

# “There’s More Between Heaven and Earth”: Danish Emerging Adults’ Religious Beliefs and Values

Journal of Adolescent Research

2015, Vol. 30(6) 661–682

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DOI: 10.1177/0743558415602555

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## **Abstract**

In a qualitative interview study, 18 Danish emerging adults (ages 18-27) were asked about their religious beliefs and moral views. Most had received little or no formal religious training within their families, but they nevertheless participated in the “confirmation” process in the Danish state Lutheran church at age 14. Regarding their current beliefs, the majority were nonbelievers (agnostic, atheist, or no beliefs), and none expressed a traditional Christian faith. Nevertheless, they held a variety of beliefs in some kind of life after death; relatively few participants believed that death is simply the end of existence. In the two questions assessing moral views, participants drew from the Ethic of Autonomy and the Ethic of Community, but not the Ethic of Divinity. This finding also indicated the absence of religious considerations in the lives of Danish emerging adults. Overall, the results provide further information on the religious and moral beliefs of emerging adults, and on views of religious questions in an exceptionally nonreligious country.

## **Keywords**

early/emerging adulthood, religion, global/international issues, morality

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In an affluent, stable society, do people still need religious beliefs to explain their lives and to answer existential questions, or not? When young people grow up in a highly secular society, do they reach the threshold of adulthood without any religious beliefs, or do they create their own in lieu of a cultural script? In a society where religion is mostly absent from daily life, is it also absent from people's moral worldviews, or does religious language persist in response to moral questions even after religious practices wane? These were the sorts of questions we sought to address in the present study, a qualitative interview study of 18- to 27-year-olds in Denmark.

## Denmark's Contented But Unreligious Society

Denmark is renowned as one of the world's most successful, healthy, and contented societies. In *The Origins of Political Order*, Francis Fukuyama (2011) argued that the challenge for countries worldwide is "getting to Denmark," that is, building a prosperous, stable, well-functioning, egalitarian society. This observation is supported by data from international comparisons. On the United Nations' Human Development Index, a composite measure of health, education, and economic well-being, Denmark ranks 10th out of 187 countries, and it also ranks 10th on the U.N.'s Gender Development Index, a measure of gender equality in life expectancy, education, and income in countries worldwide (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014). The World Bank's GINI coefficient, a measure of economic equality, shows Denmark to be among the most egalitarian countries in the world (World Bank, 2014). The *Economist's* Quality of Life Index, which includes data on crime, trust in public institutions, family life, and life satisfaction, ranks Denmark fifth out of 80 countries ("The Lottery of Life," 2014).

Danes are also among the happiest people in the world. In an international analysis combining ratings of happiness from numerous studies, Denmark ranked first in happiness, out of 91 countries (Veenhoven, 2010). Similarly, in a study comparing 40 countries on adults' responses to the question, "During the past few weeks, did you ever feel that life is wonderful?" Denmark ranked third (with 64% responding yes; Inglehart, Basanez, & Moreno, 1998).

The other quality that distinguishes Denmark among the countries of the world is that it is among the least religious. In the International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP's) survey of religious beliefs of adults in 43 countries (ISSP Research Group, 2012), only 22% of Danes described themselves as "extremely," "very," or "somewhat" religious, the second lowest among the 43 countries (slightly above Swedes). Only 32% of Danes in the ISSP survey agreed that "There is a God who concerns Himself with every human being

personally,” also among the lowest of the 43 countries. Similarly, only 38% of Danes reported “definitely” or “probably” believing in life after death, the fourth lowest proportion among the countries in the survey.

The combination of high national contentment but low national religiosity may seem like a paradox, in that many studies have found that on an individual level, religiosity is positively related to a wide range of favorable outcomes, including higher well-being, greater optimism, warmer family relationships, and lower levels of risk behaviors (Day, 2010). However, in a comprehensive international analysis, Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011) showed that although religiosity is related to subjective well-being, the relation holds mainly in countries where conditions of daily life are most difficult. Also, religious people had higher subjective well-being in religious nations but not in nonreligious nations. Thus in Denmark, where conditions of daily life are among the most favorable in the world, it is understandable that most people are both contented and unreligious (Zuckerman, 2009).

Yet, religious institutions and traditions still play an important part in Danish life. Although relatively few Danish people believe the main tenets of Christianity, the state-sponsored Lutheran church remains influential as a “cultural religion” (Zuckerman, 2008). That is, most Danes continue to call themselves “Christians” and to value and participate in occasional collective religious practices (Rosen, 2009). As Philip Zuckerman (2008) observed in a study of religion in Denmark,

Being Christian is linked to their culture, it is part of their collective heritage, and it is manifested in their childhood experiences and family traditions. Being Christian is a conduit for significant rites of passage: birth, confirmation, marriage, and death. It has to do with holidays, songs, stories, and food. (p. 150)

There is widespread support for the state sponsorship of the Lutheran church, even though the only time a Danish church is even half-full is on Christmas Eve or for a special event such as a wedding or concert. Most Danes seem satisfied with “belonging without believing” (Halman & Draulans, 2006).

### *Religious Beliefs in Emerging Adulthood*

Although there have been several notable studies of religious beliefs in Denmark, few studies so far have been *developmental*; that is, to our knowledge no studies have focused on how the beliefs of a particular age period may be distinctive due to developmental issues characteristic of the period. This is a notable omission, as many scholars have argued that adolescence

and emerging adulthood are especially important for the development of religious beliefs (Arnett, 2004, 2015; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; Erikson, 1950; C. Smith & Denton, 2005; C. Smith & Snell, 2010). In this view, young people develop religious beliefs as one aspect of developing an identity, and identity issues are most prominent during adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Several studies of religious beliefs with a developmental focus have been conducted in the United States, most notably the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR), directed by Christian Smith (C. Smith & Denton, 2005; C. Smith & Snell, 2010). This longitudinal study began with a national sample of over 2,500 13- to 17-year-olds in 2003, and has now followed them over a decade afterward, through their twenties. So far, the published results examine how the religious beliefs and attitudes of the 13- to 17-year-old adolescents changed by the time they were 18 to 23 years old. Overall, the NSYR has found a decline in religiosity from adolescence to emerging adulthood, both in behavior and in beliefs. Only about 30% of 18- to 23-year-olds attended religious services at least once a month, down from 52% when they were aged 13 to 17, and over half attended only a few times a year or less. Similarly, 44% reported that religious faith is “very” or “extremely” important in their lives at ages 18 to 23, a decline from 51% at ages 13 to 17, and 75% reported believing in God, down from 84% at ages 13 to 17.

Although only the NSYR has examined changes in religiosity from adolescence to emerging adulthood, several cross-sectional national studies in the United States have examined patterns of religiosity over the course of adulthood. All show the same unmistakable pattern: Emerging adults are less religious than any older adult age group in every way. For example, the Pew Research Center conducts frequent surveys on religion as part of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. One of their most striking findings is the high proportion of 18- to 29-year-olds who are classified as “unaffiliated,” meaning that they do not consider themselves to be a member of any religious denomination or organization. People in this category are known to researchers on religion as “the Nones,” because, when asked what religion they are, they respond with some version of “none”—atheist, agnostic, spiritual but not religious, or just not religious. One third (32%) of the 18- to 29-year-olds in a national Pew survey were Nones, and the proportion declined steadily with age through adulthood, to just 9% of those aged 65 and above (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Other U.S. surveys, using measures other than religious affiliation, report a similar pattern of an age-related decline in religiosity. The General Social Survey (GSS), a national survey that has been taking place annually since 1978, classifies respondents by generation, as follows:

- Millennials (born 1981 or later),
- Generation X (born 1965-1980),
- Boomers (born 1946-1964),
- Silent (born 1928-1945), and
- Greatest (born before 1928).

The GSS reports a steady linear decline in weekly religious attendance across generations, from 56% in the “Greatest” generation to just 18% of “Millennials” (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Like the GSS, the Gallup organization takes a generational approach, and reports findings similar to Pew and the GSS. Specifically, today’s emerging adults are far less likely than their parents or grandparents to say religion is “very important” in their lives, according to the Gallup data. The decline is remarkably linear and steady, ever downward, from 75% of “Greatest” generation respondents to 40% of “Millennials” (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Clearly religion is less important to today’s emerging adults than it is to older adults, and less relevant to their lives. Still, nearly half of U.S. emerging adults say that their religious faith is “very important” to them. At all ages, Americans are more religious in both beliefs and practices than Canadians, Australians, or Europeans are. The present study investigated religiosity among emerging adults in Denmark, widely held to be among the world’s least religious countries, even in comparison with other European countries (ISSP Research Group, 2012; Zuckerman, 2008).

### *Moral Views in Emerging Adulthood*

Another aspect of identity development in adolescence and emerging adulthood is the development of a moral perspective or worldview (Arnett, 2004, 2015; Erikson, 1950). One recent approach to conceptualizing moral development is the theory of the three Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity. This tripartite differentiation originated with Richard Shweder (Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1990), and has been developed into the cultural-developmental theory of moral development by Lene Jensen (1997a, 1997b, 2008, 2011, 2015; Jensen & McKenzie, in press). According to Jensen, the ultimate basis of morality is a person’s worldview, based on their moral socialization within their culture. A worldview is a set of cultural beliefs that explain what it means to be human, how human relations should be conducted, and how human problems should be addressed. In the cultural-developmental approach, as moral values develop, their trajectories across the life course are increasingly shaped by the predominant worldview(s) of their culture. There are three main types of cultural moral ethics. Briefly, the Ethic of

Autonomy involves a focus on the self as an individual. Moral values and reasons within this ethic include fairness and the interests, well-being, and rights of individuals. The Ethic of Community focuses on persons as members of social groups, with key considerations such as duty to others and concern with the customs, interests, and welfare of groups. The Ethic of Divinity focuses on people as spiritual or religious beings, and moral reasons encompass divine and natural law, lessons from sacred texts, and striving for spiritual purity.

Research on emerging adults in various countries using the Three Ethics model has generally found more or less equal use of the Ethics of Autonomy and Community, with the Ethic of Divinity used less in most cultural groups (Jensen, 2015). For example, this was the pattern found by Guerra and Giner-Sorolla (2015) in a study of emerging adults in five countries: Brazil, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, substantial use of the Ethic of Divinity was found in all countries. Other studies have found the Ethic of Divinity to be used less (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993) or more (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2015), depending on the prominence of religion in the culture that was the focus of the study. The present study is the first to examine use of the Three Ethics among emerging adults in a Nordic country.

The previous study most relevant to the present study in its examination of moral views using the Three Ethics model is a study of 20- to 29-year-olds in the United States (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001). The study used the same questions as in the present study: “When you get toward the end of your life, what would you like to be able to say about your life, looking back on it?” and “What values and beliefs do you think are most important to pass on to the next generation?” As in other studies, the Ethics of Autonomy and Community were prevalent and were used about equally, whereas the Ethic of Divinity was used less often. Nevertheless, 21% of participants used the Ethic of Divinity in response to the second question (“What values and beliefs . . . ?”).

### ***Rationale for the Current Study***

The present study goes beyond previous studies of religious beliefs in Denmark in two ways. First, it focuses on a specific age group, Danish emerging adults aged 18 to 27. Most previous studies on adults’ religious beliefs, in Denmark and elsewhere, have included a wide age range of adults, with little attention to how age might be an important consideration. International survey studies often include all adults above age 18 in their samples (e.g., ISSP Research Group, 2012). Philip Zuckerman’s (2008) qualitative study of Danish religious beliefs and practices mixed adults of various ages, without examining age differences.

Yet age is a potentially important variable when seeking to understand the context of people's religious beliefs. As noted above, in the United States, where age differences in religiosity have been studied extensively, findings show young people to be substantially less religious than older adults. With regard to Europe, since 1960 many scholars have observed that Europe has undergone a substantial period of *secularization*, meaning that the power of institutional religion has declined, and steadily fewer people report engaging in religious practices, although many maintain private religious beliefs (Casanova, 2006; Davie, 2000). In Denmark specifically, it has been observed that one aspect of secularization is that even private religious beliefs have less and less to do with Danes' values and moral decisions (Lüchau, 2014). Because so much secularization has taken place since 1960, older Danes and younger Danes have experienced a much different social context with respect to the role and influence of institutional religion in their society, and the current views of young Danes may therefore be substantially different.

Focusing on ages 18 to 27 is appropriate, because studies in the United States and Europe have found that emerging adulthood is especially important for the development of religious and moral views (Arnett, 2015; Douglass, 2005). Identity development, once mainly concentrated in the teen years, now stretches into the twenties for young people in developed countries, due to a later entry into a stable adulthood. An important part of identity development is the formation of an ideology or worldview, which includes religious beliefs (King, Clardy, & Ramos, 2014; King, Mueller, & Furrow, 2013; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Richie, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the worldviews of young Danes in this period when there may be a great deal of reflection on what to believe about religious and moral issues.

The second way the present study goes beyond previous research on religious beliefs in Denmark is that it takes a qualitative approach. Although much has been learned from large-scale surveys of religious beliefs and practices, the results of purely quantitative surveys can be misleading. For example, in the NSYR in the United States, among 18- to 23-year-olds who stated a religious affiliation classified as Catholic or Mainline Protestant, over one third also stated that they *never* attend religious services (C. Smith & Snell, 2010). This suggests that either their stated affiliation is based on family denominational background that is no longer meaningful to them, or that they maintain a privatized religion that does not include a motivation to attend religious services (Jensen & McKenzie, in press), but based on the survey results alone it is not possible to discern which interpretation is more likely. Other studies of emerging adults' religious beliefs have also indicated that interviews reveal depths and contradictions that had not been evident in survey results alone

(Arnett, 2015). Although survey research is important for investigating broad patterns in a population, it is important to complement quantitative surveys with more in-depth qualitative studies. Zuckerman's (2008) study of religious beliefs in Denmark was qualitative, but as noted it focused on all adults and did not examine ways that emerging adults may be distinctive.

In order to explore the extent and nature of religious beliefs in the lives of Danish emerging adults, the present study involved in-depth interviews about a variety of aspects of their lives, including the role of religion in their upbringing, participation in confirmation, current religious and spiritual beliefs, beliefs about life after death, and the values and beliefs deemed to be most important in their own lives and for the next generation. In other words, a broad range of questions were asked in order to explore the potential presence and significance of religion in various spheres of the Danish emerging adults' lives. The following seven research questions were used in the present article:

**Research Question 1:** Were you brought up to believe any particular set of religious beliefs, or did your parents more or less leave it up to you?

**Research Question 2:** Did you go through confirmation?

**Research Question 3:** Was [confirmation] just something you did or did it have a definite meaning?

**Research Question 4:** What are your religious or spiritual beliefs now, if any?

**Research Question 5:** What do you think happens when we die?

**Research Question 6:** When you get toward the end of your life, what would you like to be able to say about your life, looking back on it?

**Research Question 7:** What values or beliefs do you think are the most important to pass on to the next generation?

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 18 Danes aged 18 to 27 ( $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 2.6$ ), nine females and nine males. None of them were married, nor did any of them have children, reflecting the high median ages of entering marriage and parenthood in Denmark. (Median marriage age in Denmark was 32 for women and 35 for men in 2012; median age of entering parenthood was 29 for women and 34 for men [Danmarks Statistik, 2013]). Their social class backgrounds were diverse, as measured by mother's educational attainment: 1 (6%) *folkeskole* (through ninth grade), 6 (33%) *haandvaerkeruddannelse*



(secondary-level trade school), 5 (28%) *gymnasium* (the secondary school that is considered preparation for university studies), 1 (6%) university degree, and 5 (28%) other forms of education. With regard to their own educational status, 10 of the participants in the study were currently in an educational program, and 8 were employed full-time.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited from public places in Aalborg, a medium-sized city of about 200,000 persons, in the Western part of the country, on the Jutland peninsula. The target area for recruitment was the town center, an extensive network of pedestrian-only walkways lined with shops, restaurants, and cafés. Persons who appeared to be within the target age range of 18 to 29 were approached by research assistants, and if they were within that age range, they were asked to complete a short questionnaire used in the study. Nearly all of the persons who were approached agreed to complete the questionnaire. A portion of the questionnaire invited people to participate in an interview at a later date on various aspects of the lives of 18- to 29-year-olds. They were offered 100 Danish kroner (about US\$20) in return for participating in the interview.

Institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained from the first author's institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews occurred in public places such as cafés or in the household of the participant, depending on the participant's preference.

## Measures

The questionnaire included demographic items. The interview pertained to a wide range of topics, including family relationships, romantic relationships, educational experiences, and occupational goals, and lasted about 1 hour for most participants. The questions on religion and values took place toward the end of the interview. Follow-up questions were asked, when appropriate, to clarify their views. The interview questions that are the focus of this article were drawn from a previous study of U.S. emerging adults (Arnett, 2004; Arnett et al., 2001), except that the questions pertaining to confirmation were added for the present study. Tables 1 and 2 provide the verbatim interview questions. All interviews were conducted in Danish by the first author, a fluent Danish speaker.

*Data coding and analysis.* The interviews were transcribed in Danish and coded by the authors, both of whom are fluent in Danish and English. The

questions relevant to religious beliefs were then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The two authors constructed the coding scheme together based on an initial review of the transcripts to identify themes. Then each author independently coded all the interview responses for the presence of the themes. Agreement between the authors ranged from 86% to 100% across questions. Divergences in coding were resolved by discussion. The responses for the questions regarding moral views were coded with a separate coding system that will be described when those results are presented.

Our use of thematic analysis differed in some ways from the process laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006). In particular, we did not develop a thematic map, as we found this to be unnecessary for our data. Also, our presentation of the results is more quantitative than is typical for thematic analysis. We believed it would be more helpful to readers to know the specific proportions of participants who had articulated a theme rather than simply referring to “many” or “a few.” However, to be clear, we present the data in this way as a guide to general patterns of responses, not as a presumption or claim of quantitative precision. In our view, the value of the data we present is not in precise patterns of frequencies but in general patterns of themes, and in the presentation of how participants talked about religious and moral questions. This is in keeping with the goals of thematic analysis, and in general we followed the steps of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in transcribing, coding, and analyzing the themes.

## **Results**

For each interview question, the frequencies of responses will be presented, followed by excerpts from the interviews. A summary of response frequencies is presented in Tables 1 and 2. For each theme we present and analyze qualitative examples, in order to explore the themes using participants’ own language, to provide additional depth. In reporting the results, pseudonyms were used for all participants to protect confidentiality.

### ***Unreligious Families, Yet Confirmation Persists***

Most of the emerging adults (72%) answered the question “Were you brought up to believe any particular set of religious beliefs, or did your parents more or less leave it up to you?” by stating that their parents provided little in the way of religious training (Table 1). For some, religion was simply irrelevant to family life. Gitte (age 23) recalled, “I wasn’t raised in any religion. I never thought about it, and it was never talked about in my family.” Gitte’s family

**Table 1.** Beliefs on Religious Questions.

Were you brought up to believe any particular set of religious beliefs, or did your parents more or less leave it up to you?	
Parents left it up to me	13 (72%)
Brought up with religious beliefs	5 (28%)
Did you go through confirmation?	
Yes	14 (78%)
No	4 (22%)
Was it just something you did or did it have a definite meaning? (If yes for confirmation)	
Just something I did	12 (86%)
It had a definite meaning	2 (14%)
What are your religious or spiritual beliefs now, if any?	
None	7 (41%)
Atheist	3 (24%)
Agnostic	2 (12%)
Deist	4 (24%)
What do you think happens when we die?	
Something	9 (50%)
Nothing	5 (28%)
Don't know	2 (11%)
Reincarnation	1 (6%)
Heaven or hell	1 (6%)

went to church on Christmas Eve, because “that’s just the tradition,” but it had no religious meaning for her.

However, for others, their parents mostly brought them up *not* to believe religion. That is, it was not just that the parents did not provide religious training, but that their parents taught them to regard religion critically. “I certainly was not brought up to believe a particular set of beliefs” said Dorte (age 20).

It would be more accurate to say that I had been brought up not to be religious. My dad didn’t care at all. My mom’s view was that it’s mainly people who have problems who become religious. So, I developed a skeptical view of religion.

Although relatively few had experienced religious training within the family, most (78%) had gone through confirmation in their teens (Table 1). In the confirmation process, which usually takes place at age 14, adolescents meet regularly with a minister and learn about the history and content of the Lutheran religion. Nevertheless, in the present study most emerging adults who had gone

through confirmation did not see it as having religious meaning (12 of 14). "I just did it because everyone else was doing it," recalled Mark (age 27). Marianne (age 20) went through confirmation because "It's just a tradition. There wasn't any question about it. It would have been strange if I didn't." At the conclusion of confirmation the family holds a party in the young person's honor, with gifts, and this prospect was part of the appeal. "To be honest," admitted Annette (age 20), "I went through confirmation mostly for the gifts."

Some indicated that they now felt that age 14 was too young for confirmation to have been a reasoned, thoughtful choice. "It's way too early, if you want it to have a real religious meaning," stated Karl (age 25). "Most people do it more out of tradition than because they've now reached a deeper understanding." Marlene (age 23) reflected,

I think you should be a lot older before you make that decision, at least 16 or 17. In gymnasium, you learn for the first time how many people [Christians] have pushed around in the world, and if I had known that, I never would have said yes. You don't know what you're doing [at age 14]. It's just what you do in Denmark. It's tradition.

### *Unbelief Is the Norm*

Consistent with the lack of religious training experienced by most Danish emerging adults during childhood, few of them currently have any definite religious beliefs (Table 1), as indicated in their responses to the question, "What are your religious or spiritual beliefs now, if any?" The majority (77%) described themselves as either agnostic, atheist, or as having no religious beliefs, as shown in Table 1. Four were classified as deists, indicating a general belief in God or another supernatural power. None of the 18 participants held a traditional Christian faith.

Among the 77% who were nonbelievers (agnostic, atheist, or no beliefs), some answered the question about their current beliefs with simple conciseness, as Mark (age 27) did: "I don't have any. None at all." Marlene (age 21) responded similarly, and added a declaration of individualism: "I don't believe any of that. I believe in myself." Other nonbelievers were less adamant, and regarded religious questions as so large and complex as to be unanswerable and almost overwhelming. Some used the phrase "There's more between heaven and earth,"—a phrase imported from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—to imply this view. For example, Marie (age 18) stated "I don't have any [religious beliefs]," then added, "I talk with my friends quite a bit about how there's more between heaven and earth [*der er mere mellem himmelen og jorden*], because there are a lot of things that can't be explained."

Those who were nonbelievers were usually not anti-religious. Rather, they viewed religious people with compassion, and viewed religious faith as an expression of vulnerability and a palliative for psychological pain. As Asta (age 27) said, “Some people just need to believe. They have a sadness, or questions that they can’t figure out, so they seek something that will answer their questions.” Morten (age 21) had likewise concluded, “When people have a lousy life, then they need something to believe in.”

Previous research has reported that the majority of Danish adults respond “yes” when asked whether or not they are Christian (ISSP Research Group, 2012; Zuckerman, 2008). However, the interview responses in the present study show just how misleading this self-designation can be. For example, Annette (age 27), asked about her current religious or spiritual beliefs, replied “I don’t have any. If I had to say something, I’d say ‘Christian,’ but I don’t really believe what’s in the Bible.” Similarly, Jacob (age 24) replied, “I’m Protestant on paper, but I don’t believe in God.” Dorte (age 20) stated early in the interview, “My parents are Christians, and I am, too.” But later, asked about her current religious or spiritual beliefs, she replied,

I don’t have any. When I was 15 or 16, I thought a lot about religious questions, and tried to decide if I was a Christian. But I read what was in the Bible, and I knew I definitely couldn’t go in for it. In my opinion, there’s no established religion that’s worse.

Four participants were classified as deists, meaning that they expressed a general belief in God or a supernatural power. For example, Henrik (age 26) said, “I believe in God, but not as an old white-bearded man who sits up in the sky.” Benazir (age 20) was raised in the Muslim faith by her immigrant parents, and learned to pray 5 times a day and keep the fast during Ramadan, but she now says, “I wouldn’t say I have a definite religion. I believe in something, but what it is, I don’t know.” Morten (age 25) was also indefinite. “I believe in something, one thing or another. I believe in God, but I’m not entirely sure about it.”

Even those few who received religious training in childhood rarely continued to practice or believe in emerging adulthood. Marie (age 18) recalled, “My father is Catholic, so we often went to church and did all those things, and I had to pray before I went to bed and before I ate. But I don’t believe in God.”

### *Widespread Afterlife Beliefs*

Although none of the participants believed in a traditional faith, and only four were classified as deists, the majority believed in some form of an afterlife (Table 1). Half (nine) held a general belief in an afterlife existence, although

they were vague about the form it might take. In addition, one participant believed in reincarnation, and one believed in both heaven and hell. Only five flatly stated that death is simply the end, and there is no further existence. Two said they did not know.

Most of the five participants who believed death is the end gave short and unambiguous responses to the question, "What do you think happens when we die?" For example, Jesper (age 24) responded, "It's just the end. You disappear, and that's that." Annette (age 20) similarly responded, "I think it's just over." However, the rest of the Danish emerging adults gave more complex, tentative, and nuanced answers to the question. Not having a standard, widely held cultural response to the question, yet not wanting to believe that death is the end of existence, they struggled with what to believe.

To some of the nine with a vague afterlife belief, it seemed illogical that death should be the end of existence. "I find it difficult to accept that it's just over and done [when you die]," said Ole (age 20). "I can't imagine that." For others, it was emotionally unpalatable to believe that there is no life after death. Marianne (age 20) stated, "I've chosen to believe in something [after death], because I can't tolerate the idea that if someone in your family dies, there's nothing more." Several young Danes in this category stated a belief in a "soul" (*sjæl*) that goes on in some form. According to Marie (age 18), "our soul can't just disappear. It lives on, in one place or another, but I don't know how." Jacob (age 24) believed that "there's another side the soul goes to. It's not heaven or hell, it's just a place." The phrase "There's more between heaven and earth" came up in response to this question, too, again to imply that the question involved is daunting and difficult to answer. For example, Henrik (age 26) said he believed there is a soul that exists after death, but added, "I'm not sure what I believe, but there's more between heaven and earth. Just because we can't prove something doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

The one person who believed in reincarnation also indicated that her belief was premised on a reluctance to believe that death means extinction. "I could imagine that we're reincarnated, maybe because I don't want to admit that death is just the end," said Marlene (age 21). "Because I have to believe that we go on in some way. It can't just be finished [when we die]. I don't think so." Even some of those who stated that death is the end seemed to wish to leave the door open to something more. Dorte (age 20) first stated, "I think when you die, you're just dead," but then added, "It would be nice to think that we all go to heaven."

The one person who believed in heaven and hell was Benazir (age 20), who had been raised in the Muslim faith by her immigrant parents. "If you've been good, you go to heaven, and if not, you go the other way." Earlier she had stated that she no longer believed in Islam, and here, asked if her afterlife

**Table 2.** Use of the Three Ethics.

When you get toward the end of your life, what would you like to be able to say about your life, looking back on it?	
Autonomy	16 (94%)
Community	7 (41%)
Divinity	0
What values or beliefs do you think are the most important to pass on to the next generation?	
Autonomy	12 (71%)
Community	15 (83%)
Divinity	0

beliefs were derived from her Muslim religious background, she stated, “No, definitely not. It’s just what I believe, what I’ve always believed.”

### *Moral Values: Autonomy and Community, But No Divinity*

The two questions about values and beliefs (Table 2) were coded in terms of the three Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity, as in previous research using these questions (Arnett, 2015; Arnett et al., 2001; Padilla-Walker & Jensen, 2015; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2015). The questions did not ask specifically about religion but were viewed as potentially eliciting evidence of the role (or lack thereof) of religion in Danish emerging adults’ worldviews. It has been proposed that as a consequence of secularization in Denmark, religious beliefs have little to do with people’s values and moral decisions (Lüchau, 2014). In response to the two questions in the present study, any mention of texts, beliefs, or practices pertaining to religion, spirituality, or the divine (in any shape or form) would be coded within the Ethic of Divinity.

The two authors coded responses to these questions based on the standard manual for coding oral and written moral reasoning for the three ethics (Jensen, 2004). All responses were coded independently by each author. For both questions, each of the three ethics was coded as present or not present. That is, a response could be coded as containing one of the ethics, two ethics, or all three ethics. Agreement was 94% for each of the two questions (17 of 18). Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Frequencies of coded responses for each of the questions pertaining to moral views are shown in Table 2. In response to the first question, “*When you get toward the end of your life, what would you like to be able to say about your life, looking back on it?*” the Ethic of Autonomy was used in 94%

of responses, and the Ethic of Community in 41%. The Ethic of Divinity was not used by any participant.

Ethic of Autonomy responses focused on their individual goals. For example, Annette (age 20) responded, "That I had a good life, that I achieved what I wanted, and that I don't have much to regret." Ethic of Community responses usually focused on close relationships, especially family. Jesper (age 24) stated, "I would like to say that my influence on my friends and family had been more positive than negative." Often, the Ethics of Autonomy and Community were both present in their responses, as for Morten (age 25), who answered, "That I've done as much as possible, and I'm satisfied with it. If I have children, that they have a good life and are contented."

Responses for the question "*What values or beliefs do you think are the most important to pass on to the next generation?*" indicated a balance between Autonomy (71%) and Community (83%). Once again, there were no responses reflecting an Ethic of Divinity.

Ethic of Autonomy responses reflected individualistic values. For example, Lukas (age 24) responded, "Think for yourself, and live your own life. Fight for what you believe in." Ethic of Community responses often focused on close relationships, but sometimes mentioned people in general, or the environment. To Jacob (age 24), the most important value to pass on was "love for others" (*næstekærligheden*). Some stated their Ethic of Community values in opposition to Ethic of Autonomy values, such as Mark (age 27), who said, "Don't just take care of yourself and not care about other people." However, the majority of participants included both the Ethic of Autonomy and the Ethic of Community in their response. For example, Asta (age 27) responded succinctly, "Respect yourself, respect others, and respect life."

## Discussion

The Danish emerging adults in the present study were notably nonreligious. This finding has been reported previously for Danish adults of diverse ages, but the qualitative results of the present study add further depth and nuance. Although previous research claimed that most Danes identify themselves as "Christian" (ISSP Research Group, 2012; Zuckerman, 2008), the findings of the present study strongly suggest that this may have limited meaning, as one can self-identify as "Christian" and also reject the content of the Bible and regard Christian faith, practices, and history with indifference, skepticism, or even hostility. The majority of young Danes in the present study were actually "Nones," who ascribed to no religious doctrine and were classified as atheists, agnostics, or as having no religious beliefs.



Nevertheless, the findings here indicate that there remains a resilient “cultural religion” in Denmark (Zuckerman, 2008), in that most young people still go through confirmation at age 14 and the state-sponsored Lutheran church is still the setting for major rituals such as Christmas Eve services. Participants often spoke of the “tradition” of religion in Denmark to explain the persistence of these practices even though few Danes ascribe to the beliefs that originally gave rise to them.

It may be that the findings presented here, indicating even less religiosity among Danes than in previous studies, are due in part to the focus on emerging adulthood (ages 18-27 in this sample). Secularization has taken place at a rapid rate since 1960, not just in Denmark but all across Europe (Casanova, 2006). Consequently, young Danes have grown up in a substantially less religious cultural environment than older Danes did. In the United States as well, there is an inverse linear relationship between age and religiosity: the younger people are, the less likely they are to attend religious services, to state that religion is an important part of their lives, or to state a religious affiliation (Arnett, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2012; C. Smith & Snell, 2010). Within Denmark and other European countries, research comparing age groups could be helpful to illuminate patterns of difference and similarity between cohorts.

Although none of the 18 participants in the present study believed the traditional tenets of a Christian faith, over half of them believed in some type of afterlife. Only one believed in heaven and hell, but many others stated a belief in some kind of afterlife existence. In some cases, afterlife beliefs were stated in frank admission that the prospect of no existence at all after death was too repellent to be accepted. In other cases, it simply made sense to them that existence would continue in some form, although they were vague on what form it might take. A common phrase in Denmark, “there’s more between heaven and earth,” used by some participants in this study, implies that human knowledge is limited and there is much that we do not and cannot know. No one in the present study stated an emphatic belief in an afterlife, but over half were willing to leave the door open to that possibility.

Although “cultural religion” still occupies an important place in Danish society, it is in the background rather than the foreground of young Dane’s worldviews. This is indicated in the results of the present study regarding moral views. Not one of the 18 participants in the present study gave an Ethic of Divinity response to either of the questions tapping moral views. This is in contrast to a study of U.S. emerging adults, which, using the same two questions as in the present study, found that the Ethic of Divinity was used in 21% of responses to the question about values and beliefs that are most important to pass on to the next generation (Arnett et al., 2001). For U.S. emerging adults, religion may not be the “first language” of their moral lives (Bellah, Madsen,

Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), but for many of them it is one of the languages in their moral repertoire. However, for young Danes, it does not appear to be one of the moral languages they rely on. Rather, they balance the Ethic of Autonomy and the Ethic of Community in their moral worldviews.

### *Religion and Societal Conditions*

There are many theorists on religion who have asserted that religion is an indelible part of human nature. Robert Bellah (1970) claimed the religion is “part of the species life of man.” Philosopher Charles Taylor (1989, 2007) has argued that without religion, morality is undermined and worldviews become existentially impoverished.

However, these assertions are difficult to reconcile with the modern societies of northern Europe, which are the least religious as well as the most affluent, humane, and contented societies in the world. As the findings of the present study illustrate, religion is not part of the daily lives or worldviews of most Danes, yet they are not distressed by the absence of it and, rather than being existentially impoverished, they are notably thoughtful on existential questions such as what happens after we die.

The absence of religion in the worldviews of today’s emerging adults in Denmark is explainable partly on the basis of their society’s affluence and stability. Cross-national studies have found that, although within many countries religiosity is associated with well-being, the countries that are the most prosperous and well-functioning also tend to be the least religious. Religiosity is associated with well-being within countries where inequality and instability are high, and difficult conditions such as hunger and low life expectancy are prevalent (Diener et al., 2011). However, this association is not found in the countries that have the best conditions for life, such as access to education, political stability, and low crime rates (Snoep, 2008). These findings are consistent with the views of some of the young Danes in the present study, that religious beliefs tend to be most important for people who need such beliefs in order to make sense of their distress.

Yet even for the young Danes in the present study, who have had all the advantages of coming of age in a remarkably well-functioning society, the majority believed in some kind of life after death. Although none of them framed their afterlife beliefs in traditional religious terms, most believed that some kind of individual existence continues beyond the present life. People may be able to live quite happily without religion, in a society where the conditions for life are good, but many of them nevertheless seek to construct some alternative to the daunting finality of death. Aware that one day they will die, they often find this fact uncomfortable and seek some way out of it or beyond it.

## *Limitations and Future Directions*

There were a number of important limitations in the present study. The sample size was relatively small, 18 participants, due to the limited time frame for data collection and to the goal of going in-depth on religion, morality, and other topics in the structured interviews. Also, participants were obtained in one medium-sized Danish city, and it is possible that views would vary in more rural or more urban settings. The present study was limited to 18- to 27-year-olds, and one goal for future research should be to conduct interviews with a wider age range of participants, to examine the intriguing questions of age and cohort differences due to secularization in recent decades. Also, the present study used questions that indirectly addressed moral views, so future research on moral views in Denmark and other countries in northern Europe could expand knowledge in this area by examining moral views more directly, with questions about specific private and public moral issues (see Jensen, 2011, 2015; Jensen & McKenzie, in press).

## **Conclusion**

The present study provides evidence of the beliefs of emerging adults in Denmark regarding religious and moral questions. Like previous studies, the present study found that Danes are mostly nonreligious, even as they maintain some aspects of “cultural religion” for occasional participation in collective rituals. However, the present study illustrates the complexity of young Danes’ religious beliefs, for example, that they may call themselves “Christian” even though their beliefs exclude or reject the main tenets of Christianity, and that they hold a range of afterlife beliefs, even if these beliefs do not take a conventional form. Although the present study had limitations, in that it involved a small sample of persons aged 18 to 27, it suggests that it may prove fruitful to investigate further the possibility of age and cohort differences regarding religious beliefs, in Denmark and other countries. It also indicates that small qualitative studies are an important complement to large-scale survey research, in that qualitative studies may reveal intriguing depths and contradictions that are not apparent in responses to survey questions and that help to illuminate people’s religious and moral worldviews.

## **Acknowledgment**

The first author would like to thank the Fulbright Scholars program, which provided funding for his residence in Denmark during the study period.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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