data analysis processes. I will articulate the initial recruitment process, the interview process, the development of initial codes, their subsequent analysis, and finally, how they were reorganized into higher-order themes.

2.4 Research design

The study's main focus is to identify some of the emerging and recurring themes that appeared when nonreligious individuals thought about death and afterlife. Its aim was to close in on self-identified nonreligious millennials living in Canada and dig deep into questions surrounding death, dying and the afterlife, all with the specific intention of uncovering how these concepts are being reconfigured by this generation in particular.

I chose the millennial generation (individuals between the ages of 28 and 43) as a demographic for very specific reasons. First, much of the existing literature on nonreligious afterlife beliefs has examined specific population groups who are closely confronted with death, such as elderly individuals (Cicirelli 2021; Manning 2018; 2023) or participants in death cafés (Parry et al. 2021; Koksvik and Richards 2023; Beaman and Miller 2024). Instead, I wanted to understand how individuals who are not, at first glance, "exposed" to end-of-life concerns or scenarios are actually conceptualizing death, dying and afterlife. After all, social reality is shaped not only by those directly involved, but by broader social interactions between several population groups.

Second, this generation stands out because they represent a cohort often described as religiously unaffiliated, politically and culturally diverse. Over one third of their population in Canada self-describes as nonreligious (Wilkins-Laflamme 2022a: 131), already marking a huge shift in contrast to other demographics, as discussed earlier.

And third, they represent the sector of the Canadian population that is most economically active, meaning they will continue to take on the pivotal role of shaping our social world in the coming years. Given their unique position in our society, I believed the millennial generation offers unique and crucial insights into emergent nonreligious frameworks that are neither fully institutionalized nor shaped by proximity to death.

2.4.1 Participant selection and recruitment

Participants were recruited based on their self-identification as nonreligious, without imposing strict definitions. The intention was to let the participants position themselves and their beliefs in relation to (or outside) religion. It was not up to me to categorize them as nonreligious, rather, the recruitment poster would be directed to nonreligious individuals. If interested volunteers felt they

fit into this category, they would be the ones to contact me. I wanted to avoid the need to arbitrarily identify my sample and instead let the volunteers contact me if they identified as nonreligious.

Recruitment was conducted through a digital poster distributed on social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Reddit.[49] The poster provided detailed information on a research project interested in recruiting nonreligious millennials who wanted to share their thoughts on death and the afterlife. It was stated that anyone who considered themselves as nonreligious and was a part of the millennial demographic could take part in a one hour interview where we would discuss their views on death, dying and afterlife. I also employed snowball sampling in the specific cases where one of the participants wanted to invite someone to take part in the study, which lead to a wider representation of people from across Canada than initially anticipated.

The first recruitment wave occurred in August 2024, primarily over Facebook. The social media strategy initially involved the distribution of the poster in several Facebook groups, including those where millennials were thought to be the most active.[50] I did not choose to post on specific groups where (non)religious affiliation was self-evident,[51] as I thought it could severely limit the scope of my research. Nonetheless, the reach of the poster was limited up until this point, with only a few (about 9 people) participating in this initial wave. The research was initially received with very little interest.

After realizing that the social media strategy was not proving to be effective, a second wave of recruitment occurred in October 2024. This time, I distributed the poster in Community Bulletin and Public notice boards across the city of Ottawa, as well as certain businesses, such as Cafes, where I asked management for approval before posting it in their bulletin boards. Still, the reach continued to be lacking the necessary impact. No volunteers contacted me during this wave.

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[49] Facebook and Reddit were the preferred social media platforms for recruitment because they remain the most used social media platforms among millennials. According to Environics, Facebook remains the country's most-used social media platform, with 67% of Canadians reporting that they use it weekly (2025). Among millennials, Facebook and YouTube were the two most-used platforms across generations, with the exception of Gen Z. Furthermore, the same survey indicated that Canadian millennials were the generation most likely to use Reddit, at 26%.

[50] Some of these groups included: Ottawa/Gatineau Classifieds, Ottawa's Nightlife, Ottawa and Gatineau Social Events, Ottawa Sports Club, and Ottawa Outdoors Club.

[51] There are several Facebook groups in Canada tailored for Humanists, Atheists and others.

A third wave took place in March 2025 via Reddit. I published the poster on sub-Reddits all across Canada. I targeted wide-reaching sub-Reddits tailored for Canadians. The sub-Reddits where the poster was published were: r/alberta, r/britishcolumbia, r/manitoba, r/newbrunswickcanada, r/newfoundland, r/NovaScotia, r/ontario, r/PEI, r/Quebec, and r/saskatchewan. The Reddit campaign was particularly effective, generating over 150 volunteer responses within the first 24 hours. The posts in the r/ontario and r/alberta sub-Reddits were the most successful, accumulating hundreds of comments and reactions in the first few hours. My poster was not approved in the sub-Reddits of r/Quebec, r/britishcolumbia and r/newbrunswickcanada, and received no comments, interactions or e-mails from the sub-Reddits of r/newfoundland, r/PEI and r/saskatchewan.

After receiving an overwhelming number of responses from Reddit, I removed the posts from both social media platforms and proceeded to schedule interviews. As stated in the poster, participants were scheduled on a first come, first served basis. I organized a time and place for 30 interviews and then e-mailed the remaining volunteers, thanking them for their interest in the study and let them know that I would be contacting them in the future if data saturation was not reached by the time I finished the scheduled interviews. Out of the 30 scheduled meetings, 26 interviews were carried out. 4 out of those 30 volunteers either backed down from the interview or did not show up for them.

Interviews were briefly described as a conversation about beliefs on death, mortality and afterlife. After the initial contact with participants via e-mail, I would also let them know that we would be exploring some of their religious background and overall thoughts on religion. If they agreed to participate in the interview, we would then settle on suitable date and time, after which I would arrange the necessary logistical details.

In April 2025, after conducting interviews with 35 participants (9 from wave 1 and 26 from wave 3) data saturation was reached. I determined the point of saturation when I considered I had enough information to appropriately address the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After conducting and coding the first 30 interviews, the thematic patterns began to stabilize, with the

subsequent five interviews confirming that I had enough data to develop complex high-order themes.[52]

In this context, saturation did not imply that every possible insight and perspective had been explored or exhausted, but rather, that the dataset had reached analytic sufficiency (Low, 2019). At this point, I considered that the central themes of my research had been fully developed in relation to the study's aims. Core discursive formations around death, dying and afterlife among nonreligious millennials had been sufficiently captured. Instead of capturing data for a longer period of time in the hopes of finding additional themes, I proceeded to analyze it.

2.4.2 Interview process and data collection

Volunteers were given the option to participate either in person at public locations in Ottawa or via Zoom, depending on their preferences and availability. For participants who opted for a virtual interview, I generated a Zoom link and provided the necessary meeting details via email. For those who preferred an in-person interview, I emailed a list of potential meeting locations. Once a location, date, and time were selected by the participant, the interview was conducted accordingly.

Only 5 interviews took place in person, with the remaining 30 all being carried out through Zoom. Before each interview, participants signed an informed consent form, which outlined the topics to be discussed, the use of audio recording, and the right to withdraw at any point. Participants were also informed that video files from zoom meetings where to be deleted immediately after the end of our chat, and audio files will follow after a period of 3 years.

The interview format was semi-structured through a few topical guiding questions for each of the areas I was interested in. These questions served the purpose of leading the conversation without the need to follow a specific script. The format allowed an expressive display of a variety of feelings, affinities, thoughts and reflections that would not have been possible under a more strict interview procedure. Although some participants expressed deep emotions (several cried or disclosed personal losses) all interviews were conducted in a supportive and respectful

[52] I do not mean here that interviewing more people would not have added anything to the overall conversation of nonreligious outlooks on death and afterlife. Time constraints were also a factor in determining data saturation. I just point out that after concluding these interviews, enough data had emerged for me to develop robust and substantial themes. It could very well be possible that new themes could emerge from additional interviews. In this specific study, the categories had stabilized after 30 interviews, and the remaining 5 confirmed this.

environment. None of them withdrew from our conversation before the allotted time and a few have since contacted me to ask about publishing timelines. I was able to have deeply meaningful conversations with all of the participants, many of which extended beyond the originally established timeframe. Some were eager to share their thoughts and experiences. Many others recognized that they had not thought about some of the topics recently, yet took the time to reflect on the questions while maintaining active participation in the conversation.

Audio files were transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription software, followed by three manual revisions of each transcript to ensure accuracy and completeness. This multi-stage process allowed for the correction of any software-related errors, the clarification of ambiguous sentences and pauses, as well as uncaptured segments due to audio clarity. Manual revisions also allowed me to pay close attention to participants' original wording and intonations. Careful attention was given to the moments where participants displayed emotions, pauses and emphases to certain sentences or descriptions. The three manual revisions were crucial to ensure the interpretative depth of these interviews would not be lost, and transcription accuracy was essential for maintaining the integrity of the data and supporting a rigorous thematic analysis in the coding process.

2.4.3 Data analysis: Thematic strategy

Data was interpreted following Braun and Clarke's (2017, 2019, 2022) thematic analysis strategy. The task was facilitated through the use of Taguette,[53] a qualitative data analysis tool that allows for the creation of "tags" or codes in a simple and efficient manner. The analysis also involved three iterative rounds of coding, all of which were aligned with both my inductive and theory-informed practices.

As a nonreligious millennial myself, I did not approach the data as a neutral observer, but as someone engaged with this topic and interested in theoretical debates surrounding nonreligious meaning making imaginaries. As a researcher with a sociological background, rather than attempting to bracket my perspective and allude to the unattainable "objective" engagement with the topic, I adopted a reflexive stance all throughout the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

[53] Taguette is a free open-source qualitative research tool. It allows the user to import files and then highlight words, sentences or paragraphs with specific "tags" or codes created by the user. It can also create and export separate documents that contain specific tags or entire codebooks, depending on user preference. See: https://www.taguette.org/

Throughout it, I embraced the idea that, much like social reality is co-constructed between social actor and society, my research too is a co-constructed result of the interaction between researcher and participants.

To manage potential bias, I engaged in interactive readings of the transcript before and during all of the coding phases, but particularly during the first iteration of coding. During each reading, I wrote reflexive memos and continuously went back to the source material to make sure that the patterns were being appropriately recognized.

While my theoretical stance was clear from the outset, this first round of coding followed an inductive approach. I remained open to unexpected patterns and alternative interpretations that could potentially go against my epistemological and ontological stance. For this first round of coding, it was crucial for the emerging patterns to be authentically rooted in participants' accounts.

To do so, I identified recurring content and marked it accordingly. I developed initial codes that were descriptive in nature, and simply focused on capturing the participants' language, concerns and thoughts at face value. They were broad and exploratory; the goal was identifying initial patterns without the need to come up with predefining categories. 16 distinct codes emerged through the first iteration of coding. They largely reflected the narrative patterns that emerged from several careful reads of the material. These were: First contact with religion, ideas around death, preferred method of disposition, preferred funeral practice, religious identity, aversion to religion, household beliefs, mentions of God, natural death, immanent lifestance, how to live life, family and death, thoughts on M.A.I.D., notions of legacy, remembrance and thoughts on afterlife.

In the second round, these codes were refined, collapsed, or reorganized into more analytically meaningful categories. Taguette was also the preferred research software for this coding round. I utilized the software to "tag" some of the recurring codes emerged from the first round into more concrete ones. I then assigned a specific name to each of them, which allowed the software to separate and categorize them accordingly.

This second round was developed with the intention of highlighting the emergent patterns across participants. I captured participants' thoughts and ideas alongside direct mentions of death, afterlife, higher power, legacy, remembrance, mortality, ethics of life and death, religious background and

thoughts on religion. They were then distributed into newly named and descriptive codes with the help of Taguette[54].

For instance, conversations about the nature of a higher power were somewhat prevalent patterns that emerged from the first round of coding. In the second round, I refined this pattern into a specific code labeled "Higher Power". Whenever a participant expressed a belief, sentiment, or idea related to a higher power, I tagged their response accordingly and categorized it under this code. I followed that same strategy with all the patterns that emerged from the first coding round. Some examples of these statements can be seen as follows:[55]

Death:

> *I've had too many near death experiences. I just figure I'll be very old when I die. I don't understand what scares people about it? Is it the finality of it? But then I find the people who are most afraid of death don't seem to live their life to the fullest. So that I find very kind of paradoxical. If you're concerned about death, then you should live every day kind of recklessly, just enjoying life to the fullest. Live. (Devon, works for parliament, male, 30)*

> *I've thought about dying for sure. It's not something I can say I've ever really feared, but in terms of, you know, what sort of feelings come up about dying? What I think about it? First sort of feeling that comes up is "Who am I leaving behind? Who is going to suffer because of my death?" I don't have anyone who is actually dependent on me. You know, no children, no spouse, that sort of thing. But, you know, I worry about my siblings and my parents and what they might feel. And inside my own personal feelings towards death, there have been times in the past where I have been sort of in a suicidal mood. And one of the things that always pops up to me is "What am I going to miss?". (Curtis, electrician, male, 36)*

Afterlife:

[54] The software's aid was crucial in categorizing these patterns into codes without the need to resort to other coding strategies, such as color-coding. And while the coding process with Taguette is indeed manual labor (the researcher is the one who selects and looks at the in-text patterns to develop codes), the software allowed for a clear display of the identified codes in each of the coding rounds.

[55] The examples that follow are meant to illustrate the coding process. Later on, in the analysis-specific chapters, I engage further with some of these quotes.

I've unfortunately watched a lot of my friends die because of drug use and it didn't bring me any additional comfort to think "oh they'll come back around in 30 years or whatever". Or, like, "they'll be reincarnated" and, you know, it just didn't make sense to me. I was, like, "no, they're gone and I think that that's Ok", I think. I think it's Ok to say "this was their life" and it's good to be respectful that they were here and it's good to acknowledge it. But, like, there was pain there and that's why they're not here anymore. And I think that's something that I'd like to focus on and change rather than just think "Oh. Hey, you know what? Like, it didn't work out this time, but they'll come back". (Munsley, works for an education centre, female, 30)

I think a light shuts off. Why do I think that? I just, I don't think that that people or humans are any more special than any other animals or any other life form on the planet. And I think that I've always thought that. We're here for this period of time and then that's the end. I've never sort of thought the need to believe on anything. (Patrick, construction industry worker, male, 42)

I have this sense that matter can't, like, so second law of thermodynamics: matter can't be created or destroyed. So there's something. Because there's something that animates us. I'd like to believe that the essence of who we are kind of goes back to this kind of source of whatever life is. And maybe we're reincarnated, maybe we're not. But I don't know. I guess I have the sense that everything is connected through something, some sort of something, if you want to call it God or whatever. So maybe we're like, when we die, we become part of that thing that connects everything like that. (Karin, community worker, non-binary, 34)

Higher Power:

I think maybe the higher power is kind of interconnectedness. And an ability to access things we can't see. So I don't think it's a being, like, even if I say "God", I don't think God is separate from me. Like, I don't think I'm separate from you or anybody. So I think the higher power is connection. (Lila, graduate student, female, 30)

I don't feel like there's a higher power that has a plan for everything. You know, in the sense that, like, when people say "everything happens for a reason". I don't believe that, you know, like as if there's a predestined path that we're all on because of a higher power…

And then at the same time, like, I don't feel like we were made but created by a higher power. (JKelly, works in cybersecurity, male, 29)

Legacy:

From what I've seen, you will leave a good legacy and all I really care about in legacy is that people aren't sad that I'm gone, but was glad that I was here. I genuinely feel like, I think about how I try and live my life, thinking more, like, how are people remembering me as a living person… I don't really care what people think of me when I die, I care about what people think about me while I'm alive because, again, I don't know what will happen after death. (Gabriela, music teacher, female, 31)

Mortality:

I see this a lot on the Internet… People will mention like, "oh, it's just death is just the same thing as before you were born." Well, I have no awareness of that after I was born, and the aspect of the process of dying is terrifying to me… (Adam, emergency nurse, male, 32)

Yeah, that is definitely something that I think about a lot. I've been going, I, the reason I was at the hospital is because I was taking my father for cancer treatment. So it's been, you know, mortality is kind of been the thing we've been dealing with a lot over the past month or so since he's been dealing with that. I think that when I do think about it, it's maybe not a like a healthy logical thought process that I'm going through. But, you know, these types of thoughts are often closely related to anxieties and stress and negative thoughts, right? So, sometimes when you're thinking these things, your concerns aren't necessarily legitimate. They're like little conspiracy theories that my brain has written about myself. You know, "nobody's going to think about me ever again after I'm gone" or "nobody loves you" or, you know, these things that just our brain tricks us into accepting sometimes. (Paul, works in human resources, male, 38)

Ethics of Life and Death:

I'm OK with it. [M.A.I.D.] I mean, I understand how it's a very contentious issue. I don't know. Maybe, here's the thing, I don't know if that will change what will happen to me in

the afterlife. I don't know… But at the same time, if you're incredibly sick and you're on the last stretch, right? You're on the last stretch, the runway is short. This will help expedite things essentially. I'm OK with that, It doesn't turn my soul. I'm not disgusted by the idea. I'm like, oh, that person needs, like, if that's what that person needs to feel at peace, considering the amount of trauma they've gone through. Like I said earlier, you've done the best you can. If you've truly done the best you can, and this is the next step for assisted, you know… that is the way to do it. Then that is the way to go. (Oscar, IT project manager, male, 43)

I am strongly in favor and I am actually strongly in favor of removing all barriers in any way to Medical Assistance in Dying. If someone chooses to die and they're ready to die, they should absolutely have the right to go out in an elegant and safe fashion where they're not going to hurt themselves… Like my aunt was, like 700 lbs. She had a massive cyst that was growing inside her leg…She was unable to get up to go to the bathroom anymore because her legs and the muscles in her legs have atrophied. So she literally had to have a crane lift her up in order to go to the bathroom on the bed. And there was no way out of this for her, that was going to be the rest of her life. And in America or other countries that don't have Medical Assistance in Dying, she probably would have been able to be sustained for years and years, and would have lived an absolutely horrible life and so thankfully, you know, MAID allowed for her, you know, she was capable of just going out gracefully and on her own terms. (Vince, project manager, male, 33)

Religious Background:

I grew up Roman Catholic. I went to church regularly, went to Catholic school. Did the confirmation, everything, and then as I got older I just became non religious. (Adam, emergency nurse, male, 32)

So the first ten years of my life, because we did two years of kindergarten and then up until grade eight, I was in a religious school. So the idea of heaven and hell wasn't pushed as much, but the idea of heaven and God and afterlife was talked about a lot, and as a child, obviously you believe what you're told and what the adults around you are telling you. (Gwen, works in labour relations, female, 34)

I was raised Jewish. I am culturally Jewish. The religious aspect of Judaism is in my world, separate from the culture they intersect. I would say I practice cultural Judaism, but I wouldn't practice. I'm not a religious practicing Jew, if that makes sense. (Irving, high-school teacher, male, 29)

I grew up in an irreligious household, which is shocking because I grew up in southern Alberta. But none of our family is kind of open with religion. They're pretty closed off about it themselves. There was never any kind of indoctrination, there was no "let's go to church" or "you have to believe what I believe". We were free to explore whatever we wanted. And we had parental support through that. (Jarrod, commercial insurance broker, male 36)

Thoughts on Religion:

I can definitely remember being younger and feeling like a lot of stress about death when I was religious, right, because it's like it's a problem. There's this eternity and there's like a punishment or reward. But now I just, I just don't think of, I don't think about death the way that I used to. I feel like when you're religious, there's a lot of you thinking about your death. I think, you know, I think of, like, my grandmother, super religious and constantly focused on her death for years and years and years before it happens. Like she was just, like, excited for it, you know. (Paul, works in human resources, male, 38)

I kind of have an aversion to religion. Like I think that it's just something that's a sociological tool used by the hegemony to appease the masses and keep them in their place. Essentially, that's ultimately what I think religion is. (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)

Weirdly, a couple of the practices I've sort of retained from my time in the Anglican Church. I think that rituals are important for humans. I mean, obviously, like global leaders. Thousands of different religious practices. And, you know, thousands of other types of celebrations, you know. I think birthdays, anniversaries, things like that. We as humans seem to have a deep need to observe the passage of time, so I sort of see it as a ritual important for that reason… I have a lot more of an awareness of the harms that religion has caused, but particularly when it's institutionalized and very top heavy in terms of power… I'm more aware of its harms, but I also, I also still respect some aspects of it. You know, as I said, I still have friends who are religious. I have more friends now who are of

other religions, too. I mean, I have Muslim friends, I have Hindu friends. So, you know, and they've taught me a lot about what they believe and, you know, so I both understand and accept it more while being more aware of the harms. (Jenna, talent agent, female, 40)

The second iteration of coding also revealed several common narratives that expanded beyond these initial categories. Some participants would express their thoughts about religion when discussing their religious background. Some would discuss their own ideas about death when expressing their opinions about M.A.I.D. Afterlife conceptualizations were also deeply tied to mortality, legacy and remembrance.

The connections that emerged from these codes functioned as intermediate analytical stages. They helped bridge participant narratives with theoretical interpretation. The next step involved interpreting how these categories reflected deeper, emergent social formations. In asking what these patterns mean in light of my theoretical framework, I developed a second set of categories during the final iteration of coding. The codes were revisited through a reflexive process of interpretation informed by Berger and Luckmann's social meaning-making and knowledge production, alongside my expanded notion of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Through this analytical process, I was able to move beyond what participants said to how and why they made sense of death and afterlife in particular ways.

These themes were not present as fixed codes in the data, but emerged through a recursive process of engagement between participant narratives and theoretical reflection. Ultimately, they reflected broader social frameworks through which nonreligious millennials construct meaning and develop knowledge in the face of mortality and their own walks through life.

After the third iteration of coding, the codes were consolidated into four overarching themes: *Identity–Belief Trajectory*, *Immanent Certainty*, *Beyond the Self*, and *Embodied Remembrance*. These themes reflect the broader social frameworks through which the nonreligious millennials who took part in these interviews made sense of, constructed knowledge around, and developed meaningful understandings of death and the afterlife. Each theme has been expanded into its own chapter, reflecting the most recurrent patterns, narratives, and ways of reasoning related to death, dying, and the afterlife across participants. The next four chapters bring together the most prominent patterns identified in the data, and illustrate how these themes are expressed, negotiated, and made meaningful in participants' accounts.

Chapter 3. Who I am and Who I was: Identity-belief trajectory

> *I grew up in a conservative Christian household. It was under the Reformed Church, which is part of the Calvinist tradition. And just growing up, I always questioned religion, very heavily. And I mean heavily. By the time I was nine years old, I was already reading into other myths around the world, specifically Nordic and Egyptian, because, you know, that's kind of like something we're all surrounded by, right? And I just kept finding parallels upon parallels upon parallels between Christianity and other religions. And at some point I was like... so either it all exists, or it all doesn't exist and it's just made up. (Jessie, stay at home mother, non-binary, 28)*

Like Jessie, most participants in this study have experienced changes in their beliefs throughout their lifetime. When identifying as "nonreligious" most participants are looking to position themselves outside religious worldviews, not declare the adherence to a distinct ideology or a set of beliefs. Most of the participants in this study did not care about labels.[56]

Nonreligious identities are not static (Beyer 2015; Remmel and Uibu 2015; Frost et al. 2025; Beaman et al. 2025a). Instead, identity and belief are historically and socially contingent. These respond to a specific moment in time and transform through one's own life. As researchers, noting these changes matters because they inform how individuals' beliefs imbedded in a particular (non)religious worldview may change when subjected to new information, or when immersed in different social contexts. Some researchers have called this way of approaching changes in (non)religious worldviews as "life course frameworks".[57] Smith and Dougherty (2026), for

[56] The need to label individuals under a particular denomination might just be one of the unintended inheritances of our Christian past, to signal and categorize the "other". Several researchers have signaled "Residual Christianity" as a way of making sense of the continuous Christian influence that exists within institutions and symbols in Christian-majority societies (Thomas and Biette 2014; Seljak 2012; Beaman 2024). Critics of Orientalist approaches would also agree with the potential issue of western-imposed labels (Scott 2008; Hughes 2017).

[57] As noted by Smith and Dougherty (2026): "Life course theory emerged partly in response to longitudinal studies of the development of children during the great depression. Findings from these studies illuminate the ways that historical forces, inter-personal events, and developmental stages interlock to shape individuals' lives, and they emphasize the ways in which interpersonal relationships and ''linked lives'' are embedded within and shaped by the wider culture" (52). See Elder (1998) for an extensive treatment of the "life course" theory. Authors such as Ingersoll-Dayton et al. (2002) have also highlighted the concept of

example, examined how elements of the life course shape the spaces between religious and secular worldviews. The authors found that change in beliefs are motivated by social forces (69), and that, independently of how participants self-identified (religious or nonreligious), all of them negotiated their values and commitments as they worked out who they are throughout their daily life.

I agree with Smith and Dougherty, but argue that participants in this study presented narratives that suggest that their trajectory of beliefs can be better understood through the notion of *lifestances*. Participants' beliefs change throughout lives alongside their own behaviours and relationships, but there is a certain positionality and temporality to their beliefs and worldviews. Participants do not simply change beliefs like they moved houses or changed jobs; several relational and personally meaningful elements are imbedded in how they position themselves towards religion, death, dying and the afterlife.

Beyond seeking to establish a binary between religious and nonreligious stances, participants in this study navigate their life without the need to position or maintain themselves outside of religion. That notion privileges religion as the "thing to get away from". Instead, it is clear that participants marked a distance from religious worldviews because they do not agree with them or found them limiting. In their study of community gardens, Beaman et al. (2025b) noted:

> Community gardeners' lifestances orient how they live in the world. Focusing on whether a person is religious or nonreligious (or religion-like) misdirects our attention, and results in serious misunderstandings of people's experiences. Lifestances are beyond or 'otherwise to' the religion/nonreligion binary. To ask about a person's lifestance sidesteps the privileging of religion, refusing to either prioritise or ignore it. A lifestances approach decentres religion – making it one among the many institutions, worldviews, relationships and ethical frameworks that shape identities (155).

Participants' identities were marked by religion in most cases. It would be unwise to argue that religion did not play a role in how they identified growing up, and that they just escaped its "grasp" once they began to identify as nonreligious. It is more accurate to state that their lifestances shifted throughout their lives as they were subject to processes that prompted them to reevaluate and

"trajectories" and "transitions" as the best ways to analyse patterns of religious changes in individuals over the course of their lives.

reconfigure their approach to life. Acquiring a different worldview is but a part of participants' changes in their lifestances throughout their lives. What I capture in the following pages are some of these changes, and how these are in turn realized under the particular configuration of our social world as it stands in the present time.

Participants' accounts suggest that identity and belief are not fixed outcomes of early socialization but are continuously shaped through everyday experience. Rather than stabilizing over time, they are reworked through ongoing encounters with new relationships, ideas, and social structures. The dialectical nature between social actor and society signaled by Berger and Luckmann can most clearly be seen in these constant reconfigurations.[58]

I categorized these accounts under the theme of *identity–belief trajectory*. While belief and identity can be analytically distinguished, the interviews show that they are deeply intertwined: participants' identities are largely shaped by their belief systems, and their beliefs are, in turn, shaped by their identities. Put simply, showing these trajectories is important because they demonstrate that participants' beliefs and identities carry a relational dimension.

This fact, in turn, raises a potential tension: how can lifestances be historically and socially contingent while also giving rise to shared social frameworks? I argue that what is shared is not the content of beliefs, but the way belief and identity are structured. A potential emerging framework may be grounded in diversity of content, yet unified by a common relational form, one in which belief and identity are mutually constituted. Relationality itself *can* become the basis of a new shared framework.

The analysis here shows that the participants care not about labels and care less about being dependent on specific "lenses" through which they should interpret the world. They describe themselves as nonreligious to mark a detachment from the institutions and social structures that reify religion as the only appropriate way to make the world humanly significant. Whether those beliefs and identities also carry labels of atheists, humanists, nonreligious, SBNR (Spiritual But

[58] To be clear, I do not argue that all these reconfigurations are equally as significant or transformative. I am also not asserting that one's individual journey through life incorporates new frameworks that necessarily transform broader social structures. What I do affirm is that enough of these constant reconfigurations embodied by multiple individuals *can* have a definite impact on the configuration of new social frameworks. Whether these new social frameworks lead to new social structures is possible, but the data presented here does not intend to affirm this.

Not Religious) or none at all, falls to the participants' particular lifestances. In marking this detachment from religious institutions, new frameworks may be taking shape.[59]

Still, a relational dimension does not mean that every belief and idea is entirely subject to change. Most participants learnt about the basic notion of death from a very young age; what changed was how they interpreted its meaning and generated knowledge around it throughout their lives. When and if enough of these meaning generating forces come together, new social frameworks come to fruition. When and if enough of these social frameworks go through legitimation and institutionalization processes, new social structures may take hold.

The coincidences in content are not what can make up a new social framework; the underlying meaning and knowledge generating forces that come from outside religious frameworks do. What the identity-belief trajectory theme shows is how these meaning and knowledge generating forces are configured and embodied through *habitus* and *socialization processes* in a particular moment in time. In other words, this theme is showing that diversity in the participants' outlooks are context and time-specific. Participants' accounts, in turn, also show an ever increasing detachment from established religious social structures. If we look at those spaces, those moments or boundary zones where detachment becomes most apparent, we can perhaps begin to talk about frameworks being configured outside of institutionalised religion.

The following chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section I expand on demographic data from collected from interviews. In the second section, I use that same demographic data to develop a brief analysis grounded on Berger and Luckmann's (1991) theory of primary and secondary socialization processes. Finally, the third section focuses on *habitus* following my own interpretation of Schäfer et al.'s (2019) research.

[59] Much like what Beaman et al. (2025b) and other researches have signaled, it is hard to argue that emerging frameworks can or should be categorized as purely nonreligious frameworks. Some participants in this study expressed certain beliefs that are traditionally related to religion (belief in a Higher power or Afterlife). Instead, it could be the case that these outlooks are signaling a reappropriation or recovery of concepts that had long been co-opted by religious institutions and imbued with specific meanings. Nonetheless, what is clear is that new emerging frameworks are marking a detachment from organized religious institutions. I will return to this discussion in chapters 4 and 5.

3.1 Participant demographics

While this is not a quantitative study, in the following pages I share some of the quantitative findings that signal some common characteristics amongst the nonreligious participants that took part in this study. The aim of this data showcase is not to position my arguments from a quantitative approach, rather, it serves as complementary information for the following qualitative analysis.

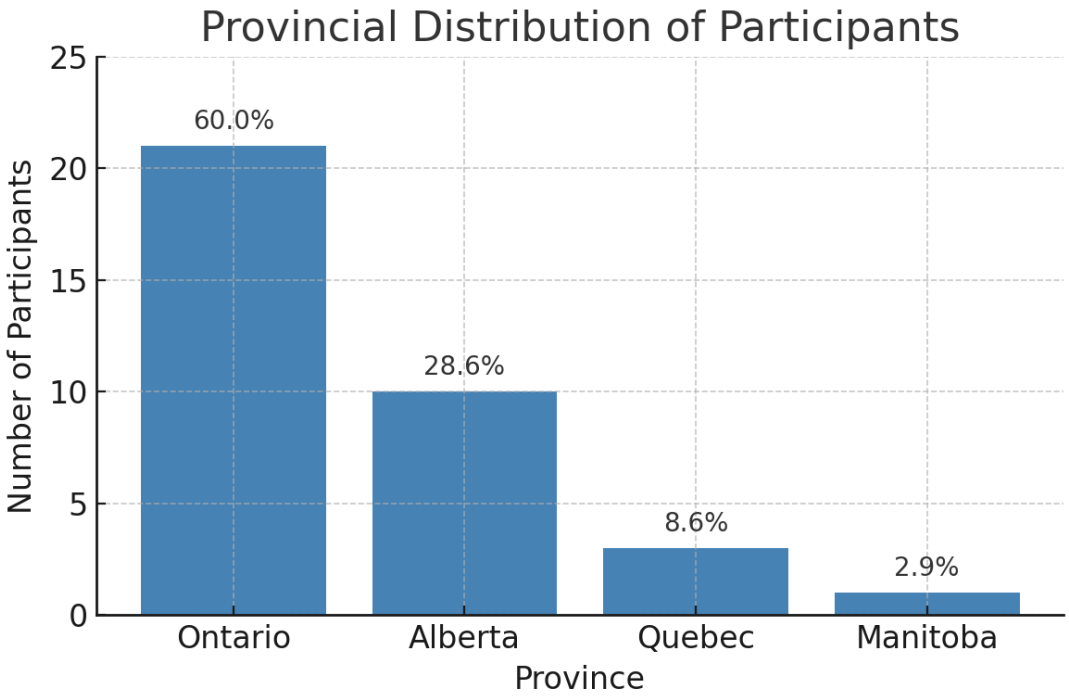
These characteristics are not exclusively useful to the forthcoming habitus analysis, they are also integral to a substantial engagement with the socialization process I intend to pursue later on. They also serve the purpose of further positioning the study's framework from a relational approach, meaning that the themes emerged from it are based on a particular group of people, with a particular set of characteristics, in a particular moment in time.

In total, 35 participants were interviewed between June 2024 and April 2025. Participants' age ranged from 28 to 43, with a mean age of approximately 34.3 years. Their outlooks on death and afterlife prove to be diverse, as were their overall backgrounds and personal stories. Granted, participants did exhibit notable demographic patterns: 57% identified as male, 77% of them grew up religious, 97% hold a post-secondary degree and 85% self-identified as white.[60] Many of these trends are similar to what Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2020) and other researchers (Smith and Cragun 2019; Zuckerman et al. 2019) have already pointed out.

The provincial distribution of participants represents 4 out of the 10 provinces in Canada. The social media strategy did try to engage with individuals from the remaining 6 provinces, but it ultimately received no responses.[61] The majority of participants came from the province of Ontario, with Alberta representing the second province with the most representation in my sample. Out of

[60] Nonetheless, these trends could be attributed to the limits of my research method. Time constraints and scope limited the reach of the research. The majority of the participants were recruited from social media on a first come, first served basis. In turn, this means that the overall scope was limited to the pool of people that have immediate access to the internet and were readily available to take part in a one hour conversation.
[61] The three territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) are not part of our sample. Time constraints and the difficulty of procuring participants from these regions proved to be too tough of a task for this study.

all participants, 21 resided in the province of Ontario, 10 in Alberta, 3 in Quebec and 1 in Manitoba.[62]

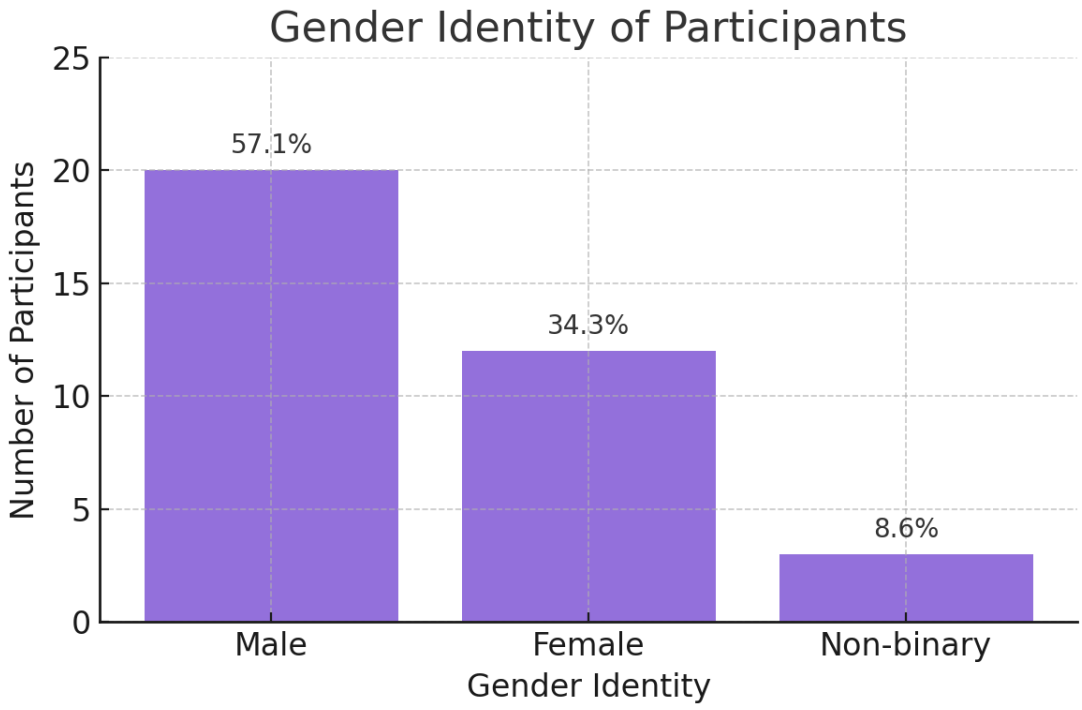


Graph 1. Provincial Distribution of Participants.

The gender identity of participants was predominantly male; with 20 out of the 35 participants identifying as such. 12 participants identified as female, and 3 identified as non-binary. Additionally, 2 out of all participants identified as gay, and 1 identified as androgynous[63].

[62] For the purposes of this research, I am only focusing on their current province of residence, though a study that maps out identity trajectories in relation to provinces could further shed a light on the relationship that geography and social context may have on lifestances as a whole.

[63] Disclosing sexual orientation was not a part of the interview process, but some participants chose to share this information when recounting their religious background and life stories.

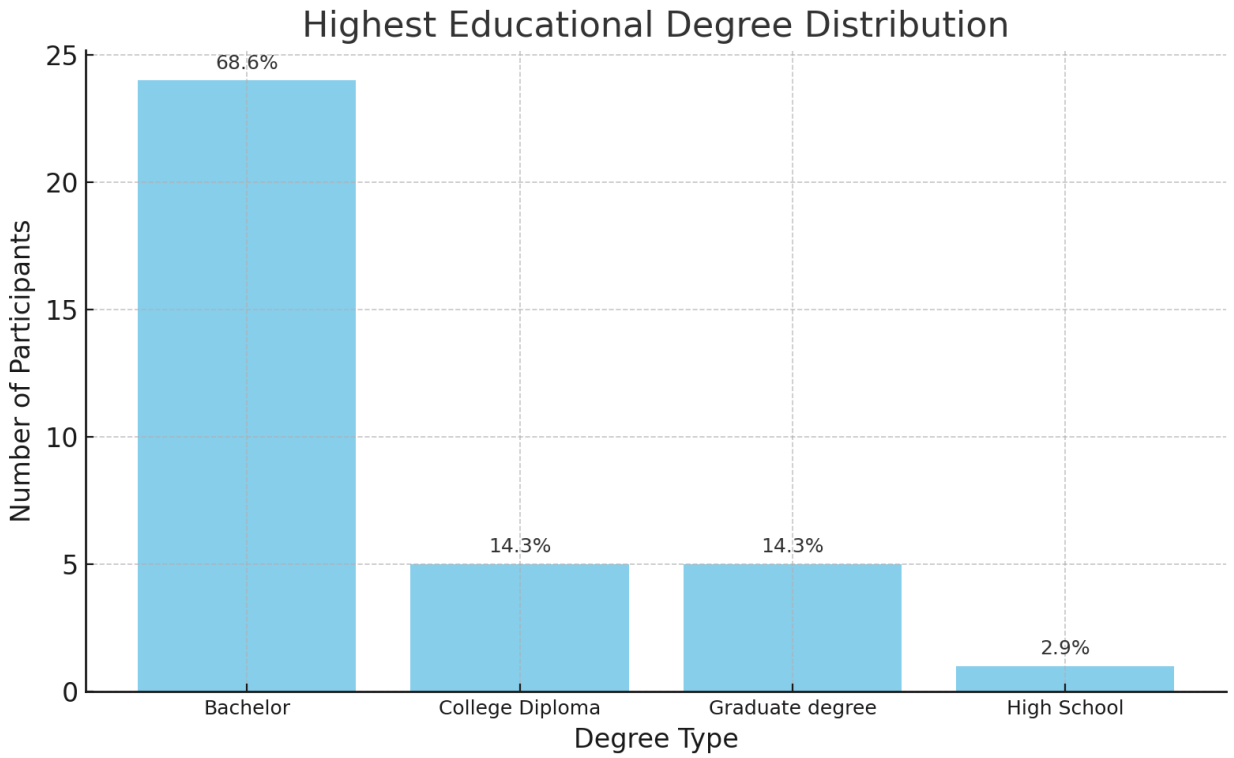


Graph 2. Gender Identity of Participants.

In terms of ethnicity, a large majority of the sample identified as white (31 participants). This trend did not appear to be exclusive to the participants who were interviewed; most of the initial emails received that contained demographic details indicated that the participants identified as white. Still, other ethnicities did participate and are part of the sample. 2 participants identified as Latin American, 2 participants identified as Asian and 1 participant identified as Black.

As part of the Background and Introductory Information section, I also asked the participants about their educational history. Similar to previous research (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020; Smith and Cragun 2019; Marks 2017; Block 2016; Zuckerman et al. 2016), the large majority of participants held upper-level education degrees. Out of the 35 participants, 5 hold a Graduate Degree, 24 hold a Bachelor's degree, 5 hold a College Diploma. Only 1 individual did not hold a secondary education degree.[64]

[64] The educational composition of the sample warrants further consideration in light of the multiple studies that have related nonreligious identity to educational history. The high level of education amongst participants in this sample may therefore confirm, in part, the relationship between education and nonreligious identification documented in Canadian literature. The primary concern of this research is to

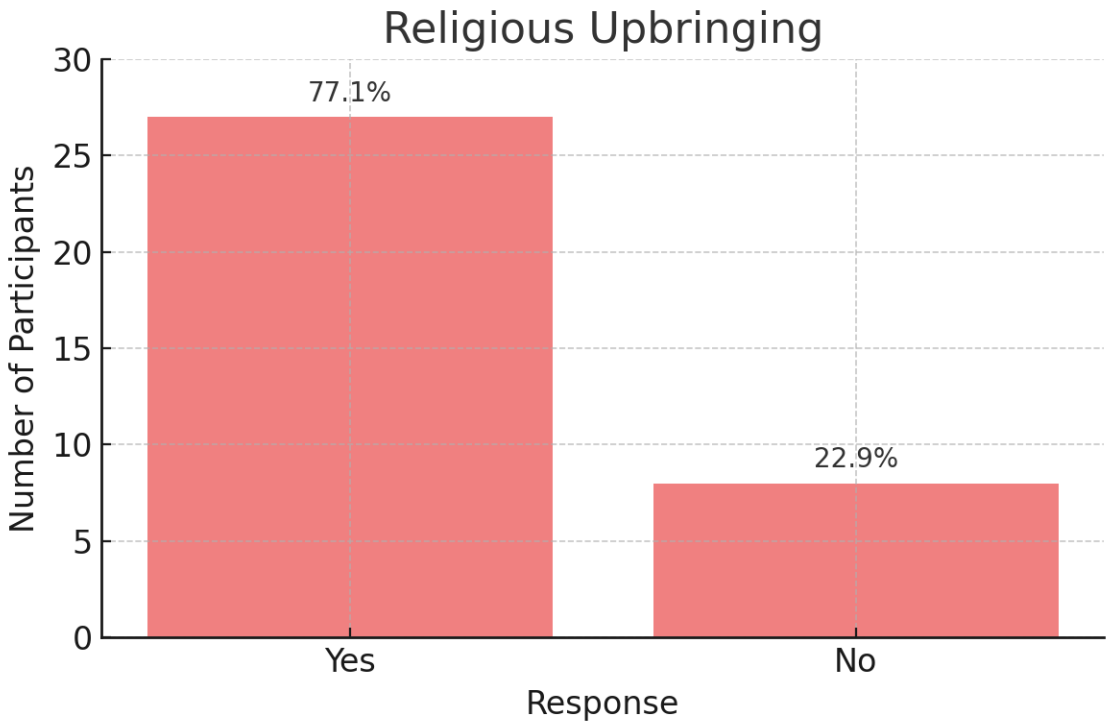


Graph 3. Highest Educational Degree Distribution.

The bulk of the interview dealt with participants' outlooks on death and afterlife, though we also discussed their religious background, trajectory and overall identity. The qualitative aspects of the interviews will be discussed in the analysis dedicated sections of this study. Nonetheless, the following quantitative graphs illustrate the layered complexity of identity trajectories and individual lifestances.

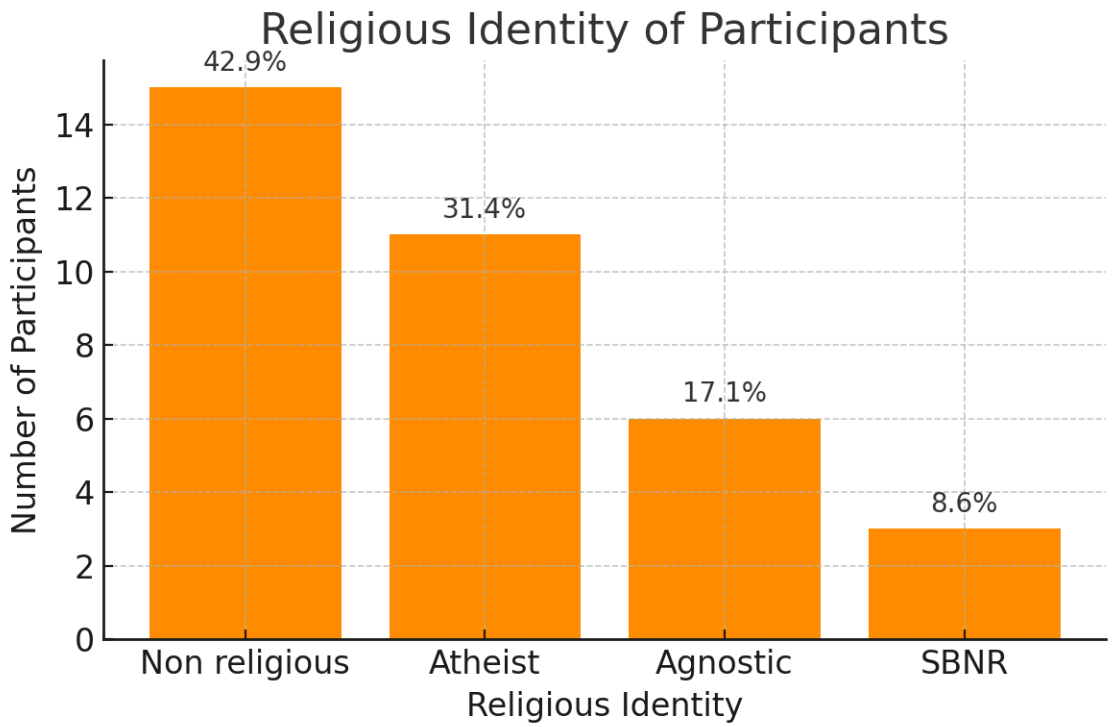
The large majority of the participants claimed to grow up religious. Most recounted stories of going to church when they were younger, or participating in certain religious ceremonies. I will later on describe how meaningful these experiences were for the participants in terms of their current religious identity and lifestance. For now, it is worth noting that out of the sample of 35 participants 27 seven of them grew up in a religious household and only 8 of them grew up in a nonreligious one.

uncover participants' perspectives on death, dying and the afterlife, and thus is limited in scope with regard to further exploring some of the distinctive characteristics of the sample.



Graph 4. Religious Upbringing Distribution.

The majority of the participants simply identified as nonreligious. As previously mentioned, most of them did not care much about labels, nor felt the need to categorize themselves as something other than nonreligious. The notion of nonreligion as a "catch-all" category took a specific meaning in this context; most of the participants claimed that it was simpler or easier to use this as opposed to the negative or complex connotations that other words may carry. A small group of the participants identified as spiritual, but quickly followed that up with a "but I don't practice religion" or "I am not religious". Out of the 35 participants in the study, 15 identified as nonreligious, 11 identified as atheist, 6 identified as agnostic and 3 as spiritual but not religious.



Graph 5. Religious Identity of Participants.

3.2 Socialization processes

Socialization processes are an instrumental part of social reality reproduction. I have previously defined it according to Berger as the period in which the social actor reabsorbs the world presented as objective (Berger 1967). The actor does so by reappropriating the socially objectivated knowledge (i.e. the knowledge that is presented as an established part of reality) through their own subjectivity. Under Berger and Luckmann's scheme, its success depends on whether a symmetry can be established between this "objective world" and an individual's own subjective view of that world (Berger 1967).

I return to this concept because interviews revealed that there is a definite socialization process that takes place as soon as participants' are involved in social interactions. There are certain overarching ideas that are interiorized during initial socialization processes. The clearest example of this is *death.* People are aware of death from a very young age. Or, at the very least, the finality of it. Yet, this awareness is rarely present in neutral terms; it is typically framed and interiorized through available narratives. In other words, how death is first explained during socialization processes is how we imagine it. How we later engage with it nevertheless differs, and other social

processes take place that help us make sense of it, digest the idea or avoid thinking about it until we are forced to confront it.

This fact, on its own, makes death an integral social aspect of social reality. When we're young, our pets die. Family members and friends pass away, and as individuals grow up, they are continually exposed to socially transmitted ideas about what happens after death. In many cases, early encounters with death are immediately mediated through religious or cultural explanations; for example, the idea that the deceased has "gone to heaven". Death is a social phenomenon, and we position ourselves in relation to it from a very young age. Some of the participants expressed how they have been confronted with death all throughout their lives, and have since formed ideas and positioned themselves in relation to it:

> *My maternal grandfather [recently] passed away due to lung cancer. I still don't really know why, but at the funeral, for some reason, I also made a speech about my grandfather and that realization of his passing. I always had pets growing up. So from a young age, I had experience with living things in my life, passing and dying and moving on. (Jordan, works in accounting, male, 33)*

> *I've had to confront death myself, like with older family members and friends, like throughout my life. [Talking about his funeral] I would like, you know, people to gather and remember me if they if they choose, like, no pressure. I'm not going to be there so it's ok, but, when it comes to burial practices, I'd like to be cremated, and, you know, have my ashes spread somewhere meaningful, whether that's like a favorite coastline or, you know, a favorite nature spot. (Oscar, IT project manager, male, 43)*

Based on participants' accounts, I argue that the primary socialization process that Berger and Luckmann refer to should not be understood as a purely pre-interpretive awareness of death. Rather, primary socialization involves the early internalization of taken-for-granted frameworks through which death is understood. In other words, individuals are not only introduced to the fact of death, but to particular ways of making sense of it, often presented as self-evident.

Participants recognized that death is an axiom of our existence. They knew about it from a young age because they were socialized into a world where death happens, to everyone. When confronted

with death, participants socialized knowledge and generated meaning around death based on their circumstances.

> *The only time I remember talking about religion in the house was talking to my siblings. About where aunt Verna went. And none of us really understanding because I was 9 at the time, not really understanding what it went. We knew she was gone forever. We knew that she was, that we could no longer see her, but we were kind of trying to figure out what heaven was… I guess this is what we really were trying to figure out, what heaven was, what God was… And I just remember talking with my younger sister who's, like, a year younger than me about "If there was a God, then why would God take her? Literally a nurse who worked two different jobs, who would give her whole life for other people. Why would he take her and then leave our abusive father? (Kylee, graduate student, female, 32)*

Kylee's account illustrates how primary socialization introduces death within existing cultural and religious frameworks (here, ideas of heaven and God) but does not produce passive acceptance. Even at a young age, participants were actively negotiating these narratives, questioning their logic, and generating their own interpretations. The initial taken-for-granted framing of death was there (my aunt die so she went to heaven), but the subsequent meaning-making and reinterpretation processes have begun already, also through socialization (in this case, a conversation with her siblings).

Death is, above all, a biological fact. While going about life and engaging in diverse socialization processes it could be that death is not an immediate part of our daily life interactions, but it's always in the background. It is not something one can escape or fail to encounter due to an "unsuccessful" socialization process. Nevertheless, we make sense of death mostly through social interactions. When our pets, friends, and family members perish, death exceeds its biological certainty and enters the realm of the social world. The socialization of death, then, consists in its early framing as both an unavoidable event and a meaningful one, embedded within shared cultural narratives. In other words, accepting death as a universal condition (and doing so through particular interpretive lenses) is part of a broad primary socialization process that begins at a very young age.

Death then takes on a different dimension as individuals continue to position themselves in relation to it. This is where secondary socialization processes take place. When we accept, modify, or reject the explanations offered to us, we generate knowledge and create meaning around death. Following Berger and Luckmann's theory, secondary socialization refers to the "internalization" of sub-worlds of meaning (1991: 158). These sub-worlds include the acquisition of role-specific vocabularies and interpretive frameworks tied to particular social domains. (158).

A crude example of Berger and Luckmann's distinction would see the acquisition of the Catholic faith as a primary socialization process, and becoming devoted to a particular saint as a secondary one. However, in the case of death, this distinction is better understood in terms of transformation rather than simple layering. The initial frameworks through which death is understood (often religious) are not simply reproduced but are continuously reworked over time.

In relation to religion, Silverstein et al. (2024) argue: "The successfully transmitted religion generally also transforms as transmission is taking place. The religion that is passed on is rarely the same religion as what the parents or grandparents started with, to some extent because the next generation changes the religion as they adopt it but just as much because the parents change the religion as they are attempting to pass it on" (154). In applying these insights to death, I argue that while individuals are initially socialized into particular interpretative frameworks, these frameworks are continuously reshaped through lived experience. Individuals do not simply inherit stable meanings of death; they reinterpret, negotiate, and sometimes reject them as they encounter new social contexts.

Distinguishing between primary socialization and secondary socialization processes provides analytical clarity for analyzing death and afterlife. Primary socialization processes highlight the initial, taken-for-granted framing of death. In Kylee's case, at 9 years old, she knew that death meant her aunt had "gone to heaven". Over time, however, Kylee has reinterpreted this experience, now believing that "people just cease to exist. There's no afterlife. There's no heaven. There's nothing like that". A combination of an engagement with new ideas, social contexts, and personal reflections led Kylee to shift her stance on death and afterlife. The combination of these changes correspond to secondary socialization processes.

When we adhere specific meanings to certain aspects of social reality, such as death, we enter the realm of secondary socialization processes. Institutionalization processes take form here, with their own set of sub-processes, such as legitimation. I argue that secondary socialization processes are constant. It's in the secondary socialization processes where we take the shared notion of death and then readjust it through our own subjectivity. To give my own provisional definition, secondary socialization processes are the moments in which we internalize given facts about our social reality and contrast them with our own previous interpretations in order to make sense of the social world. Social agency takes on as much as an important role as previously established social structures with their own institutions in place. A secondary socialization process, under Berger and Luckmann's scheme can be "successful" when a particular institution succeeds in passing on particular meaning and knowledge structures. But I argue that secondary socialization processes can be "successful" outside specific institutions; their success and enactment on social reality are not purely dependent on established institutions. They can instead reflect broader or emerging social frameworks.

The way in which all participants make sense of death and afterlife is unique, and reflective of their own subjectivities. Their interpretations are shaped by personal experiences, cultural narratives, and social contexts, which in turn continuously interact with secondary socialization processes. At the same time, participants' engagement with death and the afterlife demonstrates that thinking about death is never neutral or empty of meaning. Across the interviews, I saw diverse ways through which participants integrate death into their lifestances, reflecting both personal experience and the broader socialized frameworks they developed throughout their life.

Some participants accept the inevitability of death as natural:

> *I think the best way for me to express how I feel about it is, it's the same way I feel about breathing or going to the bathroom. I've got to do it. Sometime. And like, I'm not hungry, so I'm not worrying about food. I'm in a stable situation in my life in a stable country with a stable job. All the things I need to keep living are there, so I'm not worrying about it right now. (Irving, high-school teacher, male, 29)*

Some participants who have confronted death have instead internalized it as a transition:

I was there when my grandmother died. And there is, like, I was there during her last breath and there was kind of, like, an oddness to the last breath, that last, like, exhale. And by oddness, I don't really know how to describe it, but it did it. There was a sense as if something left the body and then it was just the body at that moment, like, she was no longer her. She's still there. You still see her. You could still touch her. You could still, like, you know, be with the body. But the person no longer is there anymore. (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)

Some are still struggling with the meaning of death:

It scares me because it's like even though I have these thoughts, it's unknown, no one really knows. And like I said before, the most experience I have like tangible is that it's atheist. And that really drives me, like, that's, that means that when we die, it's done. It's all over. So I have to do everything before then or everything I want to do before then, right? Whereas if it is and even if it we do go to this consciousness I'll probably never get to experience life in the same way as I have now. So there might be things that I'll miss out on. And so, again, I just, it scares me and I do use that as a motivator within my life. But for the most part, I'm scared. I don't want to die. (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)

Sometimes you don't really want to think that deeply about the problem. And so it's easier to just kind of conceptualize like, "oh, yeah, I'm going to be a cardinal" in my next life, you know? Or, like, maybe we'll just restart again. I can't conceptualize nothingness, but I can conceptualize being a person again, you know? But at the end of the day, I do strongly believe that we just cease to exist and nothing happens after. (Vince, project manager, male, 33)

Every participant understood death. Whether the meaning generated around death took the form of acceptance, speculative reconstruction, or confrontation with uncertainty, all participants actively interpreted and positioned themselves in relation to death. For participants, thinking about death is not an empty recognition of a biological fact. It is a constant process that shapes their lifestance, identity, and beliefs, and integrates social and personal dimensions into a meaningful framework that shapes how they relate to and experience the world around them.

Secondary socialization processes are continuous throughout one's life. As will become clear throughout this thesis, death and afterlife outlooks are provisional, reflective and relational. They are not overarching axioms of social life derived from institutionalized social structures, but instead are part of the interplay between social actors and institutions. In a way, much like Berger and Luckmann stated years ago, social reality is a direct result of a dialectical relationship. I argue, though, that social structures are not immovable objective social constructs, but are reflective of the social frameworks that configure and legitimize them. The relational nature of these outlooks makes them transformative, especially when shared, as they can generate new social frameworks. Participants' accounts illustrate how these processes unfold in practice: individuals continuously interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to death and the afterlife, even if they believe that "nothing happens after death".

Secondary socialization processes also show that, in developing their understandings of death and the afterlife, participants do more than reinterpret factual or religious content; they also negotiate the moral dimensions of these experiences. Choices about what constitutes a "good death," how to remember the deceased, or how to act in relation to dying loved ones reflect ethical reasoning in turn shaped by socialization. Socialization is not only cognitive or interpretive; it is deeply moral, and involves a reinterpretation of what participants value, their responsibilities, and relational ethics into participants' evolving lifestances. I will return to this discussion in the following chapter.

3.3 Habitus and social trajectory of belief

Why is it that, when first confronted with death, some participants internalized it as a transition? Why have some internalized it as something inevitable and natural? And what might these mean for how participants generate meaning and develop ethical stances around death and afterlife?

How people see the world and how they make sense of their experiences can be best understood through the idea of *habitus*. Much has been said about the influence of habitus in the development of an identity.[65] After all, biographic experiences and social conditions are one of the main motors behind identity and belief development. Habitus is often envisioned as the lens through which we

[65] See: Cuid (2024) for a study on habitus development amongst racialized communities. See: Stahl et al. (2024) for a deep exploration of the concept of "Transnational Habitus". Also see: Hsieh (2020) for a study on Taiwanese students and their habitus modification and improvisation processes.

see the world, and shows the specific ways in which we embody our beliefs. In analytical terms, habitus potentially allows a way for researchers to explore the reasons why someone stopped believing in the Christian god in the first place.

This sub-section focuses on showing that an exploratory habitus analysis reveals three aspects of the historically and socially contingent nature of our lifestances: 1. habitus conditions an individual's subjective meaning and knowledge generating structures, but it is not deterministic and is in continuous reconfiguration. 2. given that we *embody* our habitus, we also transform it beyond predetermined social structures as experienced in diverse social contexts. 3. habitus *can* be conceived as a transformative force, reflective of social agency.

As mentioned earlier, *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1979) encapsulates the structured yet generative schemes of perception and action shaped by one's position within fields (or, by extension, social structures).[66] It is a conditioning structuring structure within our subjectivity that structures perceptions and practices. It offers the individual a framework of dispositions that orients actions in a specific way. Ultimately, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is not a predictor of human activity, but establishes that agency is only possible within pre-established structural constraints.

Agency is not always conditioned by deeply socialized structures constraints. At least in matters related to the social identity of belief in death and afterlife, habitus conditions as much as it is conditioned by our own socio-historical lifestances. Our adherence to a lifestance under different social and historic conditions has an effect on our social world and influences the lenses through which we see the world.

The idea of fixed, pre-established structural and personal constraints implies that individuals are static, rather than shaped by the diverse social experiences and structures they encounter over time. Even when such diverse encounters occur, individuals remain constrained by their habitus, which

[66] It's important to note here that Bourdieu did not equate his concept of "fields" to social structures. Under Bourdieu, a field is a structured social space with its own rules, hierarchies, and forms of capital. They are dynamic; these are the spaces where struggles between agents most clearly transform social reality. I do not adhere to Bourdieu's concept of fields during this analysis, although I recognize the possible additional nuances that this concept can bring to it. What I refer to here is that fields, as structured social spaces, are part of broader social structures. Thus, moving forward, when I refer to habitus, I do not intend to diminish the importance that fields have in shaping one's own beliefs and identity; rather, I argue that fields exist within broader social structures.

limits how they perceive and act like under almost every scenario. This view suggests that individuals influence their social context only within the bounds of the capital they possess.[67]

Instead, this thesis shows that habitus as dynamic[68] and dialectical. We are confronted with diverse situations throughout our life, death being just one of them, that require us to adjust the array of tools at our disposal for navigating social life. However, what those tools look like and how we embody those new acquisitions is a process conditioned not only by our own biography, but by the continuous confrontation of our subjective meaning and knowledge generating forces against social reality.

The participants in this research illustrate the fact that habitus characteristics are dynamic and dialectical. Their interviews are marked by the recognition of their own individual historicity and the changes that go with it. Precisely because they *embodied* their historically situated habitus; precisely because they acted on the world with the tools they had acquired at the time, is precisely the same reason why, under particular circumstances, social actors reconfigure it in accordance to their own new experiences and their own subjective meaning and knowledge structures. Social actors face the world, navigate fields and social structures and do not come out unchanged: Inner structures change, meaning generating forces change, and lifestances do too. Beyond a site of negotiation and struggle, continuous interactions with institutions and social structures constantly modify who we are.

Gabriela, a daughter of Latino immigrants, briefly recounted her own experience with the Catholic Church in Canada. She loved going to church when she was younger. Church was, in her own experience,

> *a potluck. Everybody would hang out. There was music, live music, we would dance. We would eat. And so for me, growing up Catholic was more like community for my family. And the priest was constantly just... kind of preaching, like, be a good person, love people, like... treat others the way you wanna be treated, you know? And we would always go home just kind of feeling like... we wanna be a bit of a better person. And I thought that was a really beautiful way to be. When that priest left, a new priest came in. And he, right away,*

[67] I refer here to Bourdieu's concept of social, cultural and economic capital.
[68] See footnotes 45 and 66 for brief descriptions of Bourdieu's notion of fields.

was like, 'If you don't wear condoms, you're going to hell. If you're gay, get out.' And that was like, whoa. I was just old enough to realize, like, what? This is not for me. So I realized I actually got to see a very good side of that religion, which... a lot of people don't experience. And then I saw a bit of the darker side of that religion. That was horrible. He didn't allow, like, most women to go to the church. You couldn't dress in shorts, like... all these things that are, to me, very ridic…like, just really ridiculous. I also got an education and realized, like, I don't actually believe in Jesus or anyone in the sky, or anything. (Gabriela, music teacher, female, 31)

Gabriela experienced life through her habitus. She danced, went to mass often with her family and was an active part of the community. She would accept the priest's teachings and overall liked and felt better after coming home from church. When Gabriela interacted with a new priest that deeply contradicted her own views, she left. She further separated from the Catholic belief-system when she went to college.

Curtis grew up in Alberta, in a deeply religious evangelical Christian family. His life trajectory and identity development had an effect on his previously held beliefs and how he perceived the world. He now identifies as nonreligious and explained his life trajectory [or, the course or path his life had taken] in the following way:

I'm gay. I discovered that when I was about 14 or 15, which definitely had an effect on the trajectory of my religious views for the rest of my life… My big religious change occurred when I was 19 years old. Prior to that, as I said, I have been raised as an evangelical Christian, and I expected that immediately, immediately upon death, I would meet face to face with God and be judged. And then proceed either to heaven or hell, depending on what I believed. When I was 19, and this is a few years sort of, after having questioning my sexuality, I took an interesting course at the University of Alberta in my third year, just as an arts option, it was very interesting to me… It was that sort of thing, it was the first time I combined analytical thinking with the religious beliefs that I had been brought up with, and I remember thinking to myself around that time that the course does a very, very good job of reconciling science and religion. It raised the question to me for the first time why I believe in that in the first place. (Curtis, electrician, male, 36)

Kevin simply left church when he wasn't living at home anymore:

> *I was forced to go to church, like, every week. I was an altar boy for a number of years. I kept being an altar boy just to get my community hours in high school, 'cause I had to go there every week with my family anyway. But like, the second I moved out of the house, I never went to church again. (Kevin, works in cybersecurity, male, 34)*

Kevin was an altar boy when he was younger. Religion was a very active part of his life. But he did not like going to church, he just could not act on his wishes until he left home. His excerpt nonetheless reveals the interconnected nature shared between habitus and social agency.

His case further speaks to a reconfiguration of habitus over time. While Kevin complied with religious expectations during his youth, this was closely tied to the constraints of his family environment. Once he left home and gained greater control over his social context, he was able to act in accordance with his own dispositions and preferences. His decision to stop attending church does not reflect a failure to "socialize" him into catholic church. Rather, it shows the ongoing and dynamic nature of socialization processes in which habitus is continuously reshaped through the interplay between social structures and individual agency.

Nonetheless, social context and habitus does have certain conditioning effects. They may just present themselves in unexpected ways, precisely because they are mediated by social agency and a lifestances. Karin, for example, also grew up somewhat close to religion. They stopped formally going to church, but they enjoy thinking about the "big questions"; the sort of questions that often came about during their time in church.

> *So when I was growing we went to church, it was United Church of Canada, so God was love, which I came to understand later, is not everyone's experience. We didn't go in the summer and we didn't go in the winter, but we went in spring and fall, and then we went for Easter and Christmas. We did Sunday school and we were sort of semi consistently throughout the year until I was a teenager. I never got confirmed. But I did occasionally enjoy going to church with my mom after that and I really enjoyed like the singing, and I enjoyed the sermons. I've always really enjoyed, like thinking about, sort of like the big questions. (Karin, community worker, non-binary, 34)*

Oscar also recounts the positive effects that church had when he was younger. A son of immigrants, he remembers his time in church as a loving effort from his mother to help them adapt to life in Canada. He also recounts how his time in church helped him move through life and understand other people, but he never really thought about the "bigger questions" until later in life. He was never a Christian and does not consider himself a Buddhist, yet he currently identifies as SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious):

> *I was raised as a Buddhist, right? And I was also, somehow, I went to Sunday school too, like, Christian Sunday. I don't know how that happened, but none of it caught on. So like I had a Bible as a kid, I remember I had a Bible and at the same time I also had, like Buddhists content with me as well. And while my mother is strongly Buddhist, I, for whatever, like, maybe as a child, being ignorant and not appreciating things and not maybe just having the maturity level to comprehend it just, none of it stuck. It didn't stick. And then and then you start discovering, I'm like, "ok no one, not everybody is like this", right? Not everybody is Buddhist. Not everyone is Christian or Catholic or Muslim. As I started making friends, understanding how they were raised and, like, "oh people live differently and live their lives to different values and core fundamentals". And so that's when I started thinking about "ok many people start living different ways, I don't have to adhere to a way that doesn't make sense for me because there are lots of religions out there." And I think it came down to a point that I think maybe in my late teens, early 20s, I recognized that religion was also lost. Somebody's a great writer, right? Somebody's a fantastic writer and wrote a Great book that people love to read. (Oscar, IT project manager, male, 43)*

Looking back on her religious past, Gwen is now able to identify the things she liked and did not like about her time in church. She misses the community generated around it, yet remembers the pressures that came with it:

> *I felt like there was some sense of, like, community, but also a lot of pressure. Like, you know, there was this sort of set of standards to fit into, and the things you're supposed to do and the way you're supposed to be. I don't know what the system is like now, but back then it was very, like... we didn't talk about sex or birth control or, uh, you know, non-traditional relationships, like, nothing. Because none of that fell under the scope of, at least at the time, the Catholic Church and their prerogative through education. So it felt very much like... in*

> *a box. And like, I'm also someone who's never wanted to have children. And I realized that fairly young, and already I felt like, oh, that feels weird, like, I don't like children, why is that? You know? So I think, like, there was some good aspect, like, this sense of community and people who all want to spend time together and treat each other well. But you had to fit into this box. (Gwen, works in labour relations, female, 34)*

Like Gwen, participants reassessed, reinterpreted and eventually reoriented their lives based on their experiences over time. Their current lifestances are not fixed outcomes of early conditioning, but ongoing formations shaped by both structure and agency. During this constant process, orientations toward religion shift. The key insight here is that these orientations and reassessments are not neutral. They are evaluative. In other words, participants reflect on what they consider valuable, meaningful, or acceptable in their lives and act accordingly. Through this process, questions of value become questions of morality, as individuals develop clearer positions on how they ought to live, what they reject, and what they affirm. Their changing relationship to religion, then, is not only a shift in belief, but part of a broader reworking of their moral orientation to the world.

What these narratives share is not a simple pattern of acceptance or rejection, but a process of change. Gabriela left church when she found that her inner meaning and knowledge structures did not coincide with the new priest's view. Curtis's sexual orientation alongside university education reconfigured his lifestance. Kevin was an altar boy, but separated himself from church as soon as he was able to. Karin likes the singing and the sermons, but realized early on that what she truly liked was thinking about the "big questions". Oscar initially did not care about those "big questions", yet currently identifies as SBNR.

Answering *why* someone's belief follows a particular trajectory is layered, complex and involves considerations that relate to deeply personal life experiences. The specific reasons, as I have shown, are often related to a particular individual's life trajectory, though there are common social dimensions that can be identified to have had an influence on an individual's particular lifestance. All participants in this study went through early religious socialization processes within their families, and were presented with institutional norms and expectations, peer influences, and wider cultural frameworks that defined their acceptable beliefs, practices, and identities. These elements did not operate in isolation, but interacted over time as participants moved through different stages

of their lives. As their social contexts shifted, so too did the relative influence of these factors, allowing for moments of continuity as well as change.

At the same time, as participants reassess their past experiences and present circumstances, they continued to develop and refine their own ethical stances; what they now consider right, meaningful or worth pursuing is born out of a process of negotiation between their subjective experiences and the social reality around them.

The next chapter will demonstrate the concrete emerging imaginaries of death and dying amongst participants. As I have shown so far, these are not simply inherited or rejected, but actively produced through continuous processes of socialization and reflexive engagements with one's habitus. Throughout this chapter I have established how socialization and habitus operate at a conceptual level. The following chapter puts into play, exemplifies, and then analyzes the concrete ways in which processes of socialization and engagements with habitus take shape in lived experience. Put simply, I will show how these translate into particular emerging orientations towards death and dying.

Chapter 4. Born to die: Immanent certainty

My mother told me I cried in her womb.

They said to her: He'll be lucky.

Someone spoke to me every day of my life

in my ear, gently, slowly.

They said to me: live, live, live!

It was death.

— Del Mito [translated from Spanish], by Jaime Sabines (1926-1999) —

Declining religious affiliations, alongside the increase of the nonreligious population has diminished religion's influence in framing death and dying (Walter 1994; Dawdy 2021). Death is an historically contingent experience informed by social context (Ariès 1974; Lawton 2000; Lofland 1978), and as new understandings of death and dying begin to take shape, individuals are simultaneously positioning themselves in relation to the world.

Imaginaries of death and dying are a key site through which broader questions of value, morality, and existential orientation are articulated and reworked. Participants' narratives are examples of how nonreligious individuals are framing death and dying in the evolving religious landscape that is Canada. This chapter shows that participants assign value, determine what is worth pursuing, and construct moral and ethical depth in ways that are grounded in lived experience rather than institutionalized religion.

Participants' narratives emerge as a different configuration of meaning-making that are situated, negotiated and, most importantly, not anchored to specific religious institutions. These are diverse in terms of content, yet similar in that they highlight a separation from institutionalized forms of religion yet remain equally as meaningful for participants.

Each interview I conducted reflected a unique life trajectory. Their perspectives were all anchored to lived experiences as much as they were evaluative and reflective of how each participant understood and imagined how their views fit in the world. At the same time, their views on death were grounded on morally charged ways of viewing life, death and others.

Such is the case of my interview with Lauren. She works as a licensed trauma therapist and has long engaged with many people who have faced death directly. During our conversation, she referred to her work several times and offered a revealing account of the biological response that living beings (including humans) have to certain death-related stimuli:

> *One of my favorite things about what I've learned about trauma is that, we've all heard of the fight and flight response, right? That we have to threats or things we fear. But what happens is that there's an escalation. If we can't run from something, we'll fight it. If we can't fight it off, then we sort of… we play dead, basically. And if we can't play dead, then we go into collapse, like actually fainting, actually passing out.*
>
> *You'll see this in other animals. They even have trigger points on certain parts of their throat and on their temples, where if an animal has them by the throat or by the head, it's, by that point, kind of over. Like, "okay, this is the end now". And so when those trigger points are activated, they just basically pass out.*
>
> *Our brains have this awareness, or this mechanism, that allows us to say: okay, if you can get out of this, run for your life. If you can't, fight for your life. If you can't fight, play dead, maybe they'll leave you alone. But if it's not stopping what's coming, then you don't have to be here for this. You don't have to suffer.*
>
> *It just shuts off conscious awareness; it completely shuts us down. I find that so fascinating, because it's not really a survival strategy. There's no survival advantage to passing out right before you die. But it's there. It's almost like a kindness that our brains build in for us, like saying "okay, when there's no way out, you don't have to be here for this. We'll just take away the conscious awareness of it". (Lauren, therapist, female, 42)*

Lauren suggested that, in some ways, we are biologically born ready to die. All things considered, if we are in a biological countdown from the very moment we are born, how do we make sense of such a realization?

Berger and Luckmann would argue that the thing that makes us human, what distinguishes us from animals, is that humans have a innate need to "create meaning" (1991). Whether we're born biologically ready to die or not, we still need to make sense of the fact that we are all going to die. The assimilation of death extends beyond the acknowledgment of the end of individual consciousness; it is clearly a shared social process. How we make sense of someone's death makes us reflect on how we understand death in the first place. In that same vein, participants' accounts may reveal that what we are witnessing is a fundamental change in terms of how some people digest, accept and imagine the idea of death.

On that note, the following chapter reflects on how the participants in this study make sense of their mortality. How participants become "aware" of someone's death (both their own and others'), how they find certainties in death and make sense of them, and how they approach thinking about death and dying are all interconnected processes that signal a shift in how some nonreligious individuals are creating meaning and developing moral structures around death and dying. Their perspectives on death were a gateway to how they generated meaning and developed moral stances around the world.

Every single participant had an opinion around death. Their insights differed, significantly in some cases, yet the more we delved into these topics, the more it became clear that they actually had a pretty clear idea of what their death meant, both for them and for others. Some of them didn't think about death often, some thought about it every day. Some had already thought about ideal burial practices or methods of disposition, a few had not even thought about it until I asked them that question. Nonetheless, all of them positioned themselves around the fact that they were going to die one day. The proposed theme of immanent certainty captures the diverse changes and positions that participants have held throughout their lives around death awareness, certainty around death, as well as their overall thoughts surrounding death.

4.1 A reconfiguration of death awareness

What matters for the present research is *how* the participants position themselves around their mortality. There may be a biological component to the awareness of death, but the social dimension is nuanced, to say the least. On the one hand stands the awareness and acceptance of our own death; on the other, the awareness and acceptance of the death of others. Both constitute deeply interconnected social processes and expand beyond simple recognitions of mortality.

Participants rarely described death as a concept or an idea in isolation. Death was always connected to an element of their own social reality. When discussing it as an abstract concept, most participants would immediately refer to their own death or the death of the people they were close with. When contemplating their own death, participants would bring up their families, their hopes for them and what they would think their closed ones would act like upon their death. Asking them about their own ideas of death and afterlife would also see them refer to their own experiences; these, in turn, often extended to a close family member or friend passing away. Talking about death allowed participants to reflect on their life, the life of others, what role they play in the world, what they value, what they don't, and, perhaps most importantly, what is morally acceptable and reprehensible when it comes to death and dying.

Most participants became aware of their own death and the death of others at a young age. But this awareness alone did not determine their orientations. Rather, it was through an ongoing confrontation between subjective meanings and socially objectivated knowledge that participants reconfigured how they engaged with mortality. For several participants, these confrontations were not only moments of "existential" reflection, but also points of rupture with previously held religious frameworks. These experiences of death did not simply intensify belief; they exposed its limits, and prompted a transition toward ruptures with established religious frameworks when available explanations were perceived as insufficient, unjust, or emotionally unconvincing:

> *The turning point would have been at my father's death. I was quite young when he left and dealing with the death, I didn't find the fact that he was going to a better place better. In fact, one of the things, because we were Catholic, but he was not, his funeral was done at the Catholic Church, but the crucifix was covered because he wasn't Catholic. And that really, that struck me pretty hard as being callous. And so, I think that may have been part of the turning point of not believing anymore. But then dealing also with my grief and the*

thought of death, because at that point death was quite on my mind and, like, am I going to meet my father in heaven again? And what does that mean and? I was kind of coming to the realization that all of it is created because of a fear of death. And if you take away that fear, it almost took away the foundation of it for me. (David, automotive technician, male, 43)

When I was 12, just after my 12th birthday… I had an aunt. My mom's sister passed away and then literally on the same day, my dad's best friend, who was like, I considered my uncle, passed away. And I also had a pet that passed away within a week. So that really smacked me in the face with, like, mortality. It wasn't the first time I experienced it, but it was the first time I, like, understood that these people are gone from my life forever. I will never see Boo or Crystal again ever in my life. And that is when, yeah, I started to ask questions about religion and church and kind of fell out of faith, because I wasn't getting it… I didn't hear any answers that I thought were just… Or that I liked. (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)

Before my mom died, I never really thought about death that much. I was just like, yeah, it's probably nothing, who cares? But now there's like stakes. And I mean, I used to be a very sort of staunch and kind of shit atheist. And then I started meditating and I was like, ohh, there's something going on here… Yeah, I think, I think, I mean, my sort of… I started becoming more spiritual before that, but my mom's death definitely got me thinking more specifically about death, because before then I'd never really lost anyone close to me. (Karin, community worker, non-binary, 34)

Interviews also revealed that death awareness entails not only the recognition of its inevitability, but also the understanding that death transcends the individual. We prepare for our own death and reflect on it intermittently, but we also encounter and process the deaths of others throughout our lives. Death is "ordinary"; a fundamental social experience.[69] Participants digest and accept that it's part of their lives, not necessarily a mystical transcendent experience:

[69] The narrative of death as "ordinary" has been also articulated by the "death awareness" movement (Walter 1994; Attig and Stillion 2015). According to Walter (2019), these movements seek to expand the narrative "that death (like birth) is not a medical event but a natural part of life; citizens are urged to talk about death, not least in order to guarantee a 'good death' (400).

So the idea [dying] has always kind of been around and out there and, like I said, my dad was quite sick when I was young and he did come very close to dying. So we did have to have non religious conversations about death as well as a family because it was a very real possibility, and he did survive. But around the same time we had like a mass death in our front, like my grandparents, my uncle and my [other] uncle all died within 18 months, and that was also when my dad was sick. So, there was a lot of death in a very short period of time and I was quite young. I was probably 5 or 6. So like those are some of actually my first memories. That's kind of always been like just, yeah, people get old and die or people get sick and die like, that's always all of us. (Gwen, works in labour relations, female, 34)

I try not to think about how I'm going to die, but that's only because, you know, I'm 38. I've seen a lot of people pass, and there could be a million different ways it could happen. I could be in a car accident tomorrow, and that would be tragic. Or it could be forty years from now, on a deathbed, I don't know. My grandmother passed away from cancer, and that's one way I don't want to die. And when I said I had a tumultuous upbringing, I remember there was a time when I didn't think I would live to see twenty. I lived very differently back then than I do now, and trying to balance that is challenging. I could die tomorrow, but I probably won't. (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)

Not nearly as often as I used to [think about death] back when I was dealing with my mental health as a teenager. If I had to put a number on it, how many times per period, I mean, well, I suppose I do think about it fairly regularly. It comes up, because we're on a planet that's now tipped over eight billion people, and there are people dying every day. And there's people dying every second. Almost. I'm pretty sure. There's a war going on. People die. And that reminds me of my mortality because, I'm a person. Just last month, my mom's cat passed away. That reminds me of mortality and, I don't dwell on it, but it's a fairly common thing for to come across my mind…Yeah, it's gonna happen. (Jordan, works in accounting, male, 33)

Participants' narratives reflected an understanding of life and individuality as elements of their lives that exert influence not by persisting after death, but through the very social relations and

experiences that continue after. This idea holds a certain appeal for the participants; knowing that what they have now is all they get, even if they believe a part of them may survive death, changes the way in which they approach life. Much like what this chapter's title alludes to, the participants know they are going to die, and choose to engage with this fact through an immanent conception of the world. For participants, life had meaning within the world *as is,* and their daily life experiences were their main way of making sense of this fact.

As participants come to terms with the possibility that death may mark the end of individual experience (or, at the very least, that there are no "do overs"), they are compelled to reconsider how life ought to be lived. Mortality introduces a sense of finitude that reshapes their orientation toward time, risk, and responsibility.

Life is finite for participants, thus, how they live their lives becomes a morally charged decision. Time in this earth is scarce and must be used well. Actions have no "cosmic" correction, so the responsibility to take advantage of the time here increases: how to make life "worth it," how to use one's time, and how to position oneself in relation to others are some of the questions that a finite view on life prompted. There was meaning in death, beyond the fact that it all (might) end there:

> *I think about my death. Often I would say. I don't want to say every day, but pretty close. I lived a very tumultuous life when I was younger, had a lot of close calls and have had near death experiences a couple of times, so I'm very aware that it could happen at any time. And so, like I said, when I'm trying to find motivation for something, I think of that and a Latin term essentially called "memento mori", which means remember death, remember we will die, so "carpe diem" essentially. (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)*

> *I try to be a little bit more outgoing I think than I was before, only because the realization that this is kind of your only one turn around the board… you know, the one go around is that you don't really kind of get any do overs. There's no kind of replay at the end. So, I try to live life as it happens, you know, not completely spontaneously, but… you know, try to live in the moment and appreciate everything that you have. (Jarrod, commercial insurance broker, male 36)*

A lot of sadness, contemplation [when she thinks about death]. This is a value judgment, so it's not the words that really I want to say, but, how do I make it worth it? Like, I know I'm going to die. I know everybody I love is. I know we're all going to die, so… I definitely know that's gonna happen. How do I make it so that the time before that is like spent? (Lila, graduate student, female, 30)

For Adam, death is a reminder that he needs to take care of his life:

There are other times when I do think about it [death], especially because I'm very familiar with seeing people die, just based on the nature of my work. Sometimes I think about it more when I see people my own age passing away, or when I hear about others. Because I work for [organization omitted], I'm very familiar with suicides; I do see those as well… after going through what I've seen and what I do for work, I tend to self-reflect. And sometimes that reflection takes on what might sound like a slightly self-focused view, almost narcissistic, maybe, where I start thinking about how people age and become less healthy, sometimes earlier, sometimes later. But it always comes: that steady march toward death.

It's something that concerns me, and I think it's also a big motivating factor for why I try to take such good care of myself in general. I've abstained from heavy drug use, or really any drug use. I've almost stopped drinking entirely. I was never anywhere close to being an alcoholic, but it's just something I don't really do anymore. If I drink, it's on very rare occasions. I don't smoke marijuana or cigarettes; I've never smoked tobacco in my life, and I don't ever plan to… I try to enjoy the process of things that others might find tedious, like exercising or eating healthy, and take pleasure in that process. That way, I get to enjoy certain things later on: delayed gratification, so to speak. (Adam, emergency nurse, male, 32)

Some participants, like David (automotive technician, male, 43), thought that after death "there is nothing", thus "after I'm dead, then there is nothing to fear". Dan (supervisor, male, 38) for example, has recently began to believe in souls after long believing that "once you died, you were done". In all cases, it was okay to not know, even if that provoked fear or other unpleasant thoughts. Death, overall, helped give life meaning. And life gave meaning to death.

Stan's daily work experiences, for example, have helped him make peace with death, but also enhanced his perspective on life:

> *I might be a bit of an extreme case in that, since I deal with death and dying people all the time, I'm a little desensitized to it. At the end of the day, I accept that it will happen to everybody, myself included. I suppose it's kind of comforting in a way, knowing that, yeah, it'll happen. But seeing some of the terrible cases that I do also makes me appreciate life a lot, you know? So I try to live life to the fullest every day and have no regrets. If it happens, it happens. (Stan, critical care nurse, male, 31)*

Participants' reflections overall pointed to a commitment of living deliberately. The recognition that "this is the only one go around" was a principle for action; it guided decisions about self-care, relationships, and the pursuit of meaningful experiences. Death acquires a moral dimension here. It is a measure against which life is evaluated. What participants have is all they get. What participants do is all that remains. Their lived experiences may not transcend the social world they inhabit, but these are certainly grounded within it, and they shape how they inhabit and lead their lives.

Munsley, for example, recounts the time she almost died of an overdose:

> *I am grateful that I didn't die. Obviously, it changed my perspective on a lot of what I was doing in my living life to not want to ever end up there again. I mean, I was feeling relatively reckless, not suicidal, but lackadaisical or passive. I had a passive attitude towards living. Things weren't going well for me, so it didn't really seem like a big deal. Like, if it happened, it was going to happen. But then obviously that happened. You know, it happened. And I was like, well, I really don't want to die at 27 like that. That doesn't seem right. There's so much more I want to do. So now I kind of consider death as something that I'm striving for much later in life. That I think I'll feel grateful that I got to continue living and I think death can be really a beautiful thing that when somebody lives a full fulfilled life that it's almost a celebration of that, where it's like "congratulations, you actually got to live a full life, you got to experience the human experience for this many years". And I think that's something to cherish and be really proud of and really celebrate. And so I do welcome death now with open arms when it's my time. But I'm not going to live a lifestyle where I'm*

risk taking and actively bringing, you know, ushering it closer to me. I think I've scared myself enough from it that I'm a little more, a little more anxious to just get it started kind of things (Munsley, works for an education centre, female, 30).

Jordan had a somewhat similar experience:

When I was 19 or 18 around that time I myself had a near death experience where I was at one point essentially considered hours away from dying. And I have absolutely no recollection of that experience whatsoever, no sense that anything was going to happen. It's simply that for me. There was leading up to it and then there was where I lost consciousness. And then I regained consciousness the next day. There is nothing in between. There is nothing. If I had died then. That would have been it. So that is what informs my belief that when we die, well, you get one playthrough and when it's over, it's over. (Jordan, works in accounting, male, 33)

For these participants, what was previously a passive or indifferent stance towards life was reconfigured into a deliberate effort to "make it worth it". Their past proximity to death produced a renewed commitment to living. When Munsley and Jordan confronted the finitude of life and deliberately chose to "make it worth it" they also evaluated life ethically: what counts as a meaningful, good, or worthy life is what matters to them. In a way, the recognition of the finitude of death is a catalyst for moral reorientation: when there are no second chances, decisions about how to live (how to act, relate to others and prioritize what matters) take on a different moral dimension.

Devon's reflection pushes this logic further by identifying a perceived inconsistency in others. For him, the fear of death should logically result in a more intense engagement with life. The fact that it often does not reveals what he sees as a paradox: awareness of death does not automatically translate into a transformed way of living. Implicit in his statement, however, is a morally charged claim: if this is the only life one has, then it ought to be lived fully.

I don't understand what scares people about it [death]. Is it the finality of it? But then, I find that the people who are most afraid of death don't seem to live their lives to the fullest, which I find kind of paradoxical. If you're so concerned about death, then you should live

every day almost recklessly, just enjoying life to the fullest. Live. (Devon, works for parliament, male, 30)

Shifts in participants' lifestances involved a reconfiguration of death awareness that did not rely on religious frameworks to make sense of the fact that life will inevitably end. Beyond religious and institutionalized explanations of death, participants adjusted their beliefs when certain situations in their immediate life experiences required them to do so. These changes in beliefs did not come about without a reevaluation of what they valued about life and how they could make the most out of their limited time in the world. Death awareness is a catalyst for action, change, and reevaluation of lifestances, as well as an ethical commitment to the world and themselves..

Furthermore, these reconfigurations of death awareness and senses of mortality were developed outside of religious frameworks, even though most participants had a religious background. Religious explanations were not accurate or necessary for most participants, and their own encounters with death proved to be the best reference towards reevaluating their own death awareness:

I can definitely remember being younger and feeling like a lot of stress about death when I was religious, because it's a problem. There's this eternity and there's like a punishment or reward. But now I just, I just don't think of, I don't think about death the way that I used to (Paul, works in human resources, male, 38)

At my age now, it's more of a realization that I will eventually die, and there's no feelings behind it. I'm not happy. I'm not sad. It's just life. When I was younger, I think part of me finding my way into this was dealing with death and realizing that there is nothing after I'm dead, then there is nothing to fear. (David, automotive technician, male, 43)

I think as an individual, it's kind of scary sometimes to think about your… That one day I will no longer exist. That one day I will have thoughts that are just gone and I think there is an understandable kind of fear or distress. That you know, I sometimes get with thinking that, but it's kind of folly. My understanding of things not being permanent allows myself to not always become so attached to things, if that makes any sense. (Mark, university student/bingo hall worker, non-binary, 36)

Death can be frightening, but like Mark points out, the realization of its finality allowed participants to relate to their surroundings in a different way than when they were religious. There is no void that ought to be filled by a religious explanation; quite the contrary, the recognition of life's "immanence" encourages a more immediate and attentive engagement with the world; it sometimes even alleviates the scary parts of "non-existence" for some participants. Of course, some participants believe in a continuation after death, but that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Overall, participants' accounts represent historically and socially contingent ways of thinking about death and dying in current time; and that is precisely what makes them relevant. Their importance lies in the fact that they reveal the *current* structures of meaning through which individuals navigate existential questions in their immediate social world. A reconfiguration of death awareness is not something that *could* happen, it already has for the individuals that are part of the study.[70]

How participants positioned themselves around death is a result of enacted patterned dispositions, as much as individual and collective experiences. Simultaneously, these emerged through processes of secondary socialization, where individuals continuously renegotiate and internalize interpretive frameworks throughout their life as they encountered new communities, cultural repertoires, and life circumstances.

Of particular note is the link that exists between death awareness and the reorientation of moral stances. Meaning emerges through one's actions, relationships, and experiences, and participants orient themselves morally and make choices that reflect the value they place on life, others, and their own existence. Moral structures are "individualized", yet they emerge from social interaction. Participants' orientations towards life do not come from abstract systems imposed from within institutionalized religion, but are conceived as lived frameworks constructed through reflexivity, experience and relationality. Death awareness is a clear example this process. When participants

[70] Other studies have already begun to trace similar shifts. See, for example, Maza and Miller (2025 – in review). The paper examined changes in obituary language and found that explicitly religious references have nearly disappeared. The analysis revealed that current obituaries now tend to emphasize the personality, relationships, and life achievements of the deceased over explicit mentions of afterlife or references to religion. See also: Miller et al. (2024) for a detailed analysis of changes in language of obituaries through time.

confront the finitude of life, their moral orientations are not diminished but recalibrated, and often become more defined or intensified.

In orienting themselves towards death, participants are also orienting themselves within a moral landscape that transcends and challenges the "stability" once provided by religious frameworks. A reconfiguration of death "awareness" highlights a moral dimension that is anchored less in purely transcendent frames and more into immanence, where meaning emerges as a result of daily life experiences. These new frameworks do not signify that meaning comes purely from immanent interpretations of the world, nor does it mean that the transcendent is no longer relevant for participants. As I will show in the next chapter, the intellectual separation between immanent and transcendent stances may be as limiting as the religious/nonreligious dichotomy. The immanent does not negate the transcendent, but instead reconfigures it.

Above all, these perspectives demonstrate how meaning-making and knowledge-generating structures are historically contingent; they are but a snapshot of the current social imaginary. Nevertheless, as Berger and Luckmann (1991) suggest, such meanings have the potential to sediment and become institutionalized if they are collectively reinforced and transmitted across time. Following that logic, I argue that what participants expressed reflects not only their individual orientations but also socially embedded patterns that, while rooted in the present, may crystallize into new frameworks for making sense of death and dying.

Participants' accounts demonstrate not simply a transformation in beliefs about death, but a potentially broader reconfiguration of moral and existential frameworks. Death "awareness", rather than denying meaning for participants, relocates it away from the promise of what lies beyond and into the immediacy of social life.

4.2 Certainties in death

The presence of "nonreligion" may not just be challenging religious frameworks, but could instead be opening a space for alternative interpretations to emerge and stabilize. The question, then, is not only whether such interpretations will become institutionalized, but whether, to some extent, they already are.

Participants in this research did not rely on religious frameworks to make sense of the fact that they were going to die. Still, most of the explanations they recollected were recognized as

suppositions, ideas, hopes. Death, how it feels and what happens after, is a mystery to all the participants. But not really.

Death is “knowable”. Participants acknowledge the infinite unknowns surrounding death, yet they also expressed a surprising number of certainties.They know, for example, that death means someone is going to be missed. Some of them know what their ideal funeral looks like and how their family would react to their death. Some participants even offered detailed descriptions of how life would look like after they leave the world. It turns out, they do know a lot about death. The one big unknown is what happens to their individual self after death, but still some certainties emerge from this questioning.

These certainties extend beyond a simple awareness of one’s inevitable death. They reflect how participants imagine the world continuing after their passing. Their outlooks are better understood as a moral orientation rather than as personal or hopeful projection based around their death. While the experience of dying itself (how it feels or what follows) often remained uncertain, death as a “social occurrence” was understood in ways that go well beyond its inevitability.

Certainties around death revealed how the participants feel about their death but also how their death should and would be understood once it took place. Death was seen as a profoundly personal and frightening experience for some individuals, but ultimately was imagined as a social experience by all. In sum, the act of “dying” may be personally experienced, but the process of death is social from the outset. Death is situated in a matrix of social relations, rituals, practices and customs that participants are all aware of.

More concretely, certainties around death offer a clear view of how the frameworks of death and dying are reoriented outside religious frameworks. As the influence of religious ideas diminishes, individuals reevaluate not only beliefs about the afterlife but also the meaning and function of concrete rituals. Contemporary practices such as the increasing emphasis on “celebrations of life” over traditional funerals may just be empirical evidence of these shifts. For participants, funerals are not a rite of passage to the afterlife, but an acknowledgment of a life lived and shared with others. Newly found certainties around death help shape these rituals and repurpose them.

It is through engagement with such rituals that some participants come to position themselves in relation to death. Attending funerals becomes a key site where understandings are negotiated and

reconfigured. The certainties some participants express about what will happen after their death (especially in social terms, such as how others will gather, respond, and remember) are shaped by lived encounters with death in everyday life:

> *I've thought about that. I think… if I had the control, or I guess if circumstances were to lead that way I think that would be a nice thing to have. I understand that funerals are for the living and not for the dead. So, I mean, if someone were going to have a funeral for me in any way, I'd rather it be a celebration. People who know me know who I am; I prefer very dark humor, so, you know, nothing's off the table in that regard. And ideally, if circumstances were to allow, I'd rather still be alive so I could enjoy that as well, rather than after I've passed away and can't see any of it. (Adam, emergency nurse, male, 32)*

> *I definitely do want a funeral for the people that are… I think it's important for them, right? Not so much for, you know, wrapping up my life, but for them to come together and learn to accept that. For me, when my grandmother passed away, that was a very healing time, right? And I think that's important, for survivors. (Jenna, talent agent, female, 40)*

For Gwen, acts of remembrance during her grandfather and uncle's funerals have allowed her to deal with their loss. She shared memories about them after their funerals alongside her family in a bar. Sharing memories with her family in a bar not only helped her cope with their absence but also prompted a re-evaluation of how she envisions her own funeral:

> *When I lose someone taking time is really important, but also sharing memories and stories about people. When my maternal grandfather died, probably about eight years ago… I went to his funeral with my mom and one of my sisters, and we shared a lot of stories that I didn't know about him and, so, that was actually a really good part of the process, to like talk about it and, that's the other thing we do, is like, we try, maybe we don't talk to people if we think it's going to upset them, but it's actually very, like, bardic, to say, like, "oh, I have this really good memory about him", or my mom shared this memory with me about him… [during the funeral]. My mom and my siblings went to the bar and had drinks and talked about him, that was really our way of celebrating him. And I said: "this, this is what I want. I want everyone to sit down and just, like, talk and hang out and have a party…" And we did do something very similar when my dad's brother died… funerals are for the*

living, not so much for me, again, because I don't believe that I'll be watching and seeing it… but I do think that, like, if it was to represent me and the people that I've I care about, my loved ones, that it would be something very like, relaxed and laid back…It would be more about, you know, what are our favorite memories? What are the kinds of stuff we used to do together…More casual, and you know, if I if I did have my say, I would say I would love them to serve my favorite food.(Gwen, works in labour relations, female, 34)

Stan is a critical care nurse. Throughout our interview, he described how his profession has made him constantly reconfigure his understanding of death. He's seen countless people die, in countless circumstances. He spoke about people's spectrum of "reactions and emotions" when facing the death of a loved one:

It's a very interesting spectrum of reactions and emotions. I've seen where it was an expected death, and so everybody kind of knew it was coming and everybody already made their peace with it and they took it well. The patient passed away and the family had thanked everybody for, you know, and all that. But then, on the other side, you have a patient who's younger, for example, and just passes away, just very, very spontaneously. And then, I mean, heck, I've had it happen before. Oh geez, there was like a 31 year old gentleman once. Yeah, he passed away, he was in rough shape and his family wasn't even in the hospital yet when we got him and unfortunately he passed away before family could get there. And then finally when his wife came, she screamed out in this uncontrollable scream and just fell to the floor and just like was crying and, like, hammering away at the floor with her fists. So it's interesting to see, it's sad, but it's also interesting to see the different reactions of different people with regards to how they perceive and how they experienced a person dying or their loved one dying. (Stan, critical care nurse, male, 31)

Once an individual dies, those who remain must reorganize their lives around that absence. They grieve, arrange funerals, produce obituaries, renegotiate family roles, and settle inheritances. In doing so, they continue living in a world where the person's absence is not only felt but collectively recognized. The individual is gone, and this absence is collectively acknowledged and integrated into ongoing life. This is perhaps the most fundamental certainty surrounding death for participants.

The spectrum that Stan referred to reflects a range of social responses to the certainty of death, something that was common across participants' narratives. His account is revealing not simply

because it contrasts a young grieving wife with a family prepared for loss, but because it shows how these varying responses contribute to a shared body of knowledge about death. There exists a repertoire of reactions, rituals, protocols, and emotions that individuals observe, experience, and draw upon to form their own expectations. From this accumulation, individual understandings of death (both of one's own and of others') take shape.

As religious frameworks diminish in importance, this repertoire becomes an increasingly important source of orientation. Participants primarily draw on these socially embedded experiences to make sense of death. As a whole, their narratives also reveal yet another moral dimension to the certainties surrounding death: what matters is no longer alignment with strict religiously informed beliefs or the afterlife, but the ways in which death is handled in relation to others i.e. how one supports, remembers, and cares for the deceased.

Morgan, for example, considers herself nonreligious, but believes in spirits and that humans persist after death. She recently found out that her brother might have cancer. While discussing her belief system, we also engaged in hypotheticals about her brother's death. This hypothetical elicited a very reflective approach to death as a whole, with her parent's perspective and how she would deal with someone close passing away taking the center stage. And while she acknowledged she had a hard time expressing and naming feelings, she had a clear idea of how she would feel and how her family would react in this scenario:

> *I struggle to name feelings. I definitely think if my brother were to pass… I think a lot about what I would do to help his wife and his daughter, because they have a 2-year-old. It makes me really sad. I feel kind of alone because my family doesn't really share my belief. And I don't think if I were to share them as a consolation, that they would feel very consoled. I feel comforted that I have my beliefs and that I would personally know he would still be there for his daughter and his wife in a different way. But I don't think that makes sense to them very much. So I imagine feeling quite lonely, and then sad that I would never be able to hug him again, even though he would be a spirit. I would miss that a lot.*
>
> *I would feel regret, because he lives in Australia, and that I had to move sooner, because I'm thinking of moving there to be with both my brothers that live there. And then I don't know if there's a name for this feeling, but…Is there something I could have done? Just*

because I'm sending energy work and medicine and stuff like that. And if he has cancer, it's like, oh, is there something I could have done to help him? I don't know if I have words for feelings. Just feeling that I would be pretty alone in how I dealt with it… Worry, mainly, just worrying about how the rest of my family would deal with it. Because my dad lost his mom when he was 20, and it really, really affected him… I remember my aunt; she believes in this stuff, but she had a stroke, and they kind of feel like her beliefs are associated with mental illness. They wouldn't think they're very legitimate.

So that's another reason why I don't really talk about these things, because they associate it with that. Mostly I would worry for the people left behind, and then my own grief, of course, because even if someone is there in spirit, they're not always there every minute of the day, and you can't feel them all the time. You can't physically touch them or hug them or have a real conversation. (Morgan, massage therapist, female, 34)

Morgan's thoughts take the form of expectations grounded in deeply personal and socially embedded understandings of death and the afterlife. These expectations emerge from her everyday interactions: she anticipates her parents' reactions because she knows them intimately; she imagines the impact of her brother's death because she knows his wife and daughter. The tremors of her brother's passing are hypothetical in nature, yet her certainty about what would happen in the case of his death is not.

Death elicits moral positionings and orientations. Morgan's account is ultimately structured by a concern for those who would remain; how they would cope, what they would need, and how she might support them. Her beliefs on persistence after death do not displace this orientation; she is certain of death's finality, and is aware of loss as something lived and managed among the living.

These "knowable" aspects about dying also came up when participants reflected on their own mortality. They often appeared initially as questions, but quickly took the form of certainties about the social and practical consequences that would need to be addressed if death were to occur. When Carter was asked how he would like his death to unfold, his response moved seamlessly from the manner of dying to its social implications:

I just think for myself it would really be going out peacefully, not in a lot of pain, but more than that, feeling like there wasn't anything that you necessarily had left to do in this life.

> *Who's going to get my stuff? And who's going to…I own a house with my fiancé, for example. How's that going to be dealt with? That type of stuff. And I think the obvious thing is people around you missing you and that sort of thing. (Carter, government worker, male, 32)*

In a similar vein, Curtis articulated his expectations through questions that revealed a structured understanding of death's consequences. He knew his death meant missing out on new discoveries made by humankind, but also worried about his family if he were to die:

> *The first sort of feeling that comes up is, who am I leaving behind? Who is going to suffer because of my death? I don't have anyone who is actually dependent on me: no children, no spouse, that sort of thing. But I worry about my siblings and my parents and what they might feel.*
>
> *Inside my own personal feelings towards death, there have been times in the past where I have been in a suicidal mood. And one of the things that always pops up for me is: what am I going to miss after that? I can think of a lot of things that are probably going to be discovered in the next hundred years that I would love to witness, but that obviously can't happen because I'm already 36. (Curtis, electrician, male, 36)*

Curtis and Carter's questions reveal a set of stable expectations. Death is not an abstract or metaphysical event; it is instead something that reorganizes relationships, responsibilities, and how people react to loss and grief. The thought of their death also evokes questions tied to morality, such as what happens to their loved ones. Death also prompts a reevaluation of what they can and won't be able to do during their lifetime.

"Knowable" aspects of death are, above all, social. They are learned through shared experiences and observations of death-related situations, which, over time, form a practical understanding of how death unfolds and what it entails. These experiences, among other factors, have shaped participants' understanding of how they do *not* want to die:

> *Not slowly, you know. Yeah, my grandmother went sort of quite slowly, and that was difficult to watch. By the end of it, she was very ready to go, you know. So I just really hope that my end is not as long and painful. (Jenna, talent agent, female, 40)*

You know, like, I saw my grandmother live to 94, but her husband died, her sisters died, her brothers died, her friends died. And on her 94th birthday, you know, she was asked, "What do you want for your birthday?" She said, "I wanna die." (JKelly, works in cybersecurity, male, 29)

So, I'm more worried about the degradation that comes with old age than I am with the prospect itself. I see my grandmother struggling with her breathing, just coming upstairs. I've seen patients who begin to lose their memory, become demented, and the struggle that causes. Even though they don't feel it subjectively, their family members do, and I wouldn't want to cause that to the people that I love. (Max, physician, male, 31)

Patrick and Devon have very clear ideas about death, but also about what they want people to think and act like when they die. There is certainty surrounding they imagine or understand their deaths. When discussing their preferred circumstances, they stated:

I feel like death is a celebration and it's not something to be stuffy and mourned. We have in the in the sort of two previous generations of my family, my mother and my father's family, one side takes very much the mournful quiet ceremony approach and the other takes the old Irish approach, which is: it's a party. You remember the good things and everybody has a good time. And yeah, you know, we tend to host them at bars with pictures and memories and people just standing around and hanging out and talking to each other, because part of it is not just about sort of the memory of me as the person, but it's about of all those lives that were interconnected and just for that sort of one moment that afternoon giving everybody the opportunity to reconnect and just that being sort of like the final gift (Patrick, construction industry worker, male, 42)

You know, everyone has a funeral after they die. You get all of your friends, relatives, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, together to celebrate you. But you're already dead. I think it'd be really cool to be there for your own funeral. You're getting everyone together. It's going to be a little bit sad, but I think it would be… I also think that with time that will happen. I think that our perceptions, the way that we conceptualize death, will change, I think. I would love it if in the future funeral parties where everyone talks about, like, a celebration of life. Anyways, but they don't really do a celebration of life. Some people call it a wake,

> *some people call it a celebration of life, others it's a funeral. I picture a funeral party. I picture, like, you know, a big party and then, like, probably early the next morning, probably going to be pretty exhausted because it's going to be a party. And then, you know, ideally, it'd be like closest friends or family, or whoever's around, whoever wants to be around. Or, you know, if they're not around, then I'll just go, go on my own… I think there will be a fair bit of grief, but I also don't think that, I don't picture very much, like, actual mourning, only because those… yeah, like I said, I have a lot of friends, which I feel quite grateful for. But each of them know who I am and how I am and what I want. They'll know that if I go, I go. (Devon, works for parliament, male, 30)*

Even in the absence of certainty about what happens after death, Patrick and Devon demonstrate a high degree of certainty about what death *does* socially. They anticipate how relationships will be reorganized around their death, how emotions should be expressed, and how rituals ought to be conducted. The emphasis on the "celebration of life" is not merely stylistic, it is also a moral statement: participants privilege remembrance of lived experience, relationality, and memory over personal transcendence or metaphysical resolution. Death becomes meaningful insofar as it reaffirms the value of, and the networks that sustain, life.

Nonetheless, for some participants, it was their own experiences that provided the primary reference points through which death itself could be imagined. In Jenna's case, an accident in her house secured her perspective on death:

> *I had an experience around this time last year where I passed out. I was getting out of the bath, and I guess I stood up too fast and fainted, right? And I was completely unconscious. I was not dreaming, I was not seeing anything. I was just… nothing. After I came to, I sort of thought to myself: that must be what it's like when you pass. You know, it's just peaceful. There's nothing going on, and brain activity stops, and that's it. I'm not 100% sure of that, of course. There's no way for us to know for sure what happens after people are dead, but that's one of my prevailing beliefs right now. (Jenna, talent agent, female, 40)*

Munsley, for example, draws on her near-death experience following an overdose to imagine death as a gradual shutting down of bodily and cognitive functions:

I've had a near-death experience myself. I did overdose, and I was brought back to life. I remember feeling like I was falling asleep, and I do remember feeling at one point, and I'm sure I was probably still semi-conscious at this point, but at one point I had my eyes closed, and I felt like I was, like, falling backwards out of my body, like sinking down into the couch. And I couldn't move my arms or legs, obviously because my heart was stopping. But it was like a panic feeling right before it was happening, because I was like, oh shit, like, this is not good…And, but then I don't really… and then I just remember being woken up and being in a lot of pain and confused. And I genuinely think that if I hadn't been resuscitated, my brain would have just turned off. Like, that's it, I think. (Munsley, works for an education centre, female, 30)

What stands out from participants' narratives is not simply that they hold ideas about their own death and burial practices, but that when prompted with hypothetical scenarios, they are able to articulate responses that align with their broader worldview. Even if death is not something they reflect on daily, participants possess enough familiarity and developed perspectives to provide clear and coherent answers about how they would want such situations to unfold. Their expectations are not improvised, but are grounded in an underlying sense of certainty about death as an inevitable aspect of life.

In sum, I argue that people have a social repertoire from which they draw to understand death. This repertoire, as seen through participants' accounts, is available outside of religious frameworks. Participants develop certainties around death from outside religion, many of which are grounded on personal experiences and meaningful relationships. When participants imagine death they draw from a social repertoire that has been constructed as a result of a wide array of social interactions, as well as the interactions between their habitus and broader social contexts. In establishing certainties around death (i.e. how dying feels like, what type of celebration they want, how people will react to their deaths) participants also structure orientations around how others should respond, what forms of expression are appropriate, and how relationships are to be maintained or reconfigured at the moment of death. Participants draw on their social repertoire to organize death as a socially meaningful event, embedding it within a set of relational and affective expectations that guide interaction without recourse to religious frameworks. As I will show later on in this chapter, moral structures emerge from within these processes through meaningful reflections

surrounding personal connection, presence, dignity, and the obligations that death generates among the living (including living a good life).

4.3 Thinking about death

Having explored death awareness and the certainties of death, this section expands on how participants imagine death more concretely. How often do participants actually think about death? And how does encountering the death of others shape their understanding of mortality and their own sense of death?

Out of the 35 participants, 18 reported that they think about death often, with 17 participants indicating the opposite. I asked participants how often they thought about death. I purposefully used the word "often" to allow participants to interpret it according to their own sense of frequency.[71] For some, "often" meant thinking about death once a month or only when reminded of their mortality. For others, "often" meant every day, or at least once a week. Participants also related that question to life experiences, such as the death of a family member or witnessing death around them. I intentionally avoided imposing a rigid definitions or timeframes like "once a month", "every week" and other such words, and instead allowed participants to indicate whether thoughts of death, or awareness of their mortality, occupied enough space in their minds to qualify as thinking about it "often."

When asked about their ideal death, only 27 participants reported having a specific scenario in mind.[72] Similarly, when asked about an ideal method of bodily disposition, the majority (28 out of 35 participants) had a preference, while 7 had not considered it at all. Regarding preferred burial practices, most participants had previously considered the topic and shared their preference; 5 had not thought about it but still provided an ideal burial practice, 4 simply did not specify any, and 2 participants explicitly stated that they did not care what happened to their bodies.[73] The majority of participants in this study had indeed thought, at some points in their lives, about how they would

[71] The concrete phrasing of the question was: How often would you say you think about death?
[72] Participants were asked, "Ideally, how would you like to die?" Of the 35 participants, I distributed their responses in the following categories: Unspecified (8), Peaceful (9), Sleeping (5), Painless (4), Painless [quick] (5), Close ones present (2), Illness (1), and Unconscious (1).
[73] The distribution of the responses was as follows: Cremation (11), Burial [green] (10), Burial [traditional] (3), Donation [research or organ donation] (5), Unspecified (4), Indifferent (2).

want to leave this world, or, at the very least, what they would like it to happen to their bodies. There are important caveats to consider, however.

Thinking about death and imagining a good or ideal death are not perfectly aligned ideas. Some participants think about death often but don't have clear ideas about how they want to die. Other participants often reflected on death abstractly or philosophically, but did not have a practical engagement with it (such as ideas about burial practices or methods of disposition). Death, it seems, is processed both symbolically and concretely. When some of the participants think about death, they consider the "practical" dimensions: the funeral, what happens to the body, who they leave behind, or who may be at their final moments with them. Others instead consider the "symbolic" dimensions of death: the end of consciousness, the feelings that emerge, how and by whom they will be remembered, what their life means in the face of death. When participants were prompted to think about "death" through an open ended question (such as "what do you think about death?"), they often separated these two dimensions. Some considered both, others focused on only one, but all reflected on it in some way.

For Paul, thinking about death means engaging with unpleasant thoughts. He is an atheist and values life based on the acknowledgment that death means the end. He has not thought about an ideal death or a funeral practice. He does not think about death often, but

> *I think that when I do think about it, it's maybe not a like a healthy logical thought process that I'm going through. But you know these types of thoughts are often closely related to, like anxieties and stress and negative thoughts, right? So sometimes when you're thinking these things, your concerns aren't necessarily legitimate. They're like little conspiracy theories that my brain has written about myself. You know, nobody's gonna think about me ever again after I'm gone, or nobody loves you or, you know, like… these things that, just our brain tricks us into accepting sometimes. So, you know, I don't think that. (Paul, works in human resources, male, 38)*

Adam, also an atheist, thinks about death regularly, he knows the type of death he wants (painless), and he knows that he will donate his body after his death. He also knows what his final moments would ideally look like:

If I had the control, or I guess if circumstances were to lead that way, I think that would be a nice thing to have [a celebration]. I understand funerals are for the living and not so not much for the dead. So, I mean, if someone was going to have a funeral for me or in any way, I'd rather be a celebration. People knowing me who I am, I prefer very dark humor. So, you know, nothing's off the table in that regard and, ideally, if I was, again, if circumstances were to allow, I [am] still alive and I could enjoy that as well rather than after I'm passed away and unable to see any of it. (Adam, emergency nurse, male, 32)

Dan considers himself nonreligious. He also thinks about death regularly, knows the type of death he wants and has often reflected on what his final moments would look like:

I think a nice way to die is with a lot of people around you, and, you know, going out with loved ones, or having loved ones, either like, with you, right? Like being with people. But then I also kind of like the way, like, cats do it, where they kind of sneak off by themselves and just… I think it'd be convenient to go in your sleep… just, you know, go to sleep and not wake up again. But there's also a part of me… so I've, like, again, you know, through part of my life, dealt with some mental health issues and stuff. And so I have had, you know, thoughts of suicide before in my life. And I find now, like, I don't do that, I don't think about that frequently, but there is still a part of me that thinks, like, maybe if I'm 70 years old, you know, I get diagnosed with terminal cancer or something like that, I'll just… I'll end it on my own terms, you know? Whatever that means. And I'll figure out a way to take care of the situation. But that would be the, like, go-off-and-be-a-cat type scenario, right? (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)

Some participants rarely thought about death, yet when prompted, they were able to describe their ideal death vividly, often emphasizing peace, absence of pain, or being surrounded by loved ones. Gabriela, for example, has a very clear idea of how she wants to go. She does not think about it often, but she has clear ideas about it nonetheless:

Ideally a quick death I think would be perfect. One where I'm not suffering, I would hate to suffer. I think I always, when I don't know an answer, I think of, like, "what would be the worst scenario?" I would hate to be stuck in a box alive and die, or, like, I can think of all the worst ways to die. Best way to die would be a painless death, I think. So, like, in my

sleep, getting hit by a car, shotgun to the head. Like, just, you know what I mean? Just, quick, no pain. (Gabriela, music teacher, female, 31)

Stan's perspective mirrors Gaby's. As a healthcare professional, he *knows* that dying quickly is what he wants:

Really quick [death], because I have seen it, of course, where it's been long and drawn out and it's not a pretty sight. Yeah, bad for the mind, bad for the soul. Trust me, nobody wants to see that. (Stan, critical care nurse, male, 31)

Despite not thinking about death regularly, Irving emphasizes the importance of agency at the end of life:

I think, you know, the most ideal would be, you know, everyone wants to die peacefully, surrounded by their friends and family. That's kind of like the stereotype, right? And that would be really nice, you know, like, I'd like to... It's always nice to die on your own terms, you know? I think that's one of the reasons that I'm a personal advocate for death with dignity. Obviously, there's asterisks for everything, right? But, you know, I knew a good friend of mine, his father died with dignity, and after many years of deteriorating due to ALS, he had agency in the way that he died. And that was a powerful move that, I think, allowed him to regain dignity after he had been deprived of the life he had known for a long time, you know? So, yeah, I'd like to have at least some agency over my death, but that's hard to know if you really want that, or are going to have that, until [you are] very close to your death. (Irving, high-school teacher, male, 29)

The fact that participants could clearly describe ideal death-related scenarios even when they didn't think about it often extended beyond the "moment" of death. Oscar, for example, explained that herarely thought about death before our conversation. Still, when prompted to answer whether he had a preferred burial practice, he knew right away:

I know I don't want to be buried. It's just, the notion of just being put in the ground doesn't feel comfortable. But being cremated… it seems a lot more liberating, a lot more freeing. It's like releasing to the universe again, and probably, I don't know if it helps or hurt, but, you know, in my background…there's a ceremony with, like, releasing the ashes… that's a

thing. So just probably because of how I was raised, I feel probably more comfortable with that idea. But despite me not being religious, the process of cremation feels a lot more freeing. (Oscar, IT project manager, male, 43)

Death was also envisioned as something that needs to be taken care of. Jenna, for example, does not think about death often, but is planning to:

One of my goals for this coming year is to actually write down more of a plan for my funeral. I mean, I want to do some estate planning this year as well, as I would like to make it as easy as it can be for my kids and my husband, if he survives me, and, you know, my other loved ones. As I've been saying, it's hardest for the people left behind, and, you know, I do worry about that… about what they'll be going through. I'm really close with my family. (Jenna, talent agent, female, 40)

Death, unsurprisingly, was processed in different ways. While some manage it intellectually but keep it emotionally distant, others are able to confront it emotionally when prompted, even if they don't think about it regularly. Nonetheless, all participants reported that daily lives experiences had made them constantly reconfigure how they approach death and dying.

These reconfigurations presented themselves through a variety of means. They came up as an overall sense of awareness of death, or a certainty that they emotionally engage with, sometimes without the need of thinking about it too often. In others cases, participants didn't feel the need, or outright avoided thinking about death. What this ultimately reveals is that there are distinct dimensions to the ways in which participants reconfigure their awareness of death. These dimensions range from cognitive recognitions to affective engagements. Death awareness, thus, is not a singular or uniform experience, but a direct result of participants' individual lifestances. It is mediated by personal history, social contexts, and personal and shared experiences that result in a nuanced understanding of it. Nonetheless, the common thread is that how participants position themselves around death, their certainties about the fact and what they think of that fact is consistent with an immanent framework; a way of viewing death as an end that gives life more meaning. In the following section I explore how these orientations toward death translate into concrete moral frameworks through which participants evaluate life, death and dying by focusing on the Canadian policy of Medical Assistance in Dying.

4.4 Death and morality

Thus far, I have argued that the diverse ways in which participants position themselves in relation to death reconfigures how participants orient themselves toward life. The finitude that death represents invigorates life; it highlights its value and makes its limits visible. It is not only about taking advantage of being alive, but about giving life a sense of purpose, grounded in the recognition that "you only live once". At the same time, in making sense of death, participants draw on a socially situated repertoire (configured through their experiences, relationships, and broader social contexts) which allows them to position themselves in relation to death in specific ways. Through this repertoire, they develop forms of awareness and generate certainties about what death is, how it unfolds, and how it should be approached.

When participants reflect on their own mortality, they do not only think about the fact that they will inevitably die, but about how they would want to die and how they would not. Similarly, when they reflect on the deaths of others, they evaluate not only the life that was lived, but also the manner in which death occurred. When they reflect on the deaths of others, they think not only about the life that was lived, but about the manner of dying itself. In doing so, they engage in processes of valuation that are deeply meaningful and implicitly moral.

In this final section, I argue that one of the most visible dimensions of these reorientations around death is its moral articulation. From participants' narratives, moral structures also emerge, most of which are grounded in notions of personal connection, presence, dignity, and the obligations that death generates among the living, including the ways in which one lives in anticipation of death. It is here that the moral dimension of death becomes most visible: death is not imagined through religious lens, but as something embedded in how participants imagine, negotiate, and make sense of death and dying in practice.

One of the clearest examples of this can be found in participants' narratives on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID). The impact of *Carter v. Canada (Attorney General)* [2015][74] cannot be overstated. Carter was diagnosed with a degenerative condition that progressively limited his autonomy and quality of life, which led him to consider MAID as a way to retain control over the

[74] See: *Carter v. Canada (Attorney General)*, 2015 SCC 5, [2015] 1 SCR 331.

timing and conditions of his death. *Carter* was a case about dignity, self-determination and the ethics of death. The case proves that death itself is a site of moral articulation.[75] Beaman and Steele (2018) argue that following the *Carter* ruling, the higher courts have shifted away from transcendent/religious to nonreligious conceptualizations of assisted dying.

During the interviews, I asked participants what they thought about Medical Assistance in Dying in Canada. I also asked them if they knew about or heard of someone who had gone through the process. These questions led to some of the most emotional moments during our conversations. All participants had an opinion on MAID, with some sharing stories of family members or people they knew who had gone through the process.

In discussing MAID, participants moved beyond general reflections and articulated, often with striking clarity, the conditions under which death (and life, to some extent) becomes acceptable, desirable, or problematic. These perspectives offer a clear entry point into the moral repertoires that these individuals rely on to interpret and give meaning to death and dying.

All participants offered nuanced reflections around MAID and the ethical considerations involved. Their accounts revealed the immediate moral dimension of MAID, but in the process, they articulated moral evaluations that highlighted how they valued life and death. Devon, for instance, explicitly weighed arguments for and against MAID, but ultimately privileged the autonomy of the individual over the emotional claims of others:

> *My personal take on it is that the arguments in favor of MAID have always struck me as being much stronger than those against it, because the ones that tend to be against it mainly focus not on the person who actually chose to use medically assisted dying, but on the people they leave. And I struggle with that a little bit because, at the end of the day, it's that person's life. As much as it might be your wife or your daughter or whoever, it's that person's life. So I do think that they should have the ability to choose. Now, granted, there have also been people who have said things like, you know, "If this type of MAID was available to me at the time, I would have taken it," and they actually made a total recovery*

[75] See, for example: Steele (2018; 2023) for a concrete study on the Carter case in relation to nonreligion. Several researchers have argued that death is a site of moral articulation (See: Walter 1994; Howarth 2007b; Kellehear 2008)

from whatever it was that was afflicting them. So obviously there's a lot there, but I think it makes sense to me. But that's also because I've never viewed life to be a sacred thing, if that makes any sense. (Devon, works for parliament, male, 30)

Dan affirmed the right to choose death under conditions of "certainty", while simultaneously grappling with the ethical limits of such a position under specific circumstances:

If someone is going to be dead and it's fairly certain, they should be allowed the right to end their life the way they'd like to end it, if they choose to do so. The thing that I struggle with is age, an age limitation. Like, what if someone's 16 and there could be a cure for what they have? I do struggle with that a little bit. Like, should there be an age limitation?... Like if I'm, you know, 80 years old or 75 years old and I'm decrepit and destitute… I don't want to live without knowing the people in my life, right? Because then the concern is: will my soul know those people? Will it be able to find those people, or is it too confused? Is that like a physical ailment, or is that like an… you know what I mean? So yeah, I would want to, like I would kind of think I would want to end my life before getting to a state where I am… I saw my grandfather in seniors' homes and stuff, and it doesn't seem like a great place to be. It always smells like urine. (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)

Participants reflections demonstrate that they are not uncritically endorsing MAID, but actively engaging in moral deliberation structured by an emphasis on certain values (autonomy, protection, and uncertainty, among others). Life is not treated as inherently sacred, but as conditionally valuable. For Dan, a life worth living is recognized through relational recognition, and certain institutions (like nursing homes) are clear evidence about the conditions under which life remains worth living as much as how he evaluates life. Dan refers back to the concept of a "soul" to further question and reflect on the value of life. His identity as a nonreligious person does not remove these existential questions, but instead repurposes them into the realm of the immanent (in psychological, relational and experiential terms).

Participants moral stances also identify religious conceptions like the "sanctity of life" as insufficient or illogical bases for an evaluation of MAID. Paul, for example, critiqued what he described as a "dogmatic" understanding of life rooted in religion, arguing instead that the reduction of suffering constitutes a more compelling moral stance:

> *I think that a lot of the origin of problems with it are rooted in religion. And I think that we have this dogmatic sense of what life is, or how we should treat life or value life. And maybe even a more modern interpretation of that. And the reality is that people suffer horribly, unnecessarily. And I think that it's noble and good for us to reduce suffering as much as we possibly can. The main issue people seem to have with it, I just don't see as being logical, you know, like the sanctity of life and things like that. I don't think that there's a lot of dignity in forcing somebody to go through something that is awful. And I think fundamentally it's an issue of liberty. If we don't have the right to end our own lives, what right do we have? I'm not an extreme libertarian or something like that, but if we don't, in a healthy mindset and under the right circumstances, have the ability to choose to opt out, then it seems we have no freedom whatsoever. (Paul, works in human resources, male, 38)*

Vince rejected the categorization of suicide as inherently "good" or "bad," and instead reframed it as a neutral act whose moral significance depends on context and intention:

> *I'm strongly in favor, and actually strongly in favor of removing all barriers in any way to medical assistance in dying. If someone chooses to die and they're ready to die, they should absolutely have the right to go out in an elegant and safe fashion where they're not going to hurt themselves. And the idea, which is very much, in my opinion, a Western, religion-biased way of thinking, that all life is sacred, and so suicide is terrible, I don't agree with it. In my opinion, suicide is not good or bad, it just is. And if someone wants to do that because they're ready to go, then they should be able to do that gracefully instead of in some kind of violent way because they don't have the option. (Vince, project manager, male, 33)*

Far from a simple discussion on a policy, the interviews I held with participants served as a site through which moral frameworks were articulated, reflected on and made visible. What emerged is a rearticulation of the value of life and death from outside religious narratives. There was a clear linguistic move amongst participants from "sanctity of life" to "quality of life". Across all accounts, participants consistently invoked concepts such as dignity, autonomy, liberty, and the alleviation of suffering as foundational moral goods inherently attached to living.

Munsley defined MAID as a “wonderful thing” that allows people to exercise their autonomy. During our interview, she highlighted the right to self-determination and bodily autonomy that every person should be entitled to:

> *I'm a very MAID-positive person. I think if someone genuinely feels that they are suffering, they're not living, and continuing to live would be excruciating for them, I think absolutely they should have the right to go through a medically assisted death. I don't consider it a medically assisted suicide: I think that's some political way to spin it to get people against it. But if somebody truly doesn't want to be here anymore, why should we force them? And why should we deny them a dignified, comfortable way to go? If they don't have the option, what option will they take? I've lost quite a few friends to suicide, and it's awful. I can't imagine what they were thinking or feeling when they decided to do it and went through it. It's not like you can just choose, especially in Canada, some quick, easy way to do it. So people have to get more “creative”, like hangings, and I just can't imagine that being any kind of way to go other than horrible. So I think absolutely MAID is a wonderful thing, and people should be allowed to do it. We have free will, we have autonomy. It's a good thing. (Munsley, works for an education centre, female, 30)*

The value of self-determination as a fundamental aspect of humanity was echoed by other participants:

> *For me, it's about respect. It's your death, right? You get to choose. If you have the luxury of choosing when and how you die, that's almost like a blessing. Most people don’t have that choice. (JKelly, works in cybersecurity, male, 29)*

> *I think it's necessary in this world. There are so many people suffering, and life is meant to be lived, not to suffer. So I think if people feel like they're not living the life they deserve, especially if they're in pain, chronic pain, cancer, something where they know it's just a matter of time, there's no reason for them to be in that state when they could choose to die and get out of the pain. (Gabriela, music teacher, female, 31)*

> *I think MAID is important for personal autonomy. Technically, we already have the choice: if we want to end our lives, we can. But to offer people a solution that feels safe, reliable,*

and comfortable, as opposed to attempting it on their own, provides security. I think in that way it's a necessity as part of a humane public health system. There are ethical dilemmas for doctors, of course, but if we make so many decisions for ourselves in life, we should at least be allowed to have a conversation about leaving the world the way we want to. (Gwen, works in labour relations, female, 34)

Participants also defined access to MAID as part of being human:

I think it's very humane. I actually had a family member, an uncle with mesothelioma, and the prognosis was terrible. He was either going to lay in bed for a couple more months and die slowly, or he could choose medical assistance in dying, which he did. It was terribly sad for us all, but visiting him in the hospital and seeing him in that condition, that is a humane thing to do. Anyone suffering in that way, whether it's severe mental illness or physical illness, I don't blame people for choosing to die with dignity. (Kara, business manager, female, 41)

Oh, it's wonderful. I think it's so humane. We've come a long way in doing away with biases that prevented things like medically assisted dying. I wish we could go further. There are things that happen to people as they age that are completely out of their control, and sometimes they know when the right time is. We teach people to be independent all their lives, except at the end. My grandfather, for example, never wanted to live in a nursing home, but he was very religious and could never have chosen this. (Patrick, construction industry worker, male, 42)

Some participants situated their moral reasoning within broader social and structural concerns. Karin, for example, reframed MAID not only as an individual choice but as a practice embedded within conditions of inequality:

I mean, obviously I'm pro people having the option in general. I do think it gets complicated when we start talking about people with non-terminal illnesses, particularly because there are going to be a lot of people who, if that's approved, where you can choose to die without there being something like cancer that will actually kill you, just to end suffering; I'm not opposed to that in principle. But I think in the current situation, where ODSP is not enough

money and people don't have access to good medical care, and there's so much stigma associated with so many illnesses, it's difficult for it not to feel like we are giving disabled people the choice to euthanize themselves as a form of eugenics. (Karin, community worker, non-binary, 34)

Some participants also raised ethical concerns about MAID as a policy, especially around whether "choice" can be considered genuine when it is shaped by unequal or unjust conditions:

Somebody who has reached a point in their life where they are suffering, and that suffering cannot be resolved, should have the bodily autonomy to choose when to die. In that sense, I think medically assisted dying is fine. However, regarding recent legislation in Canada, I'm opposed to it. If a lot of this suffering could be prevented by addressing material needs—like housing, safety, support—then the issue becomes different. If someone's suffering is exacerbated by poverty or lack of support, and that leads them to choose MAID, that's a problem. I think the government should first address those social conditions. (Mark, university student/bingo hall worker, non-binary, 36)

Okay, so as a concept, I think people should have agency. If it's really and truly something that somebody wants, and they're not being coerced into it, I think that should be an option. Legally, the difficulty is that laws and legislation are constructs of language, and language does not necessarily capture the reality of life; the messiness of real human life. So that is the challenge: how can you articulate that in a law that protects people's rights but also does not allow for manipulation? It's not to say that I am against it, but I think it really needs careful consideration. (Brianna, government worker, female, 31)

Vince shared a personal story of a close family member who recently went through MAID. His account reveals another ethical dimension surrounding death: the challenge may not be the absence of moral frameworks, but the insufficient social organization around dying through MAID. He shared the following when I asked him if he knew someone who went through MAID:

My aunt. I am proud of her for going out on her own terms, and I also don't really think she had another option. She was around 700 lbs., had a massive cyst in her leg that would not heal because of diabetes, and she couldn't get up to go to the bathroom anymore. She

had to be lifted by a crane. There was no way out, this was going to be the rest of her life. And in America or other countries without MAID, she probably would have been kept alive for years and years in that condition. And would have lived an absolutely horrible life and also been an incredible weight on the healthcare system. And so, thankfully, MAID was allowed for her. And she was capable of just going out gracefully and on her own terms…

The only consideration that I have about MAID with regards to this is that, apparently, I wasn't there, but apparently, the doctor just did it very suddenly. You know, he just injected her, like, very ungracefully. And she was like mid conversation with my parents, and just suddenly kind of keeled over and died in front of my parents who were, you know, at her bedside. And it was pretty traumatic for the people around the bed, you know, to see that, just this person make conversation and then, you know. So there could have been a little bit more grace to it. But I don't think it has necessarily anything to do with MAID in itself, it's more like the way in which it was administered in this case. It's kind of on the doctor for being kind of a heartless piece of shit about it. (Vince, project manager, male, 33)

Vince's account highlights two crucial aspects related to this study: 1. Nonreligious individuals do not have a gap in moral reasoning, but instead pull from social repertoires from across their daily life experience to make sense of death and dying. 2. The social repertoires from which they pull to articulate their moral structures can possibly reveal a gap in the social and institutional organization of dying for the nonreligious. In this case, Vince's account ultimately shows that when MAID is understood as morally justified and necessary, its real-world enactment may still lack the symbolic, emotional and procedural structure required to render death meaningful and bearable for all involved.

Ultimately, the problem in some cases may not just be the moral justifications and ethical considerations behind "choosing your own death", but the social organization around death (and, more concretely in this case, dying through MAID). These concrete topics related to the world of death and dying, like MAID, are a site of ethical world-building. Participants' reflections on this policy reveal the profound ethical and moral orientations that some nonreligious people articulate when discussing sensitive topics. Though participants' narratives are socially constructed and mediated by habitus, they are also grounded in everyday life interactions, and not purely subjective.

Their nuanced understanding of the policy, its implications, flaws and benefits signal a clear moral structure.

In sum, all participants have a nuanced understanding of death, and agree that self-determination, dignity around dying and control over the bodily experience of death is justified. Interestingly, some of the tensions across participants' narratives may come from the specific processes behind the implementation of MAID in Canada. The possible lack of symbolic, emotional, and procedural structures required to render death meaningful and bearable for those present is a preliminary finding that warrants further study beyond the scope of this thesis. The people accessing MAID (whose deaths could be more meaningful than a mere "relief from pain") as well as family members whose relatives are "declared dead while in the middle of a conversation", are examples of the concrete spaces where death and morality intersect through concrete ethical considerations. Participants' moral stances, perhaps surprisingly, reveal gaps within existing institutions that do not sufficiently address the needs of both the patients undergoing MAID and their support networks (family members, physicians involved in the process, etc.)[76].

The moral and social frameworks explored thus far are not confined to the management of death and dying, but are embedded within wider understandings of what death ultimately signifies. In the following chapter, I explore participants' narratives on life after death. I examine how participants conceptualize the afterlife (if at all), and how this relates to their lifestances and broader views on life, death, morality, and meaning.

[76] Research related to the gaps in supporting family members during end-of-life scenarios has begun to garner academic interest. Hidalgo et al. (2021), for example, examined the reported death-related ritual practices of 61 adult parents from non-white ethnic groups in the United States. They found that family members may "feel a lack of understanding and support after their loved one dies if death rituals important to them fail to be acknowledged by the healthcare team" and that a better informed healthcare professional "can help family members feel more comfortable in sharing practices that differ from those common in the United States or by other ethnic/racial or religious groups" (460). The authors concluded that a better understanding of the rapidly changing bereavement practices in the United states can help healthcare professionals "guide family members to the resources they might have overlooked to help them cope with their grief" (461). In relation to MAID, academic interest in bereavement following assisted dying has only recently begun to emerge. Serota et al. (2024) identify their study as the first Canadian research to examine how family discordance can shape bereavement experiences following MAID. They outline five factors that may complicate both the MAID process and subsequent bereavement for family members: family discordance, internal conflict, legislative and eligibility concerns, logistical challenges, and the management of disclosure and potential negative reactions.

Chapter 5. And then what happens?: Beyond the self

Seven falls suffered the corn cob from my hand

before my hunger found it,

seven times, a thousand times I have died

and I am smiling as on the first day.

No one will say: he did not know life.

— Algo Sobre La Muerte Del Mayor [translated from Spanish], by Jaime Sabines (1926-1999) —

What happens after you die? Does anything happen? This is the guiding question behind this thesis project. It was also the question that seemed the most compelling for participants, and the one they wanted to spend the most time on during our interviews. When I posed this question, I did not expect to find the ultimate truth, but get a grounded understanding of what participants' narratives were. I found much more than that in their responses. Coming into the research, I expected most of the participants to not have a detailed conception of an afterlife. I expected them to think about afterlife in relation to religion, and to not engage in such questions unless prompted to do so. Quickly my assumptions were turned on its head. Thinking about afterlife was more than an aspiration or a hopeful sense of "continuation" after death. Their thoughts were a window to moral stances and ontological reflections that showed how participants position themselves around death and what comes after. How they thought about death and afterlife reflected how and what they thought about their own lives: It was an expression of the "self" as a social way of "being". Their ideas of death and afterlife, in turn, carried moral components and nuanced understandings of how they perceived their own subjectivity in the face of a social world. The theme of this chapter, Beyond the self, reflects what the participants articulated when confronted with the idea of life after death.

Out of the 35 interviews I conducted, 19 participants answered "yes" to whether they thought *something* happened after their death. 16 of them said "no". Out of those 19, 16 of them had a

conception of an afterlife, meaning that they had thought about it or had ideas and expectations of what would happen to them after they died. Granted, some of these were recognized or conceived as "hopes" or "hypotheticals" more than grounded expectations. What was clear nonetheless was that several participants expressed a *desire* for there to be an afterlife more than they were completely certain that there was.

The perspectives shared by the participants represent a mix of "hopes" and grounded expectations. The nature of our interview allowed for nuanced perspectives on afterlife to emerge even if they were initially dismissed by the participant as just "what I hope happens" or "what I want it to be like". I argue these hopes and expectations are even more important than established frameworks of afterlife because these reveal many aspects of their lifestances, not simply what they think "happens when they die". They show what participants value, what they want to keep when or if an afterlife comes (whether literal or symbolic) and what they expect that to be like. Ultimately, their perspectives highlighted the social aspects of afterlife belief. What began as questions about what happens when we die opened onto a broader configuration of values, attachments, and ethical orientations that structure participants' lifestances.

Before discussing the categories themselves there are several considerations that need to be named. First, afterlife beliefs are a snapshot that reflects a participant's belief in a particular moment in time. I prefer Beaman et al.'s term of *lifestances* (2025a) over "worldview" because the term adheres a certain sense of temporality and positionality to beliefs. What participants think about afterlife comes from a specific time and social context they experience within their lifetime. What matters is what these beliefs reflect in terms of what they value now, and how that, in turn, shows how participants understand life in the face of death.

The sense of something existing "beyond the self", independent of whether that's from a perspective founded on an immanent framework, takes the leading role here. Participants' narratives entailed sociological accounts of death, meaning and certainty that reflected immanent and transcendent stances all at once. As we will see here, some perspectives on afterlife were immanent because they were material, embodied (by others or themselves), inevitable and presented as a grounded certainty. Yet, these were also transcendent in that they presented a horizon of significance that exceeded everyday experiences and provided them with existential reflections outside of their daily lives. It is their daily experiences and existence that grounded them and

provided them with "immanent certainty", yet, these same ideas, as experienced inside the social world, also provided them with a "transcendent" sense that once they died, something happened "beyond themselves".

I employ the concept of transcendence not in opposition to the "immanent certainty" theme that I proposed in the previous chapter, but as an extension of it, emerging from within this recognition of finitude. In this sense, these "transcendent" perspectives account for imagined continuities that include the preservation of the self, but also the ways in which this "self" connects and integrates beyond one's own existence. Most participants did not express a desire to "live forever", but rather articulated a desire to "continue", or "remain" in a different way, shape or form. It was about knowing that in death, who they were carried on in a way, rather than ameliorating the fact of "death". They expressed a sense of meaning that exceeded the boundaries of life, but this did not mean they thought their life would go on forever. Much like the previous chapter showed, there was broad recognition that death meant the end. Their thoughts were instead grounded in a sense of transcendence that remained tied to the recognition that they would not be present in the world after death. Even in the cases where participants possessed a sense of "soul"[77] or believed in "spirits", death was recognized as final, and spirits and souls were conceived as a grounded sense of "self" that became more clearly defined after death. For participants, the transcendent is not opposed to the immanent, but unfolds from it.

5.1 Afterlife as an expression of the social "self"

Nineteen participants believed that something occurs after death, but only 7 out of 35 articulated a specific vision of the afterlife. Across all interviews, participants expressed varying degrees of certainty: some were confident in their views, while others remained uncertain but inclined to

[77] For the most part, I did not explicitly ask participants whether they believed in "spirits" or "souls", but instead let participants engage with these ideas as they emerged organically throughout the interviews. This was intentional, as I wanted to avoid steering the conversation toward any particular conceptualization of afterlife, or impose categories that might shape their responses. I decided not to include a section dedicated to participants' views on "spirits" and "souls" because these rarely emerged during our conversations. The few participants who expressed a clear idea of a "soul" or "spirit" always incorporated it within their overarching "afterlife" narrative. I intend for the interview excerpts presented in this chapter to also fulfill the job of exemplifying what participants meant when they referred to "souls" or "spirits" in the few instances where these are mentioned. Nonetheless, exciting studies about the ongoing changes of the notion of "soul" continue to emerge and shape our understanding of how nonreligious people imagine them. Gaudette et al. (2025) found, for example, that religiosity is not a consistent predictor of believing in a soul, and that holding other supernatural beliefs increases the odds of believing in one.

believe in some form of continuation. As seen in Chapter four, the only certainty was death, with afterlife narratives emerging more as a result of personal and moral stances than ontological certainties.

Additionally, each participant's thoughts about dying and afterlife were reflective of conscientious personal ideas of what *would* make sense according to their lifestance and past experiences. These were conceived in accordance to participant's beliefs and stances on a variety of topics —from general knowledge of history to personal moral stances, afterlife conceptualizations reflected the participant's own views about life and what "makes sense" according to their lifestances. The common thread of afterlife conceptualizations is that they are personal and meaningful.

The "social" self can be understood as the notion of a socially embedded, historically situated notion of the "self". It is a notion of the "self" that is deeply personal, but whose desires, hopes, intuitions, and afterlife narratives (among others) are shaped by social, cultural and moral frameworks internalized through life experiences. The social "self" functions as an analytical dimension for this research because 1. participants' afterlife narratives are personal and meaningful, but anchored in constant and contingent socialization processes; and 2. participants' afterlife narratives act as mirrors of how they see the social world.

One of the participants, Brianna, clarifies how afterlife beliefs function as deeply personal expressions of the social "self". She believes in a personal afterlife in which people get to live the afterlife the believe in:

> *I think that what happens to us after we die really just depends on the individual's beliefs. If I believe this, then that's what I believe, and that's what I think will happen to me. I think it's based a lot on a combination of your spirituality and your hopes for yourself. So if somebody else believes something else, then, you know, I respect that, and I want that for them. And it's not to say that I think that what will happen for them is going to happen for me. No. I think that is your cultivation of your spirituality and your practice, and I have respect for that, and I believe that. I believe a lot in the power of us as humans, and the power of the spirit, and what we bring into existence. I think we bring into existence our desires, through the power of being human. Because I do believe that humans are very powerful creatures… And so whatever somebody believes for themselves and for their afterlife… if that's what you want, and if that's what you really, truly believe in, that is what*

you will get… I think there is a lot of agency involved. (Brianna, government worker, female, 31)

For Brianna, afterlife is the ultimate expression of personal desires and hopes. There's no conflict, nor is there a need to have a "shared" vision of an afterlife for things to make sense. These "personal" afterlives work within her ontology and reveal how she feels about the social world, humans and personal connection. Her lifestance manifests through her belief in afterlife; she believes in the power of humans and the power of agency *even* over death (or what happens after).

Afterlife beliefs reveal an expression of the social "self" that in turn highlights a person's lifestance. Beliefs are, as discussed in previous chapters, historic and contingent. They open a window into participant's habitus, thus allowing us to see how the immediate social context has contributed to the realization of a particular afterlife belief. In these cases, afterlife beliefs are an expression of the social "self" in that they are imagined and configured as a result of what the participant has learned throughout life.

This social "self" is also fundamentally imbued with moral stances. Participants' afterlife imaginaries are not only shaped by what they have learned throughout their lives, but also by what they perceive as *right*, *fair*, or *meaningful*. Their beliefs about what happens after death function as moral extensions of participants' lifestances; they articulate implicit moral positions about agency, justice, responsibility, and the value of human experience.

Rather than emerging from ontological certainty, afterlife narratives often reflect what participants feel *ought* to happen. Whether expressed as a desire for continuity, as in reincarnation, or as a personalized afterlife shaped by individual belief, their imaginaries reveal *normative* commitments about the kind of world participants inhabit and the kind of world they find ethically coherent. Afterlife beliefs can be understood as projections of a moral order in that they organize death in ways that align with participants' understandings of fairness, purpose, and the limits (or possibilities) of human agency and actions.

This moral dimension becomes particularly visible when participants justify their beliefs. Appeals to respect for others' beliefs, to the fairness of multiple possible afterlives, or to the continuity of consciousness are not only descriptive claims, but they seek to transmit moral positions about how existence should be structured. Overall, afterlife imaginaries are not only descriptive but evaluative

in that they reveal how participants reconcile death with their broader moral orientations toward life, others, and the social "self".

JKelly frames his reflections in terms of consciousness and plausibility, but his belief in reincarnation also expresses an underlying commitment to continuity and coherence as desirable features of existence:

> *I feel like what makes us have consciousness is not something that is easily destroyed with the death of the physical. I feel like when we die, what makes us conscious or human maybe is reincarnated. Whether that's into a human or an animal or whatever, I just feel like it goes on. Whatever makes us, yeah, it doesn't die with the physical death of the body…The way I see it, consciousness is hard to define, where it exists in our body, right? You know, people can chop off your arm, you're still conscious. You can have half your head caved in, removed, you're still who you are. You know, the Greeks thought your consciousness was in your belly, I believe, you know.*
>
> *Ireland has this symbol called the triskele, and the triskele is a triple spiral and it signifies life, death, and rebirth. Mother, father, son kind of situation, the cyclical nature of life. And I always found that very interesting. But what made it even more interesting to me is that you have a little island in the North Atlantic believing in reincarnation, and then you have Australia, removed for like 40,000 years from the rest of humanity, their Aboriginals believe in reincarnation of the soul as well. Like, after the physical body dies, you go back up into the… wherever, like into the universe, whatever, and you're reincarnated. And then also in Tibet, you know, we're talking the Himalayas, very remote part of the world, not much integration or exchanging of ideas, I'm sure, and they believe in reincarnation as well. So for me it's like: you have these three super remote parts of the world that were not influenced by Abrahamic religion, and they all believe in reincarnation. Whereas you have Islam, Christianity, and Judaism believing in a heaven but not reincarnation. And I think that most people believe the heaven idea nowadays just because of the spread of Abrahamic religion. But you have these three remote parts of the world, and they believe in reincarnation. So for me, I just feel like without the taint of Abrahamic religion, humans believed that our consciousness continued after we died or whatever. I think it's that act of being conscious, like the spark that makes us human.*

> *…And then when I came across other examples just reading, you know, I like going down these rabbit holes online, and I came across the Tibetan stuff…And yeah, I just felt like there must be something to it if all these humans developed this independently and came to the same conclusion. Maybe it's not a coincidence. You know, I'd like to be calm if I'm approaching death, because what I tell myself is: this might be the end for me, but it's not the end for my consciousness. (JKelly, works in cybersecurity, male, 29)*

Devon woke up one day with a clear idea of what happens after death. His thoughts are informed by his knowledge of the world but also deeply personal reflections on how he can *personally* make sense of the way in which the world works:

> *I kind of think that the way that we conceptualize time as human beings is probably… like, I think our entire experience, humanity's entire experience, is like a flip in the whole scale of the cosmos and everything like that. Like, it's such a minute, tiny little pinprick of a moment. So I kind of think that it would be a neat thing if perhaps we all get reincarnated. It's not definitive, if you die, maybe you come back as, I don't know, another person. Maybe you're a whale, maybe you're an ant, maybe you're whatever.*
>
> *So maybe someone dies in the 1950s, maybe they come back as a snail in the year 3000. Maybe that snail dies in the year 3000 and comes back as a whale in the year 20 BC. So essentially all of existence is perhaps folded in upon itself, in a kind of never-ending loop. And because time… I don't think it's linear… I don't believe that there is a temporal or even a metaphysical heaven or hell, or like, I don't think that there is a place where your spirit goes. Because I don't, I think that if anything, rather than a spirit or a soul sort of thing, I feel like it's more like… I think of it more in terms of a stream of consciousness, almost. (Devon, works for parliament, male, 30)*

His afterlife beliefs reconciliate a so-called "objective" knowledge (things he *knows* to be true) with the unknowns of life and death. His thoughts do not need to make sense to everyone but only him: they are, again, an expression of the social "self". The stream of consciousness he refers to also speaks to a sense of "connection" that transcends the individual, a common topic amongst participants that I will discuss later in this chapter.

Afterlife was also envisioned as a conduit through which participants could continue to self-express after passing. Brianna, for example, saw afterlife as a way in which she could continue doing whatever she couldn't do in life:

> *I believe that in my spirituality, when I pass away, I would want to just be able to wander the world, to see all the places that I haven't been able to see in my living, you know, in my corporeal existence. And to just be able to roam and see all the things and be timeless. And yeah, just be a part of the rest of this existence, or this mortal coil, I guess. (Brianna, government worker, female, 31)*

Even amongst participants who were unsure of the type of afterlife they imagined (if any), their personal experiences helped them conceive and make sense of ideas such as "souls":

> *I think we all, I do strongly believe we all have souls. Um, when people die, I've seen death and I've seen souls. You see it leave the body. There's atoms; we're made of atoms; we're made of energy. There's science behind this. We all have this energy, like an aura, which people don't like that word, right? But, like, for example, if you come too close to me, like, I'll feel that you're in my bubble, right? Like, you'll feel someone if they're right up in your face, and you might not like that, or you might like it, you know? But that's like, that's your atoms, that's your aura, that's your spirit, your soul, whatever you wanna call it, right? That energy is life in you, which is not your brain and not your body. I think that's just… we're made of energy. We're all made of energy. (Gabriela, music teacher, female, 31)*

Common amongst participants were also afterlife beliefs that showed what participants learned about life in terms of what they *do not know* or *think*. Put another way, some participants generated knowledge around afterlife founded on what *didn't make sense* or they simply *did not know*. Afterlife beliefs, in that way, were also conceived as expressions of the social "self", but in terms of what they don't know or are unsure of:

> *I understand that you know the concept of the afterlife seems pretty ubiquitous. It seems like everyone has this shared agreement that there is this concept, whether they got it through their religious beliefs like Catholicism or Judaism… But this idea seems so like, people will say things like, 'oh, they're with their loved ones now', or something. Like they're acknowledging that there is something. But what prompts me to say 'I don't know'*

and lean towards 'there is nothing' is: I have no information, or proof, or evidence to otherwise suggest anything different. That's basically it. It's hard for me to say definitively that there is no God when I don't have any other, like, when in reality, I don't know. It's a very… it's a very firm position to take, or declare. (Mark, university student/bingo hall worker, non-binary, 36)

There's nothing to make me believe that is the case [that there is an afterlife]. To be quite honest though, when I was younger and I first became like the, like, lost my faith and became, I guess, a self-identified atheist, I would have been quite resistant to that idea. I think it's just when you kind of discover a new point of view, you're quite… zealous about that aspect. But as I've gotten older, I can completely appreciate why people are religious, and I very much respect that, as long as, of course, you know, you're respectful of other people. But although I do sometimes envy the fact that people can believe that, the aspect of, like, an afterlife, or the fact that people do have a soul and they maintain their cognitive function after death, which, to be honest, if that were the case and I'm wrong, I would love for that to be true. You know, who doesn't want to be able to maintain all your cognitive functions after you die? Be able to meet with family members that you hold dear, friends that you hold dear for your entire life? That would be amazing to me, and I can totally appreciate that point of view. Although, from my own rational perspective, there's nothing for me to believe that our personality, our mind, our consciousness, everything that makes us our own person, is separate from the electrical and chemical processes that go on in our brain. (Adam, emergency nurse, male, 32)

I think it's very arrogant of us to just assume that we've, you know, figured out everything about how the universe works in that small amount of time that we've been able to do these sorts of things. Because if we look back, you know, from a vantage point now, there's all kinds of stuff that we didn't know or didn't understand even 20–30 years ago, right? About human biology, about psychology, about all these things. So I don't know. Like, I think if I answer it that in a very rational way, it's just, well, it's nothing. But on the other hand, I do wonder about, well, maybe there is something and we just can't capture it yet. We can't, you know, we can't think about it yet. We don't even have the conceptual tools to really understand it yet. (Carter, government worker, male, 32)

Without the reliance on institutionalized religious doctrines of the afterlife, participants' beliefs did not reduce to simple affirmations of "nothing" or bare recognitions of uncertainty. On the contrary, this lack of certainty opened up a space for self-expression and reflection. These same uncertainties could be "scary" and raise questions that are uncomfortable to think about, but when participants engage with them, they articulate their personal beliefs about the social world, life and death.

In some other cases, the very act of invoking afterlife possibilities becomes an expression of the social "self" shaped by uncertainty. Some participants, despite not genuinely believing and fully recognizing that these serve as a source of comfort, entertained afterlife thoughts to make themselves feel better when needed. I argue these are also genuine expression of the self because what they invoke is not necessarily belief in terms of content, but *need*. They may not reveal what they truly think the afterlife *is*, but what would make them feel comfortable "knowing". What these show, then, is a *need* in terms of existential certainty; a certainty that, above all, is grounded in past experiences.

In Vince's case, although he asserts a rational understanding of nothingness after death, he, simultaneously, invokes imaginative scenarios as a response to existential uncertainty. Deep down, he *knows* that's not the case, but there's nothing preventing him from entertaining these thoughts when needed:

> *I have one idea that makes me feel better than another, but I do feel, at the end of the day, that nothing actually does happen. I think that it's impossible for the human brain to understand nothingness or even conceptualize it in any way. Which is why we kind of invent things to comfort us with the idea of what happens after death. But I do strongly believe that we just cease to exist and nothing happens after. That's one I do actually believe, and then the other that comforts me, is the idea of reincarnation [that] would be pretty cool. Um, but I kind of don't actually believe that that's gonna happen. I think it's just one of those things that, um, you know, it's easier to conceptualize, I suppose, the idea that your consciousness continues. So when I actually think logically about the idea of death, I don't… like, the whole argument breaks down. But at the end of the day, you know, sometimes you don't really want to think that deeply about the problem, and so it's easier to just kind of conceptualize, like, 'Oh yeah, I'm gonna be a cardinal,' you know, in my next*

life, you know? Or like maybe we'll just restart again because I can't conceptualize nothingness, but I can conceptualize being a person again, you know? I think more like: if I really think about the concept, then my final answer would be 'nothing.' And so the idea of what happens after death is, in my opinion, one of those things that, if you take a step back, we're answering that question because humans can't conceptualize nothingness, right? If I had to choose, out of all the traditional religions that exist in this world, reincarnation would be my preferred thing to happen after death. You know, I don't believe it actually does happen, but I like to think about it, you know, the idea of just kind of starting it all over again. I feel like my life is pretty great and it's been really fun so far, and I would love to do it all again. (Vince, project manager, male, 33)

Kylee considers herself an atheist, but that does not mean she doesn't entertain the idea of reincarnation:

I think the scientist in me tells me that the energy within your body that keeps your brain alive ceases to exist. I think that the neurons that were firing are no longer firing. Therefore, there's no consciousness. I think your body then degrades into the… into the universe, however it be, whether it be into a casket, into cremation, however it goes. On a more philosophical spot, I think that energy cannot be created or destroyed, so I think that is kind of where it gets a little bit difficult for me. I think that it's a lot more complex than what has been studied. I would like to say I know that there's nothing out there. I'm very strongly an atheist. I don't believe in things I can't see. And I don't know if there's anything, but that little part in me just hopes that there's more. And to elaborate by 'more': as my family doesn't believe reincarnation, but like, we don't not believe in reincarnation…I think that kind of goes with the, like, energy cannot be created or destroyed somehow. I don't believe in a soul, but at the same time, there are pieces of people that remind you of other people, that it's like, 'Oh, well, maybe… maybe there's something else going on that the scientist in me can't explain'. I think of reincarnation… I don't think it means, like, someone passes away and then their exact being is then reborn into another being. I don't think that that is what it is. I think that there are, like, pieces and memories and feelings that someone had when they passed, experiences that they had in their lifetime, that, when they passed, it's like another creature has it. (Kylee, graduate student, female, 32)

Overall, most of the participants in this study still entertain ideas about afterlife. Even those participants who stated they did not believe in an afterlife were open to the idea of engaging with afterlife narratives. It is possible that the rise of nonreligion could be signaling an emerging tendency toward conceptualizations of afterlife that are less oriented toward shared or institutionalized narratives as sources of ontological certainty. Afterlife beliefs, it seems, are increasingly more reflective of subjective interpretations about life, death and the social world. These reflections, in turn, could be signaling a reconfiguration of certain social structures as religious institutions become less central in shaping meaning and authority.

It is beyond the scope of this study to substantially consider the influence of religious upbringing in determining a particular envisioning of an afterlife. What can be affirmed is that the common "theme" amongst participants was that afterlife narratives are personal in that they reflect the participants own hopes, thoughts and expectations for what comes (or doesn't come) after, and *meaningful* in that they seek to fill with meaning ontological uncertainties. These also exposed how participants feel about the social world, as well as their ethical, epistemological and ontological stances.

Participants' reflections constitute an expression of the social "self" in that they express subjective ideas and expectations while simultaneously presenting them as meaningful commentaries on their place in the world and the conditions under which they experience life. In this sense, afterlife narratives now function less as doctrinal claims and more as *experiential self-disclosures* (subjective articulations through which individuals make sense of finitude, value, knowledge and uncertainty).

In this section, I have shown how afterlife beliefs often function as expressions of the social "self", which in turn highlights an increasing individualisation of conceptions of life after death. This tendency represents one of two broad analytic patterns that emerged from the data. The second pattern shifts the focus away from the "self" as an entity and towards afterlife beliefs as forms of "connection". In the following section, I examine this second configuration in more detail, in which afterlife narratives are not primarily centred on individual continuity, but on relationality, integration, and forms of connection that extend beyond the self.

5.2 Afterlife as "connection"

The most common afterlife narratives amongst participants involves the maintenance, expansion or generation of new ways in which participants can continue to connect with their world after death. Whether that is through 1. becoming part of something shared and greater than the "self", 2. maintaining personal connections after death, such as visiting loved ones; or 3. remaining connected through actions and thoughts of others they engaged with during life, the participants' inclination towards "connection" is more than noticeable.

This inclination is not a surprising outcome. What matters for this study is *how,* and that *how* is what I explore in this section. Much like what I have argued previously, connection can be understood as part of a broader shift in meaning-making outside institutional religious frameworks. In the absence of religious institutional narratives that prescribe a specific "cosmology", participants in this study tend to articulate their beliefs through *relational forms of meaning-making*. In line with broader research that has also shown the centrality of relationality in experiences of meaning, memory, and loss (Klass et al. 1996; Klass and Steffen 2018), this continuation of "bonds" (whether symbolic, emotional or imagined) constitutes a common way in which participants negotiated existential uncertainties related to death.

The ways in which this "connection" is managed, envisioned and enacted varies significantly amongst participants. There were, however, some recognizable patterns amongst participants' beliefs common to their narratives of afterlife. The first major narrative tendency expressed by participants involved becoming part of something greater, larger, or beyond themselves. This "larger than self" imagined afterlife was envisioned as something to be shared or determined collectively and revealed an underlying normative preference for *relational* forms of existence.

In these accounts, becoming part of something larger than the self was not framed as a loss of "individuality", but as a meaningful or even desirable transformation. The dissolution of individual boundaries (whether into nature, a shared consciousness, or a universal "source") was consistently articulated by participants as coherent with their broader understandings of life, belonging, and continuity. Participants' narratives reflected an implicit moral orientation in which connection, rather than individuality, is treated as a meaningful way of organizing existence beyond death. For participants, human connections, whether that's through spirits, souls, consciousness, or our own bodies, guided how participant they imagined the afterlife:

Maybe there's other stuff that happens, but I feel like we're probably in some, like, I feel like we have spirits, and they go back to some kind of unified source. Whatever it is, I think it has a lot of names. I don't really believe in heaven, definitely not hell, even though I was taught those things. I think we get to be, like, reunited with different souls. So I think, like, spiritually we're all connected, and when we die from here, we could be anywhere. And the universe is pretty big. Um, so I think we just go back…I think, like, I think spirit would include me as a person, but also not exclusively me as a person. So I think, like, [I] would leave an imprint, and my experiences would leave an imprint… I think everything is a big spirit, like one, right? Like, it goes back, like, I think everything goes back to source and it's one unified thing. (Lila, graduate student, female, 30)

I'd like to believe that, like, the essence of who we are kind of goes back to this kind of, like, source of whatever life is. And maybe we're reincarnated, maybe we're not…I guess I have the sense that, like, everything is connected through something, some sort of something. Like, if you want to call it God or whatever… So maybe we're, like… when we die, we become part of that thing that connects everything like that. (Karin, community worker, non-binary, 34)

We go back, we go back to the Earth. I guess in a way that is going home. We came from the earth and we will go back to the earth like the human body. You know, we are carbon based. We have a ton of nutrients and minerals in us that are naturally and unnaturally forming on the earth. If you think about it, and we constantly perpetuate ourselves with electrical currents, you and I talking right now is two parasites communicating in meat suits using electrical currents to move things basically. And the Earth is the same way: we go back to the dirt. Dirt's carbon, you know. It's got water in it. It's got a whole bunch of minerals and nutrients in it, especially nitrates, which we are also got a quick portion of, you know? We are meant to live on the thing that we resemble and go back to it eventually and just continue the process. (Jessie, stay at home mother, non-binary, 28)

I think that after we pass, one of the things is after we pass that consciousness, like, it's kind of a shared consciousness, and we're all just kind of like meat suits that walk around with just a little portion or attachment to that consciousness. And then once we pass, we

become part of that again… Because consciousness and the soul are like, like consciousness is a really weird thing that we just don't understand yet. Like we all experience life as an observer, but we can't find that observer in the head. Like we don't know where it is. And just through my own, again, this is just thought process, you know… I think that we're all connected in that manner…And once we pass on, that's what we become part of again in a grander scheme. We're just not, you know, isolated to this one little form of existence that we all have, that we experience as a person. (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)

It's a sense of kind of continuity. It's almost like, oh, like when somebody dies, they kind of just maybe, like, return to kind of just like a different state. I mean, perhaps that also kind of puts into questions, like, well, like, who are we when we're born too? Are we just like an individual person, or are we then just maybe like a collection of, like, some conscious energy from outside, right? And that's kind of how I like to think about it now, is that yeah. And like, we maybe come from this larger kind of zeitgeist, this greater collection of consciousness. And then, like I said, we kind of go back to it. But it's almost kind of like all of humanity is one big collective, you could almost say. Hard to explain…Being a person is, it's not necessarily the body, but it's more the consciousness of a person. Um, I suppose without that, I mean, it's just a vessel. If you ever had it where you thought about someone and then all of a sudden that person, for example, calls you or texts you, right? It's almost like perhaps in humanity, or living things, perhaps, there is some sort of subconscious sort of connection that we're just not aware of…Maybe it's almost like an informational or conscious field around, or in the universe around the planet or something like that, that we're all kind of connected by. And when we die, perhaps the consciousness goes from this vessel just to kind of the general sphere around the world. (Stan, critical care nurse, male, 31)

In these statements, participants demonstrate reflections surrounding human bodies as "vessels" and constant references to "going back", whether that's to the earth or to an imagined state of being before existing on this plane. These perspectives put an important asterisk on the tensions between immanent and transcendent frames. Both coexist within some participants' narratives, especially

among those who believe in some sort of afterlife. I will return to this discussion towards the end of this chapter.

Contrary to the previous narrative tendency amongst participants (becoming part of something larger than the "self"), the second tendency focused on participants' imaginaries of the afterlife as a personal experience. In other words, how afterlife is envisioned through the persistence of personal relationships. The "connections" participants articulated involved imagined scenarios in which relationships with others could be maintained beyond death. The focus, then, was on the continuation of interpersonal bonds across death:

> *So I think after we die, there is something left. I don't necessarily think it, like, stays here with us all the time. Um, but I think the spirits of those who have passed can, like, come back and visit. Sometimes I feel like that happened to me personally. And then I also, I'm interested a lot in consciousness as well, so that has gone all over the place with, like, meditation, researching religions, things like that. Like, I'm not religious myself, but then I started actually listening to people who are studying near-death experiences, and their experiences of, like, encountering what they believe were those that had passed on in, like, another place, kind of in between or whatever. And I thought it really made sense. Um, so yeah, I guess, like, my life-and-death worldview has been, like, composed of all of those things together. (Morgan, massage therapist, female, 34)*

> *I believe in souls, so… and the only reason why I believe in that is, and I didn't before, or wasn't sure of it before, but I mean, I believe I've met my soulmate. And I believe I say that largely because there has never been a connection that I've had with this particular part, like, another person, quite like this one, where it was so strong. We met, you know, we met under random circumstances, but we were pulled towards each other, right? And, it's the way we matched was beyond coincidences. You know, not only did our similarities align, but our differences complement each other. You know, similar core… we are essentially the same person, you know, but two different people. And as we discussed all this, it came down to a point where it was almost, it was unbelievable, right? We were like, I cannot believe this connection. It is felt to be the strongest, like, other than my kids, the strongest, most powerful bond I've ever personally experienced. And we met randomly. And we… it is so*

strong and so powerful that even we both recognize this is something beyond, like, friendship or beyond just compatibility. Like, this is, we are connected somehow in the soul realm of how close and… how close and connected we are…I do believe that, you know, when it comes to our souls and soul family, that we reunite. Because that connection is so strong in this realm that it obviously is guided by an overarching, more holistic connection. (Oscar, IT project manager, male, 43)

I don't necessarily know that anyone, like, leaves the earth. I disagree that people would leave the earth and either go to heaven or they go to hell. Like, I don't… to me that doesn't make any sense... . Once they pass away, I feel like there's something that just leaves, right? I don't know, but I do have a sense that there's a few things that could occur… It could be that your spirit, or whatever, is distributed or held in the hearts of the people that loved you and that you loved throughout your life. And so you kind of are distributed into them in a way. And I kind of like the idea of… not like reincarnation so much, but just that they're a part of you forever. And they're kind of there, like, you know, like in Star Wars when, I can't remember, one of the characters dies and all the other dead characters are standing behind that character in ghost form or whatever. So it's kind of like a sense that they're there, that your ancestors can be with you and follow you around. And, you know, when they die, maybe they pass some of that knowledge or transfer that on to you. (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)

Participants articulated these afterlife narratives by giving centrality to specific human bonds. These bonds, in turn, function as the primary reference through which death is interpreted and extended. Rather than abstract reflections on existence, participants' beliefs are grounded in lived relationships that they seek to preserve, reconfigure, or extend beyond death. Morgan had a personal experience that helped define her afterlife belief. Oscar has such a deep connection to his partner that he is just sure that their bond will continue after death. Dan has a sense that those who leave remain with you forever, and he has reached that conclusion through personal encounters after experiencing the death of close relatives (his grandmother and his partner's father). In all three accounts, beliefs are a result of learned experiences, grounded in social reality and then reconfigured and repurposed to conceive a specific ontological certainty that leads to their own imagined version of the afterlife.

Although the content of these afterlife narratives differs, their underlying structure is remarkably consistent: the continuation of connection and the persistence of social bonds beyond death is of most importance for participants. This consistency suggests that participants are not constructing these imaginaries in isolation, but are drawing from a broader, socially available repertoire through which death is made meaningful, and that these repertoire is conceived without the use of religious frameworks. These narratives reflect an embedded cultural and social repertoire in which relational continuity is treated as a coherent and legitimate way of imagining what follows after death from outside religious frameworks. At the same time, they point to the presence of alternative meaning-making frameworks, rooted in relationality, through which participants make sense of death outside formal religious structures.

Afterlife beliefs expressed by participants also reflect a sense of immanent certainty, meaning a certainty about the conditions of worldly existence, a deep sense that life is finite, bodily and part of a natural process in which death is understood as the end of the organism. This immanent certainty is anchored in the assumption that "things end". It represents a baseline sense of reality for participants. There's no denying death for participants. Only from that framework in which personal life experiences accompanied by a renewed sense of "finality", can their conceptualizations of afterlife emerge. Social actions and social bonds, grounded on immanent certainties, provide the frameworks upon which participants build their own personal narratives of afterlife. For the most part, even participants who did not believe in an "afterlife", highlighted the importance of personal relationships to make sense of life and death. Furthermore, these same bonds are what allowed them to conceive afterlife narratives in which death is understood as the death of the individual, not the social "self". I will engage with this discussion in the next chapter.

Afterlife imaginaries are, for the most part, marked by affective relational and symbolic responses to a sense of finitude. When participants spoke about returning to a shared consciousness or reuniting with loved ones, they did not negate this finitude, but articulated extensions that provide a framework for preserving moral and emotional continuity and, in some cases, make sense of relational loss or provide existential comfort. This is where the transcendent dimension of their immanent interpretation becomes most apparent and where the moral dimension of these imaginaries becomes most visible.

The afterlife scenarios participants describe are not neutral extensions of existence, but reflect implicit evaluations about what *should* endure beyond death. Across participants' accounts, certain common moral orientations recur: the value of maintaining relationships, the importance of continuity over rupture, and the sense that meaningful human bonds *ought* not to be rendered insignificant by death. Independently of whether these are expressed through notions of continued presence after death, joining something larger than the "self" or persisting through others, all participants expressed a preference for maintaining relationships beyond death as a way of responding to finitude.

Although these moral orientations are not always explicitly stated as moral claims, they are embedded within participants' descriptions of what makes "sense", feels "comforting", or appears "fitting" according to their lived experiences. Afterlife beliefs function as moral extensions of participants' social worlds as they project into death the values that they believe organize life, such as connection, care, and relational continuity. Furthermore, these imaginaries do *not* claim supernatural certainty. For the most part, participants frequently marked these narratives as speculative, symbolical or metaphorical; they were *felt*, more than *known.*[78] They remained anchored in an immanent frame in that the "transcendent" elements were only possible as a result of internal senses of continuation within their own material and social reality, not as a result of external supernatural claims founded on established religious frameworks.

Participants' afterlife narratives revealed the learned set of dispositions participants acquired through their social trajectories (familiarity with religious, moral, philosophical repertoires, among others). They also showed how participants navigated uncertainty through their *habitus*, mobilizing the resources they feel are "available" or "make sense" to them personally. These dispositions, in turn, point to the presence of an implicit institutional or cultural frame within which afterlife is imagined relationally, even in the absence of formal religious adherence.

[78] For all participants, the fact of death is viewed as a part of the social reality. Much like the uncertainty surrounding death I referred to on chapter four, afterlife uncertainty was not, for the most part, viewed as threatening. On the contrary, I would argue that this same uncertainty allowed participants to express and repurpose their own afterlife narratives as tools through which they made sense of their place in the world, their life experiences and the inevitable fact of death. And while some participants did express fear or discomfort when discussing death, uncertainty was seen as a motif to keep on living and enjoy life, not the "ultimate marginal situation" that Berger and Luckmann alluded to (1991).

Participants' beliefs are not static or articulated as fixed ontological stances, but change alongside their lifestances. The social "self" is articulated beyond rational convictions, with ethical and moral stances playing a role in how participants imagined an afterlife (if any). Put simply, the continuation of connection stands as a continuation of the social "self", not only as a way to overcome death and finitude, but as a means of reaffirming the moral significance participants attribute to relationships, care, and shared existence. Afterlife imaginaries do not merely seek to "extend" life, but preserve what participants understand to be most valuable within it.

Suffice it to say, imagined afterlife as "connection", much like the findings described in this chapter, could reflect a broader cultural shift, encouraged by 1. more individualized forms of afterlife narratives and 2. the preservation of meaningful relationships, personal identity and moral stances after death without the need of established religious frameworks. These orientations allowed for participants to imagine continuity without referring to institutionalized religion or religious frameworks, while at the same time affirming the enduring significance of the relationships they nurtured and cared alongside their own sense of a social "self" (in turn cultivated, expressed and articulated through life experiences).

5.3 Of higher powers

In this final section I expand on a concept that appeared somewhat often during the conversations with participants: Higher powers. Afterlife beliefs and higher power beliefs sometimes emerged jointly when participants articulated their thoughts on what happens beyond the limits of individual life and knowledge. In other words, participants often alluded to the notion of a "higher power" or a "higher order" when articulating their perspectives of the afterlife. In those cases, I asked participants the following question: "Do you believe in the concept of a Higher Power? Whatever form that may take". This section provides a brief overview of what the answers to those questions may reveal.

Although most participants identify as nonreligious, many of them answered this question positively and referred to concepts such as "spirits" or the "soul"; ideas often associated with religious worldviews. In total, 18 participants reported believing in some notion of a higher power, while 17 stated they did not. However, even among those who did affirm a belief in a higher power,

participants marked a clear separation between their own conception against traditionally religious or institutionalized notions of a "higher power".

When discussing a "higher power", participants often described it as something larger than the individual but without a defined form, agency, or moral authority. Rather than a transcendent figure that prescribes meaning or behavior, most participants explicitly referred to it as an abstract figure or "entity" that offered coherence and certainty to their particular lifestance. In most cases, the notion of a higher power was *instrumentalized* and *personalized*; it adapted to fit the participant's pre-existing worldview instead of shaping it.

Amongst participants the notion of a "higher power" was not envisioned as an all-mighty figure that regulated conduct or imposed a hierarchical moral order over the individual. It did not impose an order of things either, rather, it was a "resource" used to reinforce their own interpretations of life, death, and the social world.[79] Overall, participants' higher power imaginaries were reinterpreted through their own existing frameworks of meaning: They drew from their available repertoires to make sense, give purpose and conceptualize what lied or existed "beyond" the individual.

A higher power did not determine *how* participants should live their lives; instead, participants molded an idea of a higher power that aligned with their values, dispositions, and expectations. And though participants still drew on widely available cultural and social narratives (energy, connection, consciousness) to make sense of a higher power, they consistently distanced themselves from religiously informed conceptions of a higher power. Thus, beyond a move towards a more "individualized" form of a higher power, how participants imagined the notion of a higher power also suggests that a reconfiguration of social frameworks constructed outside religious frameworks might be taking place.

For many participants a higher power was not akin to an "authority" figure, but something that was part of existence, grounded in life experiences and part of the shared social reality. The higher power was located, identified and distinguished through relational, material, or even environmental terms:

[79] This "inversion" may be significant, as it could be argued that it reverses the relationship between the believer and the "sacred order", at least among nonreligious individuals.

Not in the sense of a sky-daddy God or some sort of powerful Zeus-like figure. I really like Tillich's description of God as the 'ground of being.' One of my close friends sort of joshes me about this and says, 'Yeah, it's like Jedi religion,' and my answer to him is, well, not religious, but yeah. So would I describe that as a higher power? I guess in the sense of, you know, is the ocean a higher power? Then yeah, it is. But does that mean I believe there is some sort of specific entity that has done all this? No. (Jenna, talent agent, female, 40)

I'm open to the concept of there being [a higher power], but I don't think that there is a conscious creator sort of thing. Maybe there's a higher power, but I don't think that that higher power necessarily knows what's going to happen. I don't think that it chooses or has any control. Now, that's kind of paradoxical, because I also do believe that certain things are just meant to pass. Like I view it like… there's an almost like… if something doesn't really work out the way that I think it would work out, I almost interpret that as a sign that that's just not the way. Not from any religious perspective, but it's just like, "Oh, the universe." (Devon, works for parliament, male, 30)

"Higher power" was also understood as a result of social relations. It emerged from the world, and only then would it be conceived as something "supernatural":

Consciousness is like a field of information, and then it creates other aggregates of information that take on personalities and people and all that kind of stuff. And I think in that regard, it can take on the shape of more powerful beings. I think that's also influenced by the mental energies we create on this planet. I'm not really sure, because I've never personally interacted with what I thought was a higher power…So I don't think there's an ultimate, personified higher power in the way religions think there is. Some religions think there's just one, and others think there are many. But even the religions that think there are many actually end up choosing to worship just one, like in the Abrahamic religions. (Morgan, massage therapist, female, 34)

I think maybe the higher power is kind of interconnectedness. Um, and an ability to access things we can't see, so I don't. I don't think it's like a being like, even if I say like God, I don't think God is separate from me. Like, I don't think I'm separate from you or anybody. Um, yeah. So I think the higher power is to "connect". (Lila, graduate student, female, 30)

Honestly, if you're going to talk about a higher power, I do believe in things like chaos and life and death, because those are facts. They're things we know, tangible things that we see and understand. I believe in what we've discovered about life, and I also believe in its complexity. Nothing is solid; it's all fluid. We should never hold it to a standard of solidity for that reason, because we are just… it's just like water. We are like water, not stone. (Jessie, stay at home mother, non-binary, 28)

Yeah, I think yes, definitely some kind of energy or something like that. I'm vehemently against the idea that there's a person or a body that's like, 'I made the Earth,' you know? I get a visceral reaction to that. But yes, I do think there is something bigger and that we are all connected in some way. And that things like empathy, experiencing other people's emotions and feelings, are sort of a demonstration of that, in a way. (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)

I'm not gonna lie, I've seen enough pain and suffering in my life that if there is a consciousness to this and God is that, I'm kind of pissed off at him. Or her, it, whatever. So I try not to think about that too much because it makes me angry. But I don't really know. Are there powers greater than myself? Of course there are. The sun is a power greater than myself, it has way more guidance or influence over my life than a lot of other things. If it wasn't there, I wouldn't be here. Plants wouldn't grow. You know what I mean? But that's about as far as I can take it in terms of what I actually, truly believe. Anything past that is speculation, in my opinion. (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)

For participants, a higher power could be articulated, felt and understood through a variety of means. The ocean could be conceived as a higher power, but so could the sun, interconnectedness, or shared consciousness. Thus, a higher power, was not simply produced by the individual, but identified within the world as something always present, or, at the very least, ready to be encountered or experienced. What varied amongst participants' account was not the existence of such a power, but how it was interpreted and integrated into their broader lifestances.

For Stan, a higher power could be conceived as an "external" influence, but its agency is limited and part of the shared social reality:

> *I don't necessarily think that it's a higher power that has any control over anything that goes on here. It's just, like I said, you could almost call it a higher kind of state of being, but it's separate. The only time it interacts with humans is when someone's born and when someone dies, when one comes into the world and someone else leaves. But between those two points, there's no interaction, you could say. So it's not a deterministic sort of sphere; it has no influence on anything that goes on around here. (Stan, critical care nurse, male, 31)*

Few participants shared Stan's vision of a higher power that operated separately from the social world. Nonetheless, in all cases, the higher power's influence was severely limited, and was envisioned as an inherent part of the social world.

As demonstrated, there is a lot of nuance behind the affirmation that nonreligious individuals continue to believe in a "higher power". Much like how religious frameworks are interpreted individually and subjectively, so are conceptions of a "higher power" articulated by participants. These beliefs *reveal* the social repertoire through which the notion of a "higher power" is made intelligible outside traditional religious doctrine for participants. These findings do not suggest an "absence" of structure, but a shift in the types of frameworks that informs participants' beliefs: a shift from institutionalized religiously informed cosmologies to more hybrid[80] configurations that focus on relationality as the main source of main source for meaning and ontological orientation.

The final chapter of this study focuses on particular articulations of the afterlife that reveal how participants navigate and exist within immanent and transcendent frameworks without ontological tensions. I show how an immanent conception of the world opens the space for the transcendent through experiential and grounded perspectives on the social world and how participants' narratives further reveal how particular envisioning of life after death, grounded on the immanent, can give space for the transcendent. What follows, thus, is an analysis of participants' narratives in which a shared sense of continuation after death through others is felt, experienced and made available through concrete shared and experiential means.

[80] Hybrid because they often combine elements of institutionalized frameworks such as science with more experiential dimensions of spirituality and lived experience.

Chapter 6. We're all part of the Choir: Social continuity after death

…So to live is heaven:

To make undying music in the world,

Breathing as beauteous order that controls

With growing sway the growing life of man…

– The Choir Invisible, by George Eliot (1819 – 1880)

George Eliot's poem was shared to me by a colleague. We were discussing what a possible immanent conception of the afterlife could look like. I explained how the participants pointed to ways in which social continuity was imagined after death: how they continued to engage with loved ones who were no longer physically present, and how some parents described continuing life through their children, seeing them as the way they "go on" after death. I shared examples of how participants maintained connections with the deceased: some would put on a TV show they used to watch with a friend in order to feel close, parents imagined their children continuing activities they shared together, and even some examples from personal life, like how my wife often hears her grandmother's voice in her head when she is stirring the cupcake batter the wrong way.

"The choir invisible" was the name of the poem. Eliot alludes to the collective influence that those who have died continue to have on the lives of the living. The actions of others are what contributes to this symphony. The lasting legacy of those who die is the "music" to our world, a "choir" that helps us make sense of the world around us. A metaphor, for sure, but a deeply resounding one.

The poem particularly resonated with what I perceived the participants in my studies said. Most of them expressed a shared sense that who they were keeps on going somehow, even after death. At the same time, there was also a commonly shared inclination to perceive and accept death *as is*, as the end, independent of religious frameworks. I thought to myself: How then do I capture this apparent tension in their perspectives? Is there even a tension?

Death does not negate the immanent perception of the world, but it does detonate a range of processes and events that shape participants' lifestances. The sociological theory of death has often been studied through Mellor and Shilling's classic work: *Modernity, Self-identity and the sequestration of death* (1993). The authors argued that death in contemporary society is sequestrated, meaning that the "organization of death has become increasingly private, separated from mainstream society" (Walter 2019: 389). A few years earlier, Ariès (1974) proposed a similar argument. He argued that "modern attitude toward death" was "the interdiction of death in order to preserve happiness" (94). Ariès stated that modern societies, contrary to the middle-age societies, tend hide and privatize death.

Recent studies have questioned sequestration theory (Cann 2014; Howarth 2007a; Maddrell 2013, 2016; Mitchell 2007; Petersson 2010; Walter 2019), and found that "twenty-first-century western societies are witnessing a new integration of the dead into everyday life (Walter 2019: 390). In line with these authors, my research demonstrates that the dead are not absent, but increasingly present in everyday life. Death is not a moment, but a social process whose effects persist.

In this final chapter, I develop three interrelated arguments. First, remembrance shapes how participants live and act in the present, as they orient themselves toward how they hope to be remembered in the future. Individuals engage in questions surrounding legacy and remembrance not only for others, but also in aspirational, emotional, and personal ways. Second, absence has content. Participants act, remember, and imagine in ways shaped by those who are no longer present[81]. Third, that while death terminates individual subjective experience, the deceased continue to exert social influence on others. This ongoing influence constitutes a form of *social continuity* that reflects emerging immanent understandings of the afterlife. I bring these three arguments together under the concept of *echoes of memory*: recurrent, socially mediated experiences through which the deceased is not simply recalled, but acknowledged in a way that can orient thought and action.

[81] See: Ginn (2014).

6.1 Remembrance as orientation

Researchers have noted that individuals are aware (implicitly or explicitly) that they will be remembered (Jensen and Jones 2005; Mitchell 2007). In this section, I argue that most participants accounts reveal that future remembrance plays an important role in how they go about their daily life. Following Bourdieu, practices are not only expressions of our subjectivity, but embodied dispositions; they are enacted through patterned ways of feeling, acting and perceiving the world (habitus). Our actions and how we navigate and interpret the world are practical and socially learned ways of experiencing the world. For participants, many of these actions are grounded in an immanent conception of the world in which what one does in life is most important, as that directly influences the perception of the "social self" in death (what people will think of you after your death).

This future-oriented dimension of remembrance has been alluded to by other authors (Cann 2014; Maddrell 2016; Mitchell 2007; Walter 2019). Attig and Stillion (2015), for example, studied bereavement and argued that it is an ongoing process of meaning reconstruction through which individuals reinterpret both the deceased and their own lives. They found that grief does not necessarily translate into detachment, but meaning reconstruction (around the deceased, death and individuals). Against the backdrop of the rapid increase in nonreligious population, remembrance may play an increasingly relevant role in areas related to death, but its meaning, much like grief, is also being reconstructed.

For participants, anticipated remembrance is a way to orient towards the social world. This orientation also carries a moral dimension. What matters is how the actions they do in life influences the way in which they will be remembered. They seek to behave morally, to have an impact in the world, and perhaps leave it a bit better than how they found it. It is a way of orienting around the world and holds a deeply significant place for participants, as it influences how they live their life in the first place. There is no need to invoke supernatural meanings for this to make sense to participants, it is an axiom of the social reality they inhabit a part of their immanent conception of the world: how you live is how you will be remembered.

These orientations were clearly articulated by participants. They constantly expressed how what they do and act like on their daily life is influenced by the ways in which the people around them

could potentially remember them in death. How people would remember them was more than a memory or a desire, but a motivation to take action in the world, to behave in specific ways.

Lauren, for example, aspires to endure in the affective memory of others, to be felt, if not seen. This aspiration orients her actions and interactions with others:

> *It's like people don't remember what you said or did, they remember how you made them feel. And I think that's kind of the thing I focus on, I hope that people remember how I made them feel and that I made a difference in their lives. I went into a helping profession, so I'm clearly motivated to be helpful, to try to help people, and to help them feel better. And I think it would be meaningful for me if people remember that I made them feel better and that I was with them in hard times. (Lauren, therapist, female, 42).*

Lauren is expressing a desire to be experienced and remembered through others, through feelings, interactions, and relational impact. Her words perhaps best illustrate a form of immanent meaning making that was very common amongst participants: the goal is for individuality and lifestances to continue to exist not in abstract memory or symbolical continuity, but in the ongoing lived experience of others.

This is, of course, not a result of a purely mental exercise, but a reflection of what they have experienced through the death of others and how they are remembered. Participants have firsthand knowledge about the fact that the ways in which they behave now affects the ways in which they are going to be remembered. How they think about their deceased loved ones now, also helps them think about how they want to be remembered:

> *I thought about this [how he wants to be remembered], during my grandmother's funeral recently. Just like, you kind of want people to remember you the way you wanted to be remembered. And in that sense… maybe that's not what you actually look like at the end of your life, in terms of… you know, she had some pretty bad medical issues towards the end. And… she was cremated. And, you know, they had the older pictures of her and stuff. And I thought about, you know, I think that's how she would want to be remembered, not necessarily how she was at the end. So, I don't know. It's a combination of those two things for me, in terms of my thinking. (Carter, government worker, male, 32)*

Perspectives that participants hold in life matter because they are felt and enacted, not because they will get to keep them after death. “Immanence” in this case is not merely a philosophical abstraction, but a declaration that whatever life participants lived matters because that is what remains in the memory of others. And that is also a way through which participants articulate their moral stances.

Remembrance also reveals participants’ feelings and ideas about the world. Much like ideas on death and afterlife, their thoughts on how they want to be remembered spoke to the world participants want to leave behind, and how their actions in life affect the outcome of that world. Thus, remembrance is a gateway to how participants perceive themselves in the face of death and their social “self”. When I asked Karin how they would like to be remembered, they said:

> *I think, like, being a cherished friend and a support to people. I’d like to have done some mentorship type stuffs. And, I don’t necessarily need to be remembered for my work, for example, but I would feel good knowing that I have improved the world a little bit. (Karin, community worker, non-binary, 34)*

Karin’s thoughts were common amongst participants:

> *I think the biggest thing that stands out is that I'd like to be remembered for loving people well, um, and then maybe also being funny. (Lila, graduate student, female, 30)*

> *I think I would like to be remembered as somebody who stood up for their ideals. I don't have particular feelings about leaving lots of money or anything like that, but I would love to be somebody who's remembered for, you know, some of the activism work that I do. Some of the ways that I helped people. (Jenna, talent agent, female, 40)*

> *I would hope that people would remember me as a kind, giving, loving person and friend and family member, and think fondly of me. That's what I would hope would happen, and, you know, it's important for us to treasure… I feel like I want to do good in this world, and, like, you know, I don't want to sound like I'm giving platitudes here… But, you know, I do. I do hope to, you know, just leave this world on a positive note, having done my best, having been a good person, having nurtured and loved the people I'm close to…as much as I'd love to be remembered for all time, I think, you know, to leave this world and have lived a*

good life is the best legacy that you could leave behind. (Kara, business manager, female, 41)

Behind death, it's your experience around you and what you have with people that makes you meaningful, yeah, after your death. And I guess, in a way, that's immortality in itself, but it's also the belief that, yeah, I'm going to die eventually, but I'd like people to remember me in a way that I think is going to matter. (Jessie, stay at home mother, non-binary, 28)

I think that like it's more about the relationships you build because eventually most of us will be forgotten to time like, I mean, I have great grandparents, I don't know who they are. I don't know anything about them. So it's really about sort of the connections you make now and being remembered. (Gwen, works in labour relations, female, 34)

Some participants also linked being remembered to the actions they do in life. Oscar expanded on how he purposely orients his actions based on how he wants to be remembered. To be remembered is his driving force:

I think that question drives a lot of what I try to do today [how he wants to be remembered] As far as being remembered, there's more self-preservation: did I do the best that I can? Like, knowing that I did the best that I can in whatever circumstance or scenario that I'm doing, then at least I have some comfort about that. And I think that answers that question of, like, what people will feel, what legacy I'm gonna leave behind? So I do think about that. That drives my day today: wanting to make sure that whatever I do today, that legacy, you know, carries in my death as well. (Oscar, IT project manager, male, 43)

For Gabriela, the focus is on the actions she has control over. She does not care what people think when she dies, but she will try to do the most good up until the point she dies because that is what matters; what she does remains:

I genuinely feel like, I think about how I try and live my life, thinking more like how are people remembering me as a living person?... I don't really care what people think of me when I die. I care about what people think about me while I'm alive because, again, I don't know what will happen after death. I do think I try to be a good person in this world, so I feel like hopefully people remember me as a good person and as a fun person and as a

> *loving sibling and daughter and friend. Um, so I have hopes for positive, hopefully. Some people out there might hate me and remember me as a bad person, but yeah, I try and live my life in a way that if I were to leave this world right now or tomorrow, that I'll hopefully leave something for people to remember me by that's in a positive way. Or that I left something in this world. Um, probably more like the people that I love and my students. Like, my students, I teach guitar, so my students, I feel like I give them a little gift sometimes of music that they get to kind of take on during their life, and I feel like that's very fulfilling for me, thinking that, you know, I've given a little something to someone for their life. (Gabriela, music teacher, female, 31)*

Immanent perspectives, again, take a central role here. The impact participants had on other people through their life experiences is "known" to remain. Such realization constitutes yet another "knowable" aspect of death, but it is also a way in which participants position themselves while going through their daily lives. It is also a meaning-generating force on its own.

All participants cared about having a positive impact during their lifetime. The desire to have a positive impact is a reflection of the aforementioned "social self"; it fuels the idea of who they are and how they want to be perceived in the first place. Thus, how they are remembered is a reflection of who they were in life.

For participants, leaving an impact was not about doing great work to be remembered through generations. It was much simpler than that; something personal and meaningful, and a clear reflection of their moral and ethical stances. As Dax puts it:

> *I would just like to leave the world a little better than what I came into it from. If I can help a couple people, or 10 people, or 20 people make their lives better, that's good enough for me. (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)*

Overall, participants actively care *how* they want to be remembered and this concern orients how they act upon the world. It may not be the primary driving force behind all of their actions, but it certainly matters. Furthermore, how they want to be remembered matters for participants because they are not looking for a supernatural reward after death, but to leave a lasting impact in the people they interacted with during their lifetime. Taking in the world *as is*, independent of whether

participants believe they might experience an afterlife in any shape or form, what they have certainty over is that social relations matter as much as the positive impact they leave once death comes their way. Participants are not hoping for a "ticket to heaven", they simply want the residue of their lives to be positive.

In sum, participants acknowledge the death of others as deeply significant socialized experiences that leave a lasting impact on the way in which they experience the world. They reflect through the death of others, how they want to be remembered, but they also know that people matter in death because they, themselves, continue to experience the impact that the death of loved ones left on them. It is the world as it is, the immanent world, that enables them to make sense of the death of others and their role within the social world. The desire to leave a positive impact does not emerge as an isolated subjective interpretation, but is deeply influenced by a number of daily life experiences; chief among them are their own encounters with the death of others. The particular way in which this looks like is, at the same time, made socially available to them through socialization processes and their own encounters mediated by habitus. Being a good person and helping people are specific ways in which participants imagine what leaving a positive impact in the world looks like. Thus, death, and being remembered, act as vessels through which their moral orientations are both consolidated and projected into an imagined continuity beyond the "self". In the following section I explore how the relationship with the deceased is not severed, but transformed after death. Absence constitutes a form of presence that is articulated by participants' narratives centered on the continuing bonds and ongoing relationships they maintain with the deceased.

6.2 The presence of absence

I previously argued that death is a deeply significant social experience because it resonates as strongly in subjective consciousness as it does within shared social relations. I have argued that for most participants death represents the end of individual experiences. The deceased don't think anymore, they don't feel anyone; their body decomposes. This section instead focuses on the fact that participants' narratives also revealed that there is content in absence. For participants, death resonates in other people's lives, and in death, others continue to exert influence through the

collective actions and ideas of others. The deceased are more than their absence, they continue to reconfigure relationships in death.

Research has shown that with death, the relationship with the deceased is not severed, but transformed (Howarth 2007b; Kasket 2012; Klass 1996; Wallis 2001). Personal bonds and relationships continue with the deceased, though these often take different forms (Maddrell 2013). What participants' narratives have shown is that there is content in absence. The deceased are simultaneously gone and present. Participants not only reflected on what they thought about when remembering others, but they talked about the practices, narratives and interactions that can be interpreted as an ongoing relationship with the deceased.

For participants, the death of a loved one does not mark the end of who that person is. Nor does it end what they continue to mean for them. Their narratives showed that their dead loved ones still had an impact on them even after they were no longer with them physically. They thought about them, acted based on their teachings or advice, imagined scenarios together, and watched tv series that would make them feel close. Their presence was felt because they *interacted* with the deceased's absence.

The deceased's absence and presence is not metaphorical for participants. These interactions took on a variety of forms, from internal dialog to seeking moral guidance. Absence is experientially populated by participants through interactions in diverse spaces (homes, graves, objects), in daily practices (ritual, habits) and in imagination and memory. Absence, thus, is not empty, but is structured and an active part of participants' life and daily interactions. As Maddrell (2013) points out: "For many individuals, knowledge and experience of someone's death can go hand in hand with a sense of their ongoing presence of the deceased, often expressed as continuing bonds. This paradoxical absence-presence is mediated through religious or secular spaces and practices, or through a mixture of both. For all, the experience and expression of absence-presence through continuing bonds is a dynamic process, which may fade, flux or persist over time." (517)

Ginn (2014) studied how gardeners respond to death, absence and afterlife. She found that looking at the "practicalities of living rather than ideas of life, and to the work of landscaping rather than concepts of landscape" can allow researchers to "ascertain the ways in which absence comes to matter" (241). Much like what participants' narratives showed, Ginn found that, for gardeners,

"absence was not seen as simply an 'end' or an 'outside' to the garden, but as important to its continued existence" (241).

People behave differently when death is acknowledged, when an absence becomes perceptible. The loss of an individual's capacity to act in the world (their inability to exert their will) has lasting effects on their immediate social context. Everyday practices and relationships are disrupted: the loved one who cooked every Sunday or helped pay the rent is no longer there; the daughter who used to call her father after a good day at work no longer does so. This absence is not merely symbolic; it is experienced through the disruption of everyday life, and leaves a space that is actively felt by others.

The fact that an individual is deceased, and is no longer able to interact with others, does not negate the lasting social impact that these interactions once had. For participants, even if their loved one is no longer there to act and exercise their will in the world, that person still has presence in this world. This fact speaks to the ambivalence between presence and absence that Maddrell (2013) wrote about,[82] but it also relates to an immanent dimension of afterlife narratives because the continuation of the deceased is not located in a transcendent realm alone, but within the ongoing social relations, practices, and moral orientations of the living.

Remembrance in these scenarios also constitutes a position and orientation around life that participants actively perform, articulate, and narrate in a way that is informed by someone's absence. These acts are a way to reaffirm the reality of the relationships, identities and moral bonds they had with the deceased.

For Kara, thinking about her close friend's death still stirs up emotions, but it also opens up a space to think about her friend's family and the times she shared with her:

> *I also had a friend that passed away last year, suddenly, so you kind of think about: What happens and where is she now? And, you know, do you still look for signs, or you feel like she's maybe communicating with you a little bit from the afterlife?...After we've been friends for thirty years… yeah, it was tough. I feel very emotional just thinking about it. It's been almost a year, but, you know, just knowing her legacy lives on, like, her memory will*

[82] In her 2013 article, Maddrell argued that the concepts of absence-presence refers to the relational and dynamic expressions of continuing bonds with the deceased (518).

> *always live on with me. And I will always treasure her as a close friend. And she's got beautiful children… but it's also just very terribly sad that she, you know, missed out on half of her life, basically. (Kara, business manager, female, 41)*

Remembrance goes beyond a recounting of personal memories with a friend. Kara's memory of her friend prompts her to wonder about afterlife (i.e. where her friend might be) and how her friend's family is doing, among others. Most importantly, perhaps, the exercise of remembering her is also a recognition that "her memory will always live on with me", and that her "legacy lives on". Remembering constitutes an orientation because it prompts her to act and behave in specific way throughout her daily life. When Kara remembers her friend, she is making sure her legacy lives on; she is making sure she is remembered, if not by her family, by her. These statements are not purely coping mechanisms, they are a way of acknowledging an absence that carries an ongoing influence in this participant's daily life.

Participants' narratives also showed what went into the various acts of remembrance they hold for their loved ones. Dax sometimes prays to people he has lost, even though he considers himself an agnostic. He does so as a way to maintain a connection with his loved ones:

> *I would say if anything, I probably pray the most now, and that is just because even if I'm not talking to, I don't think I'm talking to God, but I pray more to people that I've lost and I think about that, and I, you know, believe that that's speaking to them. But I also just find that therapeutic. It's, like, my brother passed away and, like, so I talk about: What would Jeremy think of this or how would Jeremy do this? Or, like, "would Jeremy?…", or "I miss Jeremy", or "that one time with Jeremy…" Or, "I'm glad Jeremy was into that kind of thing". (Dax, automation and engineering controls specialist, male, 38)*

When Dax thinks about his brother he is engaging in an act of remembrance, but he is also acknowledging the influence that the memory of his brother has when he thinks about him and wonders: "What would Jeremy think of this or how would Jeremy do this?" In doing so, Dax is constructing Jeremy as something more than a memory. He is giving Jeremy back some of the *presence* he had in life. He is letting Jeremy speak through more than an act of self-reflection, but a source of moral guidance. The constant and active engagement with the memory of him potentially influences some of his thoughts and actions. A non-transcendental presence that

emerges and is able to be interacted with. The memory of Jeremy is acknowledged by Dax because it's acted upon, reflected on and pondered as a way for Dax to act or think about situations he encounters in his own daily life.

Participants' narratives have shown that the physical absence of a deceased is filled with social practices enacted by others. Talking to dead loved ones, sharing stories, performing rituals, gathering socially and reconnecting through certain objects, are just some examples of how participants engage in concrete actions that 1. Are intended to seek connections with the deceased, 2. Materialize such connection through concrete actions, and 3. Are influenced by the person they are remembering.

The clearest example of how participants' daily life interactions are influenced by the memory of others was perhaps shared by Munsley. During our conversation, she narrated how she often remembers important people in her life:

> *There's some fun things that I'll do. Like, my grandpa died when I was living in Germany in 2013. And when we were little kids, he would always take quarters and coins and throw them into the pool for us, because he lived at, like, a townhouse that had a shared pool. And he'd throw them into the water for us; we'd all dive down and grab them, and then he'd throw it again somewhere else. And it was just like a fun thing that he would do with us. And so now, whenever I see, like, a penny or a quarter or something on the ground, I think of him, right? I'm like, "oh, there's my grandpa"… I care about the people around me dying because, like I said, "there's my grandpa". Every time I see a coin, I think of him. Or my one friend—whenever I watch Bojack Horseman, like, he loved that show—all I can think of is, like, oh, this one's for you [gestures raising a glass]. You know? Like, so I think we all have that with different people. If I died, somebody out there… there'd be at least one person that would care. (Munsley, works for an education centre, female, 30)*

Munsley's memories of her grandfather shapes how she perceives certain scenarios from her daily life. Her grandfather's memory is always there whenever she finds a coin; whenever she tosses a coin into a pond. Her friend's memory influences how she experiences certain media, and it takes her back to when she talked about the show with her close friend.

Overall, there is a shared sense among participants of the "continuing social presence" of the deceased. This "presence" shapes decisions, values, emotional orientations and actions as participants go through their daily lives. The dead continue to influence the living. Like Munsley, most of the participants may not really believe their loved ones are physically part of their world. When talking about her grandfather, she also shared: "I don't really believe [he manifests through a coin], like, I genuinely believe he is part of the earth now". Nonetheless, what matters is the invocation of the memory as a way of interacting with the deceased and letting them be *there*. When Munsley sees a coin in the ground she thinks of her grandfather, and when she watches *Bojack Horseman,* she raises a glass for her friend. Participants find "presence" in absence through how they relate to their contexts; through their daily life experiences. How they experience the world while going about their daily life is influenced by their memory of the deceased.

Participants' narratives also show that death is not the end of close relational bonds, but instead reorganizes how they relate to people they cared about in life. The deceased are no longer there to be interacted with directly, yet, their "absence" becomes a condition that in turn allows for new actions, thoughts and orientations. In other words, people continue to be meaning-generating forces even in death.

Through varied acts of remembrance (prayer, ritualized practices, storytelling, among others) participants continue to relate with the deceased and reincorporate them into their daily lives. These are not simple invocations of memories with loved ones, but active and substantive ongoing relationships that carry values, ideas and actions. The dead persist not merely as products of memory, but as a "relational" presence, in turn embedded with habits, objects and narratives. Their absence is, too, a meaning-generating force.

The deceased carry an ongoing impactful influence on the participants. They remain relevant because their actions in life resonated with the people they shared that life with. Their "continuing" social presence is not symbolic nor abstract. It is not a residue of a memory nor a coping mechanism. It is, above all, a lived and enacted social action that reaffirms connections, generates meaning and influences how participants experience life. In the next chapter, I analyze just how much the deceased continue to affect the living.

6.3 Echoes of Memory

In this final section, I try to capture something for which I think we do not yet quite have a language. Researchers have signaled this phenomenon before, often by merging it into broader accounts of *continuing bonds.*[83] Here, however, I want to approach it more directly and concretely. I am not only referring to the diverse ways in which social life continues after death, but to what I call *echoes of memory.*

As I have argued, sometimes, after someone dies, their presence does not simply vanish. It lingers. You encounter it in moments that recall them: when you face a difficulty and find yourself remembering how they would have helped, or when a place, a gesture, or a routine brings them back into view. You remember walking a road together, cooking alongside them. Yet, sometimes, when you return to those shared memories (how they made you feel, or what they used to think) things begin to shift in meaning. You cook the pot roast you once disliked because it now carries them with it. You feel drawn to take a fishing trip because you once went there together. You reach for your phone, almost without thinking, because you are watching the show you used to watch side by side. In these moments, the deceased's voice is not gone at all. It resurfaces, maybe not as a literal presence, but as something that moves you, that calls you to act and influences how you go about the world. These are the *echoes of memory*.

Before moving forward, it is important to recognize some of the literature that has examined the diverse ways in which the living continue to maintain relationships with the dead. Foundational to this field is the concept of *continuing bonds* that I alluded to at the beginning of this section. The concept itself challenges earlier models of grief centered on the privatization of sequestration of death (Mellor and Shilling 1993). Klass et al. (1996) develop this concept as a way to demonstrate that relationships with the deceased persist over time through memory, practice and identity formation. They found that the bereaved sustain ongoing connections with the deceased, and, that in death, the relationship with the deceased is not extinguished but transformed. Other researchers have since also studied the diverse ways in which the living continue to relate to the death (Howarth 2007b; Maddrell 2013; Petersson 2010).

[83] See: Walliss (2001) for a study on the relationships between the living and death within contemporary spiritualism.

Klass and Steffen (2018) later provided an updated approach to the continuing bonds model of grief that recollected the diverse ways in which interactions with the death have shifted in recent years (in part due to social media). Other researchers have also signaled the increased role of the material and technological mediation in sustaining relationships with the death. Kasket (2012) for example, studied how digital social media platforms have enabled new forms of presence after death, allowing the dead to remain connected to the world through profiles and ongoing interaction.

The literature on continuing bonds shows that how people relate to the dead has changed. As the nonreligious population continues to grow, these transformations are not simply marked by the "absence" of belief or by the continuation of bonds with the deceased. Rather, they are characterized by the emergence of alternative ways of sustaining relationships with the dead and of developing understandings of an "afterlife" that fit these renewed relational (and moral) orientations.

So far I have argued that participants articulate an understanding of an afterlife emerged from social life, mostly grounded in social relations and practices. In this section I further argue that these afterlives are form of immanent transcendence in that they exceed the individual and endure beyond them, albeit embedded within this-worldly social relations. From maintaining social bonds after death to anticipated remembrance as an orientation, participants have also showed that engagements with death and dying are not dependent on religious frameworks. Furthermore, remembrance as a conceptual category is multidimensional in that it shows how the individual values how they want to be perceived in death, but also how participants engage in acts of remembrance as a way to maintain bonds with their loved ones after death. Both dimensions, taken together, point towards potential ways in which participants understand and envision an afterlife without the use of religious frameworks, and in turn grounded on an immanent approach. Yet, there is a transcendent dimension to their narratives. Participants have articulated a variety of ways through which people continue exerting their presence on the living after death *without* the supernatural involved.

The deceased leave a mark when alive; a mark that is often reactivated and enacted by the living in ongoing social life. However, the anticipation of death and the inclination towards social continuity is not only a reflection of how participants act or feel when remembering a loved one. These also include personal desires, hopes and concrete thoughts surrounding how they intend to

continue to matter within the lives of others after death. The moral teachings and traces left by participants' loved ones are instrumental in shaping how participants interpret and act within the social world. These articulations constitute forms of social continuity after death.

Several participants reflected on how they would want their deaths and funerals to unfold and how they wanted to be remembered in death. These are, already, clear inclinations towards a particular envisioning of social continuity. While they were by far the most common amongst participants they only constitute a portion of the nuanced complexity behind participant's views. In this section I will expand on some of the participants' views to further develop how social continuity is imagined and enacted beyond death.

As seen earlier in the chapter, participants expressed a desire to influence the world in a way that aspects of themselves (their values, relationships and viewpoints) would be carried forward by others. For some other participants, their inclination towards social continuity was expressed through the concrete ways in which they would actively influence how they would be remembered in death. One of the questions I posed to participants was directed towards their own sense of legacy. I wanted to know how legacy was imagined through their own views. For the most part, participants' thoughts and ideas on legacy are condensed all throughout the two previous sections of this chapter.[84] Legacy was often envisioned not simply as memory, but as something that would be taken up and enacted by others.

Patrick offered a rendition of legacy that illustrates this clearly. More than a memory of the past, legacy for Patrick is understood as social continuity across generations. Intergenerational lessons and family continuity are how Patrick imagines his life being remembered, and more importantly, enacted by others after his death:

> *Legacy for me is my family. You know, my wife and I have replaced ourselves, at the moment, with two children, and my legacy is, you know, my family name does not continue on with my girls. But I mean, that's not a particularly important circumstance to me either. The legacy is that we've sort of continued on the line of this big family of ours, and we've*

[84] There is much to be said about how the nonreligious envision legacy. In this research I was more concerned with how legacy relates to the nonreligious and their afterlife imaginaries. The themes developed in this study partially reflect participants' perspectives about legacy, but I encourage further research into nonreligious imaginaries of legacy as a way of deepening the insights surrounding how the nonreligious imagine continuation after death.

contributed to the tree. And that's, like, that's the only real legacy I think I've ever been concerned with…I think it's interesting, I think the continuity comes from the nurture versus the nature of it, and maybe there's a little bit of both to it. But I think it's sort of imparting the best parts of what I've learned and hoping that my children sort of take that and pass that down. I know I've done that with my grandfather and with my father. I try to take those best parts that I've learned from them and pass those lessons along to the people that come behind me, you know. God willing, one day I will have grandchildren, and I will do the same with them as well as my grandfather did with me… I think those are very valuable oral traditions and lessons and morality lessons that we learn from people that have experienced life and who are sort of willing to share. I think it's really interesting. I love hearing and learning lessons from people that are sort of older and more experienced than I am because life is hard, and there's no one way to do it right. And so, like, if somebody lives their whole life and comes away with sort of one thing, one lesson learned, that's a lesson that is worth learning and worth passing down. I hope there are many lessons that I learn over the course of my life and that I'm able to sort of pass those down. And I think that's the legacy piece, sort of understanding what is important to me in passing that down, and hopefully some of those things that are important to me are important to the people I teach, and they then sort of pass that lesson along. (Patrick, construction industry worker, male, 42)

Patrick recognizes the social weight of actions and teachings during his lifetime, and wants to pass that forward as a way of contributing to "the tree". What persists here is not Patrick as an acting subject beyond death, but the relational patterns he helps produce and reproduce. Relational continuation is something he is actively pursuing. His family's values and lessons are intended to be taken up and enacted by others. The relational continuation is not merely aspirational, but oriented towards shaping future practices and relationships. Of particular note, too, is how Patrick narrates that he and his wife have "replaced themselves" with their two children. His choice of words points toward an understanding of continuity that extends beyond memory: who Patrick is becomes embedded in ongoing relational life through his children.

Social continuity for Irving is more than being remembered; he seeks an ongoing presence within the social and material practices of those close to him even after death:

I would hope that people would remember me from me bringing something good into their life, whatever the opposite of harm is. Not value, because the implication there is if you don't have value, that's a harmful thing. But, like, you help to grow their lives in some way. I would also want people to, like, want to continue remembering me…All my friends, we like to exchange clothing; we go thrifting together, we go vintage shopping together. It's very exciting for us to connect with clothing. And so I want that to be something that people want to do, like, "Oh, I'm going to take a piece of this. And every time I wear it, I'll remember [Irving]." You know, I think that's pretty cool…So I have a really extensive clothing collection, and one of the things that I want to do, if I'm able to prescribe my funeral, is I want to have a separate event where anyone who wants to come can take whatever piece of my clothing from my collection they want. So, you know, I have hundreds of individual pieces of clothing—you know, ties, hats, jackets, pants, whatever. And it's something that I loved a lot in my life and that I wore every day. Each piece of clothing I own is imbued with a part of myself, you know, so by them taking that piece of clothing that I consider to be so fundamentally attached to the way I lived my life, they are taking me with them. (Irving, high-school teacher, male, 29)

Afterlife for Irving is not metaphysical, but relational. He sees his belongings as carriers of his identity; who he was in life. His clothing allows others to carry and enact aspects of him through everyday practices. His narrative points towards an embodied (by others) and active way of living an afterlife beyond existing as a mere memory. Irving's afterlife, thus, is a (materially) mediated form of social continuity, grounded in the relational and the symbolic, but ultimately sustained by everyday practices and this-worldly relations.

The way Patrick and Irving imagine social continuity after death exemplifies how participants articulate the diverse ways through which their "will" goes on through others. After death, they get to affect how that "will" carries on either through moral lessons (teachings) or outright material aspects of social reality (clothing). This "will" has deep significance because it affects others' behavior even after their death. Though it's unknown whether Patrick's children will indeed stick to his teachings or Irving's friends will continue to wear his clothes after his passing, the participants' inclination towards a continuing influence of others after death is undeniable.

Patrick's and Irving's accounts can also be understood in terms of a relational continuity grounded on an immanent framework. They know that the deceased do not act; rather, their past actions, relationships, and meanings are taken up by the living, who reproduce, reinterpret, and embody them in ongoing social life. The influence that the deceased have on the living does not require an acting subject beyond death, but emerges through social practice alone.

Dan's account demonstrates how the living reinterpret and incorporate the lives of the deceased into their own practices:

> *I want to be cremated. And something that my brother-in-law does, actually, is his dad was cremated, and he takes a little bit of his ashes every time he travels somewhere, and he leaves his ashes in, like, a nice place in a different country. And so I was like…my grandmother was cremated…We scattered her ashes in England, where she was from, you know, on, like, a beautiful beach that faces out into the Atlantic Ocean. So I do think that that is…yeah, that's something that I'd like to have done: just be placed somewhere that's, like, beautiful and scattered around the world again. I like to travel a lot, so I want to be placed in places where I haven't been or that I have been that I really liked. (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)*

Dan's reflections demonstrate how his father-in-law's life and death are taken up and reworked within ongoing social life. Though his father-in-law is not acting after death, Dan's life and practices continue to be influenced and shaped through the interpretation and enactment of his father-in-law teachings. Dan's desire to have his ashes scattered precisely reflects that influence. The memories of his father-in-law come into play and affect the way in which he takes decisions about his daily life.

Dan also talked about a moment where he felt connected to his partner's father after his passing. He describes encountering a "part of his soul"[85] while going through his tools. While he does not

[85] All participants in the study hold distinct and unique ideas of what the concept of "soul" entails. As research has shown us (Heelas 2005; McGuire 2008), ideas traditionally associated with religious frameworks such as the "soul", often transcend strictly religious definitions (see also: Gaudette et al. 2025). Thus, it would not be accurate to argue that simply because a participant refers to a "soul" their ideas about death and dying are born out of established religious frameworks.

frame this in explicitly religious terms, the experience had a lasting impact on how he understands death and the afterlife:

> *When I was much younger, I used to think that once you died, you were done. That was it. It's annihilation, you cease to exist and you eventually fade from the memories of people who knew you, and eventually you, if you didn't make a big contribution in life and have some name written on a wall somewhere, or you make it into the textbooks or history or whatever, you just you kind of cease to exist. So I thought, like, what's the point? Throughout my life that led to sort of different experiences with drugs and, you know, wanting to seek a greater understanding of the world and all of that. So when I had that experience and I've had these other ones, it's kind of been a… I don't know if hope is the right word, but it gives you kind of like a sense of comfort. Maybe that's a better. A better word, but also like kind of curiosity because, like, what? Is the spirit aware they're here, or is it just? You know, is it just a manifestation of the piece of them that's, you know, come into my heart and they come out to say things? (Dan, supervisor, male, 38)*

For the most part, the deceased are not envisioned by participants as spirits, souls, or even supernatural.[86] The deceased's individuality and their ability to personally enact their agency is considerably diminished in death. It is through the actions of others that the deceased get to exert their influence or "will" in social life. When the deceased thoughts, teachings or actions are enacted by someone else the living are effectively giving presence and space to the death within daily social life interactions.

Dan's experience can be better understood as *echoes of memory:* recurrent, socially mediated experiences through which the deceased is not simply recalled, but acknowledged in a way that

[86] While some participants did choose to use these words when referring to themselves or others, they were not common across the interviews. For the most part, participants spoke about their deceased by name or relationship: "my friend X", "my mother". These findings might correlate to what Gaudette et al. (2025) found in their research on soul-belief amongst the nonreligious: "a majority of nonreligious individuals report believing in a soul but not in other supernatural beliefs. This suggests that nonreligious understandings of the soul are, for the majority of nonreligious individuals, unrelated to their understandings of reincarnation ,miracles, or an afterlife. Further supporting this is the finding that the majority of our nonreligious respondents leaned toward agreement with a naturalistic understanding of the human body, a belief that would seem to directly contrast a belief in a supernatural soul. This difference in understanding could explain why belief in a soul is able to exist within a nonreligious lifestance even when other supernatural beliefs are rejected" (12).

can orient thought and action. These experiences exceed mere recollection and internal reflection; rather, they emerge within ongoing relationships that have been reconfigured, but not dissolved, by death. In this sense, they align with broader understandings of *continuing bonds* (Kasket 2012; Klaas et al. 1996; Klaas 2018; Wallis 2001), in which the relationship between the living and the dead persists through memory, practice, and interpretation, yet they also point toward a more immediate and affectively charged form of presence.

I further argue that these experiences exceed mere recollection while remaining grounded in immanent, social contexts. They are not encounters with an supernatural force, but neither are they experienced as purely subjective or fictional. Instead, they occupy a space in which the deceased is encountered *through* the relational and interpretive frameworks of the living.

Patrick's emphasis on intergenerational transmission and Irving's materially mediated forms of afterlife are broader articulations of social continuity after death, but also contribute to the articulation of *echoes of memory* as an immanent form of conceiving the afterlife. Patrick's account shows how the dead persist through values and practices that are taken up and enacted over time; Irving's illustrates how objects can mediate an ongoing sense of presence through everyday use. Dan's experience extends this continuum by revealing how, at particular moments, this continuity can be *felt* with a heightened sense of immediacy. Munsley's recollections of her friend and grandfather and Kara's[87] concern for her friend's children are also clear examples of *echoes of memory*. Munsley remembers thinks of her grandfather when she sees a coin in the ground, and remembers her friend when watching Bojack Horseman. Kara's memories of her friend prompts her to reflect on the afterlife and the meaning of life. These instances, these *echoes of memory,* reveal how certain forms of social continuity after death can, at times, be experienced with *heightened immediacy.*

Echoes of memory are not exceptional or separate from everyday forms of remembrance, but are different articulations of the same relational processes. They demonstrate the extent to which the dead continue to influence the living. They motivate the living to *do* (wearing clothing or watching a show), to *think* (watch a show and think of shared memories), contribute to the configuration of

[87] See section 6.2 for Munsley's and Kara's excerpts.

morality (passing down values), but also to *experience* those ongoing relationships in affective and embodied ways.

Echoes of memory act as direct examples of social continuation after death. They shape perception, provide comfort, provoke reflection, and orient future action of the living. It is through these echoes that the deceased continue to participate in the moral and practical organization of everyday life. They are, therefore, articulations of an afterlife grounded in the immanent, yet capable of gesturing toward the transcendent. The transcendence here is not located beyond the social world, but emerges from within it: it is produced through the persistence of relationships that outlive the individual and continue to exert influence in ways that can feel, at times, as though they exceed ordinary experience. *Echoes of memory* thus captures a form of *immanent transcendence*, in which the dead are neither fully absent nor present, but continue to inhabit social life through relational, affective, and enacted continuity.

Earlier I argued that anticipated remembrance functions as a way of orienting oneself towards the social world, and that the deceased are more than their absence—that they continue to reconfigure relationships in death. *Echoes of memory* is thus construed as an ancillary concept that captures the dimensions of an alternative way of articulating afterlife narratives. It brings these insights together at the level of daily life experiences, showing how such orientations and relational continuities are not only structured over time but also actively felt and experienced by individuals. In this sense, *echoes of memory* operate as one of the ways in which the dead become perceptible within everyday life, not as supernatural encounters but as immanent, affective, and relational presences. At the same time, the concept remains connected to participants' anticipated remembrance because the echoes aid in how individuals perceive the world and their place within it. Through these experiences, participants come to recognize the enduring impact that others can have after death, a realization that, in turn, shapes their concern with how they themselves will be remembered and orients their actions accordingly.

In sum, *echoes of memory* name a mode of social continuity after death in which the deceased persist through immanent, relational processes that are enacted, felt, and interpreted in everyday life. The concept captures how ongoing relationships with the dead are sustained across practices, objects, and moments of heightened immediacy. These echoes are not exceptional disruptions but intensified articulations of ordinary remembrance practices, engagements with memory and

otherwise meaningful experiences through which the dead continue to shape perception, moral orientation, and action. Ultimately they reveal a form of afterlife that is immanent and transcendent: the dead are neither fully absent nor present; instead, they remain socially active through enduring relational and affective continuity.

Conclusion

...So shall I join the choir invisible

Whose music is the gladness of the world.

– The Choir Invisible, by George Eliot (1819 – 1880)

The dead live through the living. Perhaps an eerie conclusion to a sociological endeavor. Perhaps also a tautological statement. It is, nonetheless, a statement grounded on sociological research. Before I crafted this analysis, I thought of this statement as an allusion to a hopeful sense of continuation. But as I grow older I realize that everyone experiences and relates to their deceased independently of religious affiliation. After this analysis, I realize that living alongside the dead constitutes an inescapable fact of our social reality.

I agree with Wright Mills (1959) in that the ultimate task of sociology is in rendering the taken-for-granted world of everyday life more complex and analytically visible. The goal is to show that what appears self-evident or natural is in fact socially produced, historically situated, and relationally sustained. One could say that my Mexican heritage has instigated me to think about these changes in light of how we celebrate Dia de los Muertos. But the truth is that the impending shifts in how people think about death and dying are unprecedented. Canada is experiencing foundationally significant changes in the realms of death, dying and the afterlife, and researchers' task is to think about what these mean in light of broader meaning and social frameworks. This thesis highlights but a small portion of the expanding literature on the nonreligious and death.

Summary of findings

This thesis is a contribution to the emerging literature around the nonreligious, death and dying. In it, I show that the increase in influence of the nonreligious population that Canada is undergoing is not limited to the realm of religious attendance or identification. Even realms such as death, dying and the afterlife are experiencing deep and meaningful transformations. Canada has been a Christian nation since its inception (O'toole 2000), but the influence that religion used to have over

death, dying and the afterlife has been severely diminished (Ariès 1974). New ways of imagining death and the afterlife continue to emerge from outside religious frameworks (Gaudette et al. 2025; Haimila and Muraja 2023; Manning, 2018, 2023; Miller and Beaman 2024). The millennial demographic, in its deep diversity of belief, offers a particularly revealing site through which to examine these shifts. Drawing on qualitative interviews and a thematic analysis organized around four overarching categories (identity-belief trajectory, immanent certainty, beyond the self, and echoes of memory) Overall, participants' perspectives reveal that their imaginaries of death and afterlife have been reoriented in ways that are deeply meaningful,but also social, relational, and grounded in everyday life. This finding, in turn, could point towards the emergence of alternative frameworks through which questions of death, dying and the afterlife are continuously articulated.

These findings also raise questions about the relationship between changing patterns of religious identification and Canadian social institutions. As nonreligious individuals increasingly encounter institutions concerned with death and dying, including healthcare, palliative care, and end-of-life decision-making, such institutions may need to accommodate forms of ethical reasoning that are not necessarily grounded in shared religious doctrines. And though this study cannot predict how Canadian institutions will change, nor can the experiences of these 35 participants be generalized to Canadian millennials as a whole, it reveals how participants negotiated questions of death and dying through multiple sources of meaning and authority, and highlights the potential importance of understanding nonreligious perspectives in institutional contexts where questions of mortality and ethical decision-making are increasingly consequential.

Another important finding pertains to the study of nonreligion as a whole. Participants' perspectives revealed, much like what previous literature has already unveiled, that studying nonreligion without assuming absence opens avenues for new and unprecedented research in often unaccounted for spaces. Reflecting on death and the afterlife created a space in which questions of morality could be encountered most directly. Put simply, participants' perspectives were evaluative and descriptive, yet they articulated a sense of morality surrounding death that almost inevitably invited nuanced reflections on their own place in life.Overall, this thesis constitutes an exploration of some of the ways in which these emergent frameworks are actively being reconfigured. To craft my explanation, I developed four overarching chapters in which I analyzed the diverse layers of meaning and knowledge production that signal the emergence of alternative frameworks to

articulate and position around death, dying and the afterlife. In the first of these chapters I develop the category of *identity-belief trajectory*. In it, I discuss how participants'nonreligious identities are not static, but historically and socially contingent. Participants' accounts revealed that belief and identity are shaped through early religious socialization within the family, institutional norms and expectations, peer influences, and wider cultural frameworks that define acceptable beliefs, practices, and identities. For participants to develop their own lifestances and orientations, these elements do not operate in isolation, but interact over time as individuals move through different stages of their lives. As their social contexts shift, so too does the relative influence of these factors, producing both continuity and change. I thus argue that participants' lifestances are the result of layered, complex, and deeply personal life trajectories, while still reflecting broader social patterns. Even among the nonreligious, orientations toward death and afterlife cannot be understood outside of the social conditions in which they are formed. At the same time, these conditions are experiencing significant changes as the nonreligious continue to navigate different realms of social life.

In the second chapter, I develop the category of *immanent certainty*. I show that participants are actively reconfiguring how they position themselves in relation to death, as well as how they assign value, determine what is worth pursuing, and construct moral and ethical depth. I found that while death remains surrounded by uncertainty in some cases, participants nonetheless express a range of certainties that are grounded not in institutionalized religion, but in lived experience, meaningful relationships, and everyday interactions. For participants, death is understood as finite, yet this finitude does not diminish meaning; rather, it intensifies it. In orienting themselves toward death, participants simultaneously orient themselves within a moral landscape in which questions of dignity, responsibility, and what constitutes a good life become central. My data also revealed that participants draw from a social repertoire to make sense of death, organize its meaning, and structure expectations surrounding dying, mourning, and remembrance. What stands out is that this repertoire is available outside religious frameworks and is continuously shaped through the interaction between participants' habitus, constant socialization processes and shifting social contexts. As a result, I argue that meaning is relocated away from transcendent promises and into the immediacy of social life. What emerges is not simply a transformation in beliefs about death, but a broader reconfiguration of moral and existential frameworks in which death is reconfigured into a generative force of meaning and purpose.

In the third chapter, I develop the category of *beyond the self* as a way of approaching emerging afterlife imaginaries. I argue that participants' afterlife imaginaries can be understood as expressions of a socially embedded and historically situated "self." These imaginaries are deeply personal, yet shaped by social, cultural, and moral frameworks internalized through life experiences. Rather than emerging from ontological certainty, they function as moral extensions of participants' lifestances, articulating implicit positions about agency, justice, responsibility, and the value of human experience. Whether participants "imagine" becoming part of something larger than themselves, maintaining interpersonal relationships after death, or persisting through the memories and actions of others, a consistent orientation toward connection and continuity is evident in their accounts. I argue that these imaginaries, in turn, reflect normative commitments about what *ought* to endure beyond death, and ultimately reveal a preference for relational forms of existence over rupture from this-worldly relations (via explicitly transcendent frames, or disappearance).

Even when participants invoked the notion of a "higher power," it was typically abstract, personalized, and adapted to fit their existing worldview, rather than serving as an external source of authority. I argue that these findings do not suggest an absence of structure, but a shift in the frameworks that inform belief (from institutionalized religious cosmologies to diversified configurations grounded in relationality and the immanent).

Finally, in the category of *echoes of memory*, I have brought together the processes through which social continuity after death is enacted, experienced, and anticipated. I developed three interrelated arguments: that anticipated remembrance functions as a way of orienting toward the social world and carries a moral dimension; that absence has content, as the deceased continue to shape thought, action, and relationships; and that while death terminates individual subjective experience, the dead persist through ongoing social influence. These processes are captured through the concept of *echoes of memory*, understood as recurrent, socially mediated experiences through which the deceased are not simply recalled, but acknowledged in ways that orient perception and action. I argue that these echoes are not exceptional or separate from everyday forms of remembrance, but are intensified articulations of punctual relational processes. They demonstrate how the dead continue to influence the living by shaping how individuals act, think, remember, and engage with

the world. *Echoes of memory* make visible a form of social continuity after death that is both ordinary and profound.

These four themes point to the emergence of alternative frameworks for understanding death, dying and the afterlife. Across most participants' accounts, the afterlife is not located beyond the social world, but within it (enacted through relationships, memory, anticipation, and moral orientation). The themes developed in this thesis demonstrate that participants articulated new frameworks for understanding death, dying and the afterlife that see continuity after death as experienced as an ongoing feature of social life. These experiences involve the "ordinary" in that they happen to everyone, but are deeply meaningful and significative in that individuals experience them in diverse ways. They are "immanent" in that they emerge from this-worldly experiences, but "transcendent" in that they *may* exceed them through personal experience. Thus, *echoes of memory* constitute a nonreligious form of immanent transcendence. They are evidence of the ongoing relationship and influence between the living and the dead, while at the same time sustained through practices of memory, anticipation, and everyday social engagement.

Conceptual and Methodological limitations

This thesis has sought to develop a set of conceptual tools for understanding contemporary imaginaries of death and afterlife among nonreligious individuals. Still, several limitations should be acknowledged. Conceptually, the categories I developed (identity-belief trajectory, immanent certainty, beyond the self, and echoes of memory) are but analytical constructs designed to organize and interpret complex lived experiences. As such, they inevitably involve a degree of simplification. The boundaries between these categories are not always clear in participants' narratives, and in practice they sometimes overlap, intersect, and mutually inform one another. Furthermore, concepts such as "immanence," "certainty," and "continuity" are used as "heuristic" devices and may not fully capture the fluidity and ambiguity of participants' own meanings. Their purpose is that of ancillary concepts that may aid in the broader pursuit of recognizing and identifying these new emerging social frameworks.

Another conceptual limitation lies in the interpretive framing of "nonreligion" itself. Although I focused on participants who self-identify as nonreligious, such identifications were inevitably self-ascribed and context-dependent. Participants' narratives often drew on culturally available religious language, symbols, and moral frameworks in indirect, reworked, or residual forms. This

thesis explored nonreligion against a predominantly Christian cultural backdrop, and acquired most of the participants from a single social media platform (Reddit). As researchers in nonreligion would be quick to point out (Quack 2014; Quack et al. 2020; Lee 2015), context matters when exploring nonreligion, but so does the religious tradition against which nonreligion is defined. Participants' background inevitably played a role in the outcome of this research.

Methodologically, this study is based on a qualitative interview sample of millennial participants, which provides depth and richness but at the same time limits its generalizability. Thus, the findings presented here are not intended to be representative of all nonreligious individuals, nor of all generational cohorts. Additionally, as with all interview-based research, the data contained here is inevitable marked by what participants chose to share, how they remembered experiences, and how they articulated often abstract reflections on death and afterlife.

Finally, another limitation of this research alludes to Bourdieu's idea of sociological analyses as "snapshots" of their time. This study captures participants' accounts and a specific moment in time. Their orientations towards death, belief and memory are likely to shift across their lifetime. Though perhaps a difficult endeavor, a longitudinal research that traces changes in beliefs around death, dying and the afterlife would be particularly valuable for tracing how these imaginaries evolve in response to major life events, ageing, and changing social contexts. Nonetheless, this study has shown that people in "younger" generational cohorts have deep and meaningful reflections about death, dying and the afterlife, and that their grounded accounts point towards the emergence of new frameworks that are actively being constructed in contemporary social life.

Moving Forward

I developed this thesis with the hope of contributing to the broader sociological debates around nonreligion, death and dying. Throughout this study, I show that the decline of religious influence does not entail the disappearance of meaning and moral orientations, but rather involves their transformation. Death is a central existential concern, and remains a key site through which individuals articulate moral commitments, relational orientations, and understandings of continuity. Future research should continue to explore how these emerging frameworks are shaped across different social contexts, generations, and cultural settings, as well as how they intersect with religious institutions in the area of death and dying. In particular, further attention should be given to the emerging needs of the nonreligious population in the areas of death and dying. The symbolic,

emotional and procedural dimensions of certain practices (such as Medical Assistance in Dying) may provide important insights into how the needs of the nonreligious should be tended to.

The dead are neither fully absent nor fully present. They persist through the social worlds they helped develop, and continue to shape the living through memory, relationships, and moral orientations. The afterlife is not a distant elsewhere; it is an ongoing, relational process that unfolds within the fabric of everyday life. The invisible "Choir" George Eliot spoke of might just be the multitude of social relations that continue to amplify the voices of the dead; music echoed by the living.

Appendix A (Recruitment Flyer)



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON

Millennials and Non-religious perspectives on afterlife

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study that explores what the non-religious millennials think happens after their death.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in one interview session for approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will occur virtually over Zoom () or on an agreed upon public location in the City of Ottawa. Participants will be selected on a first come first served basis. The study will be conducted in English. Participating is optional.

If you are a Canadian citizen or permanent resident between the ages of 28 and 43, have no religion, are not involved in religious or faith groups, and would like to receive more information or participate in this study, please contact:

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This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board

Appendix B (Interview guide)

Background and Introductory Information

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
    a. How old are you?
    b. How do you identify in terms of ethnicity?
    c. What gender do you identify with?
    d. What is your highest educational degree?
    e. Can you tell me about where you grew up?
    f. Can you tell me about your current occupation?
    g. Where are you from originally? Where do you live?

Perspectives on Afterlife

1. What do you think happens after we die? Why do you think it works like that?
2. How do you think an ideal (good) death looks like?
3. Do you ever think about your own death? How does that moment look like?
4. When you think about the moment of your death, what comes to mind? Any feelings?
5. Do you think your death will affect other people? If so, how?
6. What would you like to be remembered for?
7. What would you like it to happen to your body? Why would you like it to be that way?
8. Do you think our existence is finite or infinite? Can you tell me why you think that?
9. Do you imagine any sense of continuity after death?
10. What do you think about Medical Assistance in Dying? Do you know anyone that has gone through MAID?
11. How do you deal with death as a nonreligious person?

Upbringing and Nonreligious identity

1. How do you identify religiously?
    a. Do you believe in a higher power?
    b. How often do you engage in religious activities (going to church, baptism, etc.)? Why do you engage or not engage in them?
    c. How present is religion in your daily life?
    d. When would you say you became aware of your own death?
    e. How much do you think religion impacts the way in which you see the world?
    f. When did you start identifying as nonreligious and why?
    g. Do you think your nonreligious identity affects the way in which you see the world, if so, how?
2. What did you think about religion when growing up?
    a. If any, what was your religion growing up? How was it like?
    b. What was your parents' religion? How was it like to grow up with parents with that religion? Or how was it like to grow up with no religion?
    c. Did you attend a religious school? What was your experience?
    d. Would you say your beliefs have changed over time? If so, how?

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