

# Life after Death: A Canadian Profile

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**Easter’s historic message that seems so right for the current turbulent times — that “death is not the end” — is a message that is being partially embraced by Canadians. But most people are light on specifics. Perhaps that is why so many are also light on hope.**

Research carried out by University of Lethbridge sociologist Reginald Bibby dating back to the mid-1970s shows that almost all Canadians raise the life after death question. What’s more, a majority have concluded that there really is something beyond death. However, regardless of whether they draw on the Easter message or other messages from any number of sources, they typically have little sense of what will actually happen. Only a minority indicate that their major response to death is one of hope.

## *It’s Not That They Are Not Asking...or Not Believing*

**Bibby has found that all but a small number of people raise the question of what happens after death in the course of their lifetimes. What’s more, for decades, close to 70% have been saying that they believe in life after death.** In fact, the proportion of people who rule out the possibility altogether has declined over the past sixty years, from about 15% in the 1940s to a current 10%.

- Contrary to common perception, belief in the life-after is actually somewhat higher among younger adults than seniors; it also is more widely-held among women than men.
- Belief in life after death is held by majorities in all regions, with levels ranging from a high of close to 80% in the Atlantic provinces to around 60% in British Columbia.

**Table 1. Belief in Life After Death**

<b>Nationally</b>	<b>68%</b>
18-34	72
35-54	69
55+	63
Women	72
Men	64
Atlantic	78
Prairies	72
Quebec	70
Ontario	66
B.C.	61

Source: Bibby, Project Canada 2000.

**But while such belief is widespread, more than 5 in 10 Canadians who say they are certain about life after death also acknowledge that they “have no idea what it may be like.”**

- Another three in 10 think that rewards and punishments will be involved, while most of the remainder think we will be reincarnated.
- There are no differences by **age** in certainty about what will take place.
- The inclination to say, “*I have no idea what will happen,*” is the most common response of people even when they claim **a religious tie** — be it Catholic (Quebec or elsewhere), Mainline Protestant, or with another world faith. Here there is one exception: a majority of Canadians who identify with Conservative Protestant, evangelical groups maintain that the hereafter will be characterized by rewards and punishments.
- However, although group *identification* makes little difference, *involvement* does: **weekly attenders** are considerably more likely than those who never attend to be thinking of rewards and punishments; most of the never attenders say they have no idea, with reincarnation a distant second choice.

**Table 2. What Will Happen After Death**

*Views of Those Who Believe in Life After Death*

	Have No Idea	Rewards & Punishments	Reincar- nation	Other	Totals
<b>Nationally</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>100</b>
18-34	54	27	13	6	100
35-54	57	30	10	3	100
55+	53	34	10	3	100
None	63	11	18	8	100
RCQ	62	21	13	4	100
Main Prot	60	25	12	3	100
RCOQ	52	38	6	4	100
Other Faiths	47	13	37	3	100
Cons Prot	19	78	0	3	100
Weekly	35	59	3	3	100
Never	65	11	17	7	100

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada 2000 Survey.

## Predictable Responses to Death the Unknown

In light of the widespread vagueness many people have concerning what happens after death, an important question is how do Canadians respond when people die?

We asked our survey participants, "What would you say your primary response is to the reality of death?" Some 25% indicate that the dominant response is one of "sorrow," while close to the same number say "mystery." "Hope" and "no particular feeling" are each cited by just under 20% of the population. About 15% admit that their primary response to death is one of "fear."

- The response of **hope** tends to be somewhat more common among older Canadians, Conservative Protestants, and Catholics outside Quebec than others. It also is the dominant response of weekly service attenders.

	Sorrow	Mystery	Hope	No Partic Feeling	Fear	Other/ Varied	Totals
<b>Nationally</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
18-34	26	26	12	14	18	4	100
35-54	26	22	19	14	16	3	100
55+	22	20	25	21	9	3	100
None	32	29	6	19	10	4	100
Main Prot	27	20	17	22	10	4	100
RCs: Quebec	24	28	12	12	22	2	100
RCs: OutQue	24	17	26	14	16	3	100
Other Faiths	15	36	15	15	18	<1	100
Cons Prot	11	20	52	6	8	3	100
Never	32	20	9	22	12	5	100
Weekly	18	16	43	9	9	5	100

Source: Derived from Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 2002:128-130.

- **Sorrow** is the most common response to death reported by people who have no religious affiliation, and those who never attend services — two categories, of course, with considerable overlap. But sorrow also characterizes sizable numbers of Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics.
- **Mystery** is the number one response cited by people who adhere to Other Faiths.

## Conclusion

These findings show that Canadians continue to raise the important question of what happens after we die. In addition, a majority of people conclude there is something "out there." There clearly is a considerable "market" for answers pertaining to what lies beyond the grave.

However, the failure for most people to have clarity and confidence in the face of death leads to at least three basic interpretations. First, religious groups and other "market entries" are failing to get their messages across to Canadians. Second, they have little to say. Third, without recourse to definitive answers from either science or faith, Canadians have no choice but to hold fragmented and eclectic views of what — if anything — lies beyond death.

This Easter season seems a most appropriate time for Canada's various religious groups to ask themselves whether in fact they have something decisive to say about this fundamental reality that every Canadian has to confront. If so, the times call for them to be far more explicit...and far more effective.

Reginald Bibby holds the Board of Governors Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge. He has been monitoring social trends in Canada through six adult and three youth surveys spanning 1975-2000 that have benefitted from the input of close to 20,000 Canadians. He is the author of eight best-selling books including *Fragmented Gods*, *Mosaic Madness*, *Canada's Teens*, and the *Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style*. His latest book is *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (2002).

Some illustrative reflections on life after death from a sampling of Canadians; drawn from Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (2002), page 125.

**“What Do You Think Will Happen to You After You Die?”**

***Some Have Pretty Conventional Ideas***

“I believe that we are placed on this earth through the miracle of birth given to us by our heavenly Father so when we die our spirit goes back to be with Him all of those who have gone before us.”

- A 69-year-old female from near Montreal who is active in her United Church.

“Because I have repented of my sin and placed my faith in Jesus, my soul will join, for eternity, all the believers from ages past. I hope it’s exciting, because eternity is a long time.”

- A 35-year-old evangelical from Vancouver; she is a public relations consultant.

“My soul will go to heaven. At the end of the world, my soul will be reunited with my renewed body and I will live in the new earth, this time not having to fight against sickness, suffering and sin.”

- A Reform elder from Hamilton in his mid-30s; he works in public affairs.

***Others Are A Bit Less Conventional***

“Physically, I will be put into a modest coffin and buried. Spiritually, I ‘believe’ my spiritual energy will become the soul of a new person.”

- A Calgary administrator, 35; she says she is a nonpractising Christian.

“I believe your essence lives on in the memories and hearts of those you touched in your life, and you go back to being part of the sky, sea, and sun.”

- A B.C. government worker in his late 30s; he doesn’t attend services or identify with any group.

***A Good Number Are Thinking of Reincarnation***

“Because I believe in reincarnation, I think I will come back in a different form that will be determined by karma and the life I lead now.”

- A 22-year-old third-year university student in Alberta; she is a Hindu who values her faith highly.

“You get points for learning. Then, in death, you review the life you led. To me the ultimate reason for life is to learn and to perfect, so you’re able to come back many times to learn something more.”

- Canadian Lynn Johnston, creator of the comic strip For Better or for Worse (Todd, 1996:107).

***Some Have Little Idea — Maybe Hoping***

“I don’t know, though it would probably vary from day to day on how devout I’m feeling (you can tell I was raised in the United Church, right?).”

- A 50’ish writer with a national magazine.

“I cannot control what happens. I need to make the best use of my life now when I have some control of it.”

- A 73-year-old retired biological scientist and an active Buddhist.

“Intellectually, I don’t believe in living forever or in an afterlife. But I’d love to be proved wrong. In some sly little part of my brain, I think maybe I’m ex-pt.”

- Evelyn Lau, whose best-selling books include her autobiography Runaway and Fresh Girls (Todd, 1996:71).

Source: Project Canada Quota Sample, Winter, 2001-02.