

## PROTOCOL FOR GATHERING INFORMATION ON CONCEPTIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE

September 12, 2007

This protocol is designed to gather information on conceptions of the afterlife around the world and throughout history. By gathering the same information for many specific conceptions of the afterlife, we hope to create a database that can be used to test hypotheses. The data can be examined from any theoretical perspective. Our own perspective is evolutionary theory, which informs the particular questions that we ask, but knowledge of evolutionary theory is not required for you to provide the information.

You are asked to provide information about a particular religious, cultural, or philosophical system (hereafter referred to as “the system”), the conception(s) of the afterlife associated with the system, and the circumstances that caused some conceptions of the afterlife to become prevalent, compared to alternative conceptions. Your answers will become the starting point for scholarly inquiry that can be built upon by others, facilitated by our website (<http://evolution.binghamton.edu/religion/>). Your answers can be as long as you like and should include supporting references, as for any scholarly publication. Please contact the project directors if you need clarification or have suggestions for improving the protocol.

David Sloan Wilson [dwilson@binghamton.edu](mailto:dwilson@binghamton.edu)

William Scott Green [wgreen@miami.edu](mailto:wgreen@miami.edu)

- 1) What is the particular system that you are describing? It is important to be as specific as possible about a time period and geographical location. Please consult with the project directors to make sure that your system is appropriately defined for this project.
- 2) Describe the history of the system. How did it originate? What are the other system(s) from which it was derived? If possible, draw a diagram of historical relationships similar to a phylogenetic tree, in which your system is a “species” derived from ancestral “species.”
- 3) Most systems exist in a surrounding environment—a physical environment, an economic environment, and a sociopolitical environment that includes factions within the system in addition to other groups of people employing other systems of thought. Describe the most relevant features of the “environment” for your system.
- 4) What is the conception of the afterlife associated with your system? Where is this conception articulated? If in texts, please describe the literary context in which it appears. If in oral tradition or traditional practices, please describe them. Please provide as much detail as possible, including important differences in conceptions of the afterlife within the system.

5) How does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system differ from other conceptions present in the same environment? Why did it become prevalent in your system, compared to the other available conceptions?

6) Did the conception of the afterlife associated with your system change over time or remain static? If it changed, please describe how and why in as much detail as possible.

7) Many cultural, religious, and philosophical systems mandate, promote, or enable specific human behaviors and practices. For example, they might define group membership, motivate acceptable behavior, punish deviant behavior, or govern conduct toward other groups. To what extent can your system be described in these terms?

8) *If* your system plays an important role in organizing, shaping, and guiding behavior (as outlined in 7), what role (if any) does the conception of the afterlife play? In other words, how (if at all) is this particular conception of the afterlife likely to translate into behavior? Please be as specific as possible.

9) Some beliefs and practices appear to cause the group to function well as a unit, such as by fostering solidarity, cooperation, and behaviors considered moral by members of the group. Does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system appear to function in this way? Please be sure to distinguish between *within-group* interactions and *between-group* interactions. For example, it is possible for a belief to foster moral conduct *within* a given group, without extending the benefits to other groups.

10) Some beliefs and practices appear to help individuals thrive in their own lives, apart from cooperating with others or functioning as a member of a group. They would be categorized as individually advantageous without harming others. Does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system appear to function in this way?

11) Some beliefs and practices may benefit some members of the group (such as the elites) *at the expense of other members of the same group*. They would be categorized as unfair and exploitative within the group, often involving elements of deception or coercion. Does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system appear to function in this way?

12) Some beliefs and practices appear primarily to perpetuate themselves without benefiting either individuals or groups—in the same way as appealing messages trick people into perpetuating a computer virus. Does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system fit this description of a self-perpetuating “cultural parasite?”

13) Some beliefs and practices do not appear to benefit individuals or groups in the present, but had demonstrable benefits in the recent or distant past. Their existence in the present is a *historical holdover*. Does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system fit this description?

14) Some beliefs and practices are not beneficial by themselves but exist as *byproducts* of other useful beliefs. An example from architecture is a spandrel, which is the triangular space created when two arches are placed next to each other. Arches have a purpose but spandrels do not. They are byproducts of arches, although they can acquire a secondary function, such as a decorative space. Does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system fit this description?

15) Some beliefs and practices become common *purely by chance*. An example from language is the formation of arbitrary dialects when people are isolated into separate populations. To what extent does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system appear arbitrary, as if it could be replaced by many other equivalent conceptions?

16) Any belief that persists through time must be transmitted from one individual to another. Please describe how the conception in the afterlife associated with your system is transmitted. When during the life cycle is the belief typically acquired? Is there an organized instruction process or is learning more spontaneous? Are different beliefs tolerated or suppressed?

17) To what extent are myth, folklore, and ritual practices associated with beliefs in the afterlife? Please provide as much detail as possible about these transmission processes (e.g., public vs. private, who is involved, and so on).

18) Please focus on how the conception of the afterlife associated with your system was likely to appear to *children* within the system. Would it be easy for a child to grasp or would it require more mature cognitive abilities and cultural knowledge?

19) Beliefs persist through time in part by being memorable. One way for a belief to be memorable is by seeming compellingly reasonable, like a good scientific theory. Another way is by departing from normal experience, like a fantasy novel. How does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system become memorable? Please suggest other ways in addition to the two that we have outlined.

20) Beliefs can influence behaviors by arousing either negative emotions (e.g., fear of hell) or positive emotions (e.g., the reward of heaven). To what extent does the conception of the afterlife associated with your system arouse negative vs positive emotions?

21) Beliefs can motivate behaviors by arousing emotions or by appealing to rational arguments. To what extent is the conception of the afterlife associated with your system emotionally or cognitively based?

22) References. Please provide key references to this system in addition to the specific references that you cited in sections of this essay. Your essay and the references will provide the starting point for other scholars who want to contribute information and their own interpretation of this system.