

If life is a journey, what is the destination?
We asked people 50 and over to share their
most deeply held beliefs.
The result is an illuminating glimpse
into America's spiritual core

Illustrations by Merian Bantjes

86%

believe in Heaven

For all the nudging and pushing and jockeying for position among the sweaty tourists who surround me on the floor of the Sistine Chapel this summer morning, it's nothing compared with the cyclone of activity going on up there on the front wall.

In Michelangelo's painting *The Last Judgment* there's little doubt about who's going where. On the left, a swirl of saints and martyrs ascend Heavenward, their faces a mix of rapture and shock. They soar triumphantly, flanking the figure of a Risen Christ. On the right, it's a decidedly downward trend, a slightly more populated mix of eternal unfortunates being dragged, pushed, and hurled into the abyss. I step around behind the altar—a vantage virtually no one else seems interested in—and marvel at the nearly hidden figures of three ape-like creatures, seemingly the gatekeepers of a fiery furnace that is glimpsed just beyond.

In appearance and execution *The Last Judgment* is archetypal Mannerist art. But the fact is, the nuts and bolts of Michelangelo's vision are shared by the vast majority of 50-plus Americans.

In an exclusive survey of 1,011 people 50 and over, AARP THE MAGAZINE sought to learn just what Americans in the second half of life think about life after death. Over the years we've seen countless surveys examining Americans' attitudes and beliefs about the afterlife, but we wanted to hear specifically from the AARP generation—those who are more than halfway to the point of finding out, once and for all, precisely how right or wrong they were about life after death.

To begin, we found that people 50 and over tend to be downright conventional in their basic beliefs: nearly three quarters (73 percent) agree with the statement "I believe in life after death." Women are a lot more likely to believe in an afterlife (80 percent) than men (64 percent).

Two thirds of those who believe also told us that their confidence in a life after death has increased as they've gotten older. Among them is 90-year-old Leona Mabrand. Born in North Dakota, she moved to Oregon in her 20s, married—and watched, one by one, as every member of her family passed on before her. "I'm the only one left of my family tree," she says, her voice a mix of pride and sadness.

Turning down her radio to chat one recent afternoon—Paul Harvey is one of her favorite companions these days—she tells me that the longer she lives, the more miracles she sees, and the

more that convinces her that what her Christian faith tells her about the hereafter is true.

"The Lord has shown me a lot of good miracles happen," she says. "I'm looking forward to seeing my husband and my family and all those who have gone to their rest before me."

Of course, Christians like Leona aren't the only ones with their eye on an afterlife.

"It reflects our multicultural environment," says Barnard College professor of religion Alan F. Segal, author of *Life After Death: A History of*

the Afterlife in Western Religion (Doubleday, 2004). "Most Americans believe they will be saved no matter what they are. In the '60s and '70s there was this thought that the boomers were not particularly religious; they were busy finding jobs and setting up house. But as they entered their fourth decade, they returned. I'm not sure it was a religious revival—it may have been they were just returning."

It may also reflect a repudiation of the long-held notion that science is the source of all of life's answers, adds Huston Smith, Syracuse University professor emeritus of religion and author of the 2.5 million-copy-selling *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

"Belief in an afterlife has risen in the last 50 years," he says. "Serious thinkers are beginning to see through the mistake modernity made in thinking that science is the oracle of truth."

Believers show general agreement over the choice of destinations in the afterlife, as well: 86 percent say there's a Heaven, while somewhat fewer (70 percent) believe in Hell.

After that, the groups break down into subsets. While most people 50 and over believe there's life beyond the grave, there's a spectrum of visions regarding just what's ahead.

Location, Location, Location

A copyeditor I once knew insisted that you should always capitalize the word *Heaven*. "Heaven," he explained, "is a place. Like Poughkeepsie."

He'd be in the minority among those 50 and over who

94%

believe in God

believe in Heaven. Just 40 percent believe Heaven is "a place," while 47 percent say it's a "state of being." As for the alternate destination, of those who think Hell exists, 43 percent say it's a "state of being"; 42 percent say it's "a place" (although not, presumably, like Poughkeepsie).

"Heaven's a place, all right," says Ed Parlin, 56, of Salem, New Hampshire, about Heaven. And he's got some ideas of what to expect. "It's a better place than this is—that's for sure," he says. "And I guess everybody gets along. It's always a beautifully clear day, and sunny, with great landscaping."

"Americans see life after death as a very dynamic thing," says Barnard College's Segal. "You don't really hear about angels and wings, sitting on clouds playing melodies. A lot believe there will be sex in the afterlife, that it'll be more pleasurable, less dangerous, and it won't be physical, but spiritual. They talk about humor in the afterlife, continuing education, unifying families—like a retirement with no financial needs."

There's a line in Matthew's Gospel that states: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And perhaps not so coincidentally, our survey shows the richer people are, the less likely they are to believe there's a Heaven. Among those with a household income of \$75,000 or more per year, 78 percent believe in Heaven—compared with 90 percent of those earning \$25,000 or less. Similarly, 77 percent of college-educated people think there's a Heaven, compared with 89 percent of those who have a high school diploma or less.

The Price of Admission

While the overwhelming majority of Americans 50 and over believe in Heaven, there's a lot of splintering when it comes to just what it takes to arrive there. The largest group, 29 percent of those who believe in Heaven, responded that the prerequisite is to "believe in Jesus Christ." Twenty-five percent said people who "are good" get in. Another 10 percent said that people who "believe in one God" are welcomed into Heaven. Likewise, 10 percent took a come-one, come-all philosophy, saying everyone gets into Heaven.

And while 88 percent of people believe they'll be in Heaven after they die, they're not so sure about the rest of us. Those responding said 64 percent of all people get to Heaven. And many think the percentage will be a lot smaller than that.

"Fifteen percent," says Ira Merce of Lakeland, Florida. He admitted it's just a guess on his part, but he's still not happy about it. "I'd like to see the percentages turned exactly around, but I can't see it happening. If you read Scripture, it says, 'Broad is the way that leads to destruction, and narrow is the way that leads to eternal life.'"

Among those who told us they believe in Hell, their attitudes about who goes there generally mirrored the poll's results about Heaven. Forty percent of those who believe in Hell said "people who are bad" or "people who have sinned" go there; 17 percent said, "People who do not believe in



70%

believe in Hell

What's With That White Light?

Can you die and live to tell the tale? Some people come awfully close, and a few return with a remarkable story: of euphoria, a bright light (sometimes at the end of a tunnel), encounters with dead relatives, or an out-of-body experience, in which they feel as if they're hovering over their physical body. Scientists call these near-death experiences, or NDEs; polls show 4 to 5 percent of Americans say they've had one.

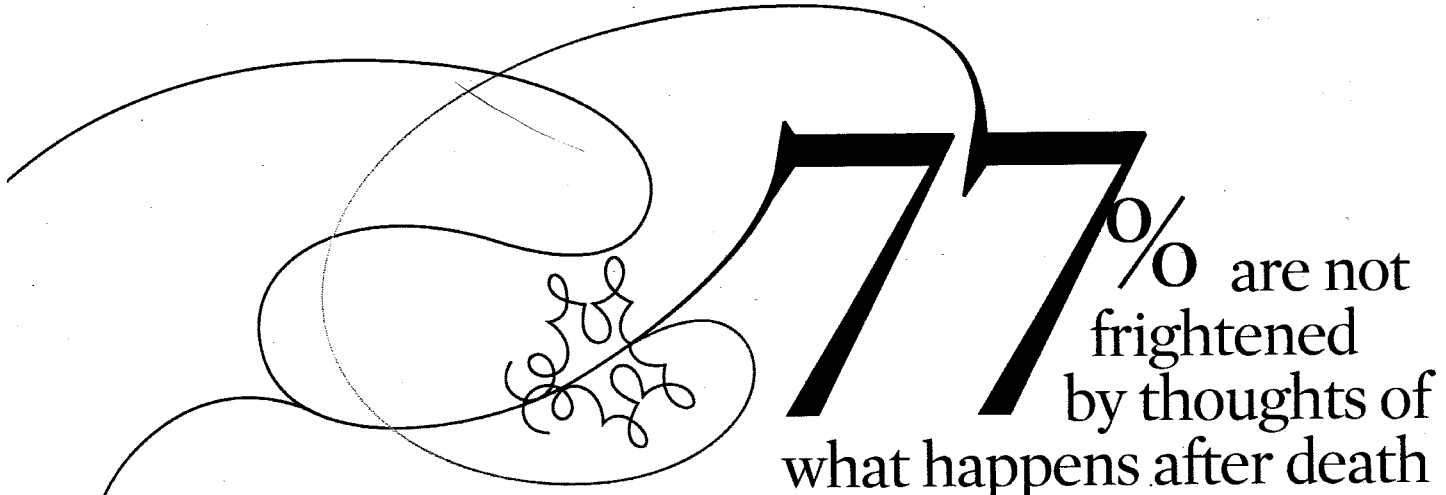
Some experts dismiss NDEs as nothing more than an altered state of consciousness. "It's very likely that REM [rapid eye movement] sleep and the arousal system of the brain are contributing to NDEs," says Kevin Nelson, M.D., a University of Kentucky neurophysiologist. His research suggests that people with NDEs have a "different brain switch" that blends sleep with wakefulness—which reduces the ordeal of dying to a dreamlike state.

But lots of people believe NDEs are glimpses of the afterlife—and there's some data to indicate there's something happening beyond the realm of physiology.

Some of the most intriguing findings come from Pim van Lommel, a retired cardiologist from the Rijnstate Hospital in Arnhem, Netherlands, who followed 344 survivors of cardiac arrest; 18 percent reported having had NDEs while their brains showed no wave activity. This perplexes van Lommel because, he says, "according to our current medical concepts it's impossible to experience consciousness during a period of clinical death."

"The out-of-body component of the NDE is actually verifiable," says Sam Parnia, M.D., Ph.D., a critical-care physician at New York City's Weill Cornell Medical Center. He says patients who report watching their own resuscitation from above may have had visions—or they may be recollecting false memories. He plans to place markers, visible only from the ceiling, in emergency rooms across the United Kingdom, then quiz patients who report having had NDEs.

"If they correctly identify these targets," says Parnia, "that suggests the experience was real." —Anne Casselman



77% are not frightened by thoughts of what happens after death

Jesus Christ” are condemned to spend their afterlife in Hell.

And in what has to be the understatement of all eternity, Ed suggests, “It’s probably a place where you’re gonna do things that you don’t like to do.”

Second Time Around?

Twenty-three percent of those responding said they believe in reincarnation—meaning there are a fair number who have an overlapping belief in Heaven and a return trip to Earth. The percentage was highest in the Northeast (31 percent), and boomers were most likely to believe in reincarnation.

“It’s controversial here [in the United States], but reincarnation is a mainstay of the Eastern religions—Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism,” says Ishani Chowdhury, executive director of the Hindu American Foundation. “You see more and more people of the younger generation weighing it at the same level as Western religions and not dismissing it.”

Adds Jeffrey Burton Russell, professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of *A History of Heaven* (Princeton University Press, 1998): “If you took this study 50 years ago, the belief in reincarnation would be down at about one percent. Generally, the traditionally clear Christian vision of Heaven has declined, while the vaguer visions of the continuation of life have taken its place.”

One true believer is Linda Abbott of St. Louis. “We have to come back,” she tells me. “We come back over and over until we get it right!”

More than half of those responding reported a belief in spirits or ghosts—with more women (60 percent) than men (44 percent) agreeing. Boomers are a lot more likely to believe in ghosts (64 percent) when compared with those in their 60s (51 percent) or 70s or older (38 percent). Their belief is not entirely based on hearsay evidence, either. Thirty-eight percent of all those responding to our poll say they have felt a presence, or seen something, that they thought might have been a spirit or a ghost.

“We’ve had some strange experiences,” says Ed, who once lived in a house he suspected might be haunted. “Doors closing that shouldn’t close, things falling down when you know they’re stable. Kind of like someone on the other side was trying to get our attention.”

Still, despite all those great stories about old haunted hous-

es in the Northeast and Deep South, it was respondents from the West (50 percent) who were especially likely to say they’d felt the presence of a spirit or a ghost.

No Place to Go

Nearly one quarter of those responding agreed with the statement “I believe that when I die, that’s the end.” It’s not the sort of statement that invites a lot of questions for clarification, but Tom, a friendly, outspoken fellow I chatted with from the Lake Champlain region of upstate New York, took a shot at it.

To the question “Is there life after death?” Tom responds, “Nope. I’ve always felt that way. Life’s short enough without having to worry about something you can’t do anything about anyway. It’s just reality, you know? I mean, I’m a Catholic.”

Tom waits while I lift my jaw from the table. A *Catholic*?

“Sure. They preach life after death, you know? I just say, hey, people preach a lot of stuff. You just gotta make up your own mind about things. I go to Mass. I live my life like there’s life after death, but I don’t believe there is. If it’s true, well, hey, it’s a plus. But if it ain’t, I didn’t lose nothing.”

He laughs, and I laugh with him. (He does ask that I not divulge his last name, and I wonder if that’s to cover his tracks just in case God picks up this issue of AARP THE MAGAZINE.) Nonetheless, it’s interesting that Tom tries to live as if there were an afterlife, even though he doesn’t believe in one. It seems to echo what others tell me about how their beliefs in the hereafter—or lack thereof—impact the way they live their lives. Surprisingly, few confess their beliefs have any effect at all. And everyone I talk to agrees we should be living our lives according to a moral code—which many would define as God’s code—whether there’s a God at all, or a reward awaits.

As 90-year-old Leona puts it, “I just want to be faithful to Jesus every day and do what’s right.”

The sentiment, I discovered, is echoed across a wide spectrum of belief—and disbelief. “Atheists celebrate life, but we know death is a reality,” says Margaret Downey, president of Atheist Alliance International. “We believe the only afterlife that a person can hope to have is the legacy they leave behind—the memory of the people (continued on page 107)

✦ Just about everyone has an opinion about life after death. Share your beliefs at www.aarpmagazine.org/messageboards.

that continues to this day. Shirley does what she can: stains floors, textures ceilings, and paints walls. She works part-time for Catholic Charities. At night she stays with her mother, who has Alzheimer's disease, in an independent-living house run by Catholic Charities on the suburban West Bank. She gets worn down. "Physically, I'm tired," she says. "But you can't stop." Besides, she says, the spiritual rewards outweigh the physical fatigue.

One sunny day Shirley was replanting her flower garden, which had been completely destroyed by the flood. "And a man was walking his dog—I saw him on the other side of the street—and he came on my side," she says. "He said, 'Miss, the flowers are so pretty, I think that's what I'm going to go home and do.'" The hope of Shirley's garden was contagious. All because of "something as simple as flowers," she says. ■

Barry Yeoman, based in North Carolina, is a regular contributor to this magazine. His last article, "Sudden Debt," appeared in the September–October 2006 issue.

Life After Death

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who have been touched by their lives."

No matter what your belief, adds Omid Safi, former cochair for the study of Islam at the American Academy of Religion, "even though we use words like *afterlife*, or the *next life*, the *life beyond*, it is actually a great mirror about how people like to see themselves now, and the way they see God, and the way they see themselves interacting with other people."

For my money, there have been two great books written about the afterlife: Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. Of course, Lewis's book is funny, and shorter, so it's better: a guy gets on a commuter bus and finds himself on a tour of Heaven and Hell. Still, both writers seem to reach similar conclusions: whether we choose to take any side in the afterlife conversation, the reality is heading relentlessly toward us. We can straddle the line between belief and unbelief all we want, but in a

world where we love to split the difference when it comes to spiritual matters, where inclusiveness often means reaching consensus on conceptual matters, the answer to the ultimate question of life after death leaves no room for quibbling. The position you took during your earthly life is either spot on or dead wrong.

The figures on Michelangelo's monumental fresco seem ready to tumble over me, and I figure it's time to make room for some new tourists. At the back of the Sistine Chapel, I notice two doors: a large one to the left and a smaller one to the right. I ask an English-speaking tour guide which way I should go.

"That way"—he points to the right—"is a lovely long staircase. And if you keep going, there's a shortcut to St. Peter's Basilica. That way"—he jerks his head to the left—"you snake through a dozen more galleries and stand on a two-hour line to get into the basilica."

He pauses, then adds, "It's Hell." ■

Additional reporting by Emily Chau.