Much of the reigning research on non-religion and non-belief focuses on demographics and personality characteristics. While this is a necessary foundation on which future research may be built upon, such data does not necessarily produce theory. In many ways the dominant cultural milieu of religions along with the benign intent of some researchers force a person who holds no belief in a God to assume an oppositional identity in relation to religion. This oppositional identity tautologically sets researchers up to continually define its object by the absence of something. This something cannot always function as a normative point of reference in which to tell researchers what to look for. This article provides one such normative trajectory, termed “horizontal transcendence.”

1. Introduction

A recent article appeared in Time magazine titled “Why There Are No Atheists at the Grand Canyon” by Jeffery Kluger (2013). While Kluger certainly did not mean that atheists would not visit there, his assertion suggested that if an atheist were to visit this awe inspiring geological location, the view would move them to believe. Kluger paints a picture that denies all humans the right to not “be religious” arguing that there exists some sort of inherently religious affective state that no human can escape in the face of awe and wonder elicited from the beauty present in nature.

However, most scholars and researchers have been unable to identify such a thing as a primordial sui generis religious emotion or feeling with the possible exception of mystical experience (James 1985; Barnard, 1997; Berger and Luckmann 1991; McCutcheon 1997; Vergote 1997; Boyer 2001; Taves 2009; Belzen 2010; Paloutzian and Park 2013). Kluger claims his statements are supported by recent research from Valdesolo and Graham (2013) who apply a solely religio-spiritual framework in their research, thus receiving a solely religio-spiritual result. Interestingly, the researchers’ published article is
entirely void of any reference to the “religious feelings” Kluger claims that the researchers were “looking at” (2013). Furthermore, he goes on to state that Valdesolo and Graham’s work “confirms” the “awe-equals-religion equation.” Valdesolo and Graham conducted experiments where awe was elicited as part of the study design. The authors suggest that experiences of awe provide motivation to make sense of the world around us. Valdesolo and Graham imply that such sources of meaning may lead to a belief in the supernatural. While the data certainly provides an indication that experiences of awe occur for many different types of people, the data only speaks to those experiences. Certainly anything else is a statement of causation, which cannot be inferred from their work (Lakatos 1980).

We cite this research as only one example of what we might be able to call, to use Lakatos’ term, a “research programme” (1980, 47) for the investigation of people we might term as non-believers in a God or gods. Current research on non-believers in a God seems to consist of mainly demographical information and psychological personality characteristics of atheists who join groups. This is a welcome start, however, directions as to how to proceed past this point remain unclear or undefined as some of these studies infer nominal description while others – like the one noted above – can lead to the inference of false causations unsupported by the research design or data.

This paper acknowledges that the notion of horizontal and vertical transcendence (HVT) (c.f. Streib and Hood 2013) provides a promising research programme with which to advance research into non-believers that will extend past their non-relationship and difference at times to “religion” and or “belief.” Streib and Hood conceive of such transcendences as going beyond the mundane and everyday, however occurring in the “life-world” (140) thereby making them accessible to the believer and non-believer alike. However, they see the vertical transcendence as explicitly religious and state that horizontal transcendence (HT) might be a “variant of religion” which they term as “implicit religion” occupied by those who hold no belief in a God (142). They go on to write that the ‘implicit’ is considered a derivative of the ‘explicit’.

Contra Streib and Hood, we see no reason religion should provide normative claims as to what it means to not believe in a God. Maintaining the focus on Streib and Hood’s horizontal axis, we depart from their underlying assumption of horizontal transcendence as implicit religion. This paper seeks to provide a broad overview of the current field of research involving/focused on non-believers in God and to suggest that we move away from the term “non-believers” — at times — and towards the term “horizontally transcendent” when referring to or describing this population. But what is horizontal transcendence and can people who lack a belief in a God transcend anything?

2. Researching Non-Believers: An Overview

Inquiries and academic research into non-belief and secularity has been a relatively recent phenomenon (Streib and Klein 2013). Often such research endeavors stem from a cacophony of methodologies and frameworks that have been established for research into the religious and believing human (Hood et al. 2009). Still others simply conduct research with no theoretical framework whatsoever thus leaving us heavy on numbers and light on
Focusing on Horizontal Transcendence: Much More than a “Non-Belief”

theory (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Research frameworks and theory in the study of atheism and non-belief are lacking. Furthermore, as Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009, 482) point out we “must demand good theory as a prerequisite for the collection of meaningful data.”

Debates into how to define the object of one’s study (i.e. non-belief, non-religion, atheism, secularity horizontal transcendence) have only begun and no doubt should continue less the social sciences risk prematurely agreeing on how to approach a subject that is just seconds ex-utero. For instance Lee (2012) has argued for defining our object of inquiry based off of belief and religion therefor allowing religion to determine whatever is to be considered “non-religion” or “non-belief” while Coleman, Silver, Durham and Hood (under review) have argued for new terminologies and a lexicon independent of, and thus indifferent to “religion” or “belief.” As researchers we must recognize that we do not merely research “who someone is not” – we research who they are. Who they are can be as much of the counter cultural contrast as it can be a nominally dominant variable within research. For example, not being interested in soccer is not interesting unless the overall population embraces soccer as a social or cultural identity. Only then is the identity or lack of interest in soccer interestingly important to social research. Variation of the social norm can then prompt further research within diffusion of change and innovation of new ideas (Rogers 2010). We have to at least offer a way out, another possibility, another option that can be ticked on a survey that does not involve identifying as what you are not. Thus, we insist on descriptive definitions (i.e. ones that have content) and terminologies as a more accurate reflection of our actual object of inquiry.

Beliefs, feelings, emotions, meanings, values, importance and the varying intensities of such things function along a continuum that is likely shared by the human race as a whole involving individual difference variables. Problems in the allocation of such ethereal concepts can enter in the realm of such contentious, politically and morally charged subjects as religion and other special things (i.e. non-belief, Humanism, horizontal transcendence, atheism, types of Buddhism and many more) when researchers assert that one group bears a greater claim to these things than another group (typically a minority group). Taking into context such arguments, as foci of the social scientific study of religion and non-religion seems much more of a debate about names, terminologies and the right for one group to possess them vs. another (Shook 2012). Thus the timing seems right (i.e. research into religiosity and religion is increasing as well as the acceleration of research into atheism) to introduce and advance a humanistic approach that remains methodologically agnostic and allows for the comparison of “like things” (i.e. both believers and non-believers have things of ultimate value and exceptionally profound experiences present in their lives).

In many ways, our secular reality seems clear (Bruce 2011; Chaves, 1989, 1993,1994; Coleman, 2013). Some theologians are beginning to label secularization as “unstoppable” (Oviedo, 2012). However, religion persists (Luckmann 1990; Pratt 2013) although perhaps not to the degree argued by Pratt (2013) and others. Some scholars even warn of the “will to religion” (Beaman 2013) arguing that some academics are indeed attempting to paint man as homo-religious. Still some scholars, in what might be considered the most atheistic of all sciences (cognitive/evolutionary), argue for the
naturalness of religion and against the affordance of a non-belief in a God as a naturally occurring cognitive phenomena (e.g. Barrett 2010; Barrett and Lanman 2008; Bering 2010, 2012). Yet others, seeking to slow down such premature theoretical cognitivist chauvinism (McCutcheon 2010; Caldwell-Harris 2012; Shook 2012; Hood 2012; Johnson 2012) find such assertions to be hasty to say the least.

Mustn’t we recognize the contentious nature and implications of playing such a Wittgensteinian language game with loaded theological terms/concepts such as religion and belief? Is language not a social construct in its entirety and nothing more than, as Berger and Luckmann write, “a facticity external to myself and it is coercive in its effect on me ... language forces me into its patterns” (1991, 53)? Indeed, we as researchers appear as helpless victims to our current language constrictions/barriers. Hood begins his 2000 article by stating “Americans pioneered the psychology of religion and have always defined the nature of the field” (531), referring to the hegemonic dominance of American quantitative research methodologies. This statement can be extended to the newly formed research area of non-belief. If there are problems with traditional methods and frameworks dominating research on religion, what kinds of problems can we expect when these frameworks are extended or applied to atheists, non-believers, freethinkers and agnostics?

Further methodological misplacements may enter the reification of the public domain often times as the pro-social effects of “religion” (for a critical review see Galen 2012). Important to remember is that the majority of the studies done on religion have made no comparison to a category of similar or equal content. In other words, when researchers compare “religion” to that which it is not, no comparison has been made. How does one compare “something” (i.e. religion) to merely the absence of “something” (i.e. not religious)? For example, it makes little sense to compare the existence of, say, an apple with the absence of said apple. On one hand we have something that exists (the apple) while on the other hand we have non-existence (no apple). No comparison has ever truly been made when we compare something that is with something that we have determined is not. Comparisons are needed which is precisely why we need what Koenig calls “secular sources” (2012). This is imperative if we are ever to hold anything (secular or religious) as some type of source. That is, we cannot truly appreciate the scientific findings of researching religion/belief without appreciating the findings of researching non-religious/non-believers (Vergote 1997).

As Hood notes, we must demand good theory to guide the collection of meaningful data (Hood et. al 2009). Quite simply, theory is lacking in researching non-believers because theories for non-believers are based off of pre-existing religio-spiritual frameworks. There is nothing to guide the researcher within this form of research enterprise other than researching non-believers in order to learn more about believers, as some has suggested surely has its value (Vergote 1997). Others have called for research into non-believers in their own right (e.g. Hood et. al 2009; Silver 2013) and while this is certainly a welcome and foundational step, it does not get us very far. Researching non-belief for the sake of non-belief does not guide us in how to structure and implement data collection nor what data to collect, how to inform our interpretation of it. Is it fair to engage in research comparing a group of people who believe in ‘something’ that the other
groups of people in the study do not? The secular-non-believing human today is forced to juxtapose him or herself against something by identifying as an atheist or non-believer not only in everyday life, but in response to the calls of the very scientists/researchers that study them! Researchers will start to collect meaningful data about ‘non-believers’ when guiding theory and frameworks are created. This does not imply past research on demographics and psychological profiles has been meaningless, quite the opposite – however limit.

Researching non-belief for the sake of non-belief will slowly become obsolete in at least one of two ways. First, it will diminish implicitly as it is inevitable that a sizable body of literature will be created that has changed what it means to do research on non-belief, for better or worse. Second, it could (and should in our opinion) diminish quickly as we can formulate and play with different theories, frameworks, and methodologies that allow us to discover different things that are important for different reasons and to different people (Feyerabend 1975; Belzen 2010, 18). Studying non-belief as a phenomena in its own right can only sustain the field for so long. We need a way out.

3. A Way Out…

To offer up a ‘new theory’ or framework to anything, especially when human beliefs and experiences are involved, is to surely invite criticism (Guthrie 1993). However, it is surely welcomed in such an extremely young field as one tentatively titled as “non-religion” (Lee 2012) from a more sociological perspective and as ‘non-belief’ (Silver 2013) from a more psychological approach. It is refreshing to hear that researchers are now beginning to accept that “religion” does not form a stable set of beliefs, affects, meaning and values, thus it is quite simply a constructed category and not a primordial entity with a rigid identity in the world (c.f. McCutcheon 1997, 2007; Paloutzian and Park 2013; Taves 2009). In other words, researchers can identify an entirely new category if they wish, (something not religion, but ‘comparable’) as research into what is tentatively known as ‘non-belief or non-religion’ demands. Systematic categorization (i.e. including this but not that), is the underlying foundation of the sciences and of humans in general (Levi-Strauss 1966; Guthrie, 1993). Therefor let us create something new.

Throughout our research into non-belief, one of the most pressing problems we encountered when we asked if anyone had experiences that were profoundly meaningful but not accurately described in religious or spiritual terms was that there was a great reluctance to share such things less they be construed as religious or spiritual. As mentioned previously, this is likely part of the problem of taking terms and frameworks from the study of religion and applying them to the non-religious and/or non-believing populations. A small vignette from our ongoing work on non-believers in America exemplifies this point further:

I dislike the word “spiritual” as so many religious people use it to describe themselves. I think the term has too many religious connotations. However, there are certainly many awe-inspiring, moving experiences in life, and I might describe
my feeling towards nature as “spiritual,” were I in a solely atheist group who would not misunderstand my beliefs. – ‘Jenna’

It is important to note that Jenna is letting researchers know that their research participants are unlikely to express that which is most “awe-inspiring,” “moving,” and important if they know it might be misconstrued. Certainly just as some scholars warn of the “will to religion” (Beaman 2013), the non-believing public is all too weary of the “will to religion” as well. We need a category and dimension for such experiences to function that will not misconstrue ones worldview. In other words, whatever category or dimension is considered (i.e. horizontal transcendence as one option) it cannot be the very thing the individual declares it is not, like religion – even “implicit religion.”

3. What Horizontal Transcendence is not, Implicit Religion

As Streib and Hood push towards a reconceptualization of “the religious field” (2013) through the notion of horizontal and vertical transcendence, we find this approach extremely promising, however we differ in one key area. Thus we find it necessary to state what HT is not, before we explore what it is. As Streib and Hood use the term of “horizontal transcendence” to account for those who identify as non-religious or non-believing, so do we. However, they attempt to understand HT as “implicitly religious” whereas we do not. Furthermore, we put forth that such a label as “implicitly religious” is a direct violation of methodological agnosticism. Moreover, it approaches methodological theism.

Thanks to our colleagues at the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, who have provided their support to publish excerpts from a recent blog post rejecting such implicit labels authored by Coleman (2013) from their official blog, this provides the rationale for rejecting the inclusion of HT under any category such as “implicit religion.” The concept of ‘implicit atheism’ is developed briefly here as a means to critique ‘implicit religion’ by showing normative claims can be established using any term if the word “implicit” is placed before the term. If the category of religion can dictate the nature of something it is not (the absence of religion or belief in God), then perhaps atheism should be allowed to dictate what can count as “religion” or “belief.”

While the notion of ‘implicit religion’ is not something new to academia (e.g. Bailey 1983), it is an area that seems to be gaining momentum, with the first journal dedicated to its ‘study’ – Implicit Religion – established in the not too distant past. This ‘implicit’ concept has seeped into the psychology of religion field, and also risks reification from the cognitive study of religion field as well, albeit in the form of ‘implicit belief’ (e.g. Barrett and Lanman 2008; Bering 2010).

What is wrong with the concept of ‘implicit religion’? The relationship between IR and what we are now forced to term as ‘explicit religion’ is of a tyrannical hegemonic nature. The political power to socially construct (Berger and Luckmann 1966) a category or grouping that then allows the current discourse of whatever is deemed ‘religious’ to be extended to things that are not deemed as such by the individual is nothing more than a
power struggle which (similarly constructed) explicit religion always controls. Interestingly enough, this notion of IR, in various forms, seems to be favored by those in academia with theological degrees (e.g. Bailey 1983, 2010; Clay 2009; Francis and Robbins 2007; Streib and Hood 2013; Schnell 2003, 2013) however they should not be confused with theologians! We should be asking why we do not extend this ‘implicit concept’ to other areas of academic inquiry. For instance, where is our theory of implicit art or implicit sports (Belzen 2010, 59)? Moreover, why is sports psychology not taking the notion of “homo-athleticus” seriously? Perhaps the topic of implicit sports should take a closer look at the three-to-four feet free throw I make with a crumpled up piece of paper into my office trashcan? Would a researcher label my actions as ‘implicit basketball’? Moreover does it contribute to sports psychology? More than likely, however, it would only serve to confuse our idea of what an “athlete” is. The reason implicit concepts are not typically extended into other domains should be made clear. It seems that due to certain religious a priori’s (Belzen 2010, 93) or the idea that we are inherently religious (i.e. homo religious), some scholars feel it necessary to label humans in general as ‘religious’. This can lead to researchers claiming such things as cross dressing, playing sports, or our reverence and enthusiasm for selling Apple computers (just to name a few) are ‘religious’, albeit implicitly (cf. Schnell 2003).

If we want to know what someone “believes” or does not believe, we have to ask them. We should consider this the nature of ‘belief’. There is no such inherent thing as ‘religion in general’ or a ‘religious act’ or ‘religious emotion’ (Belzen 2010, 12-32), but only things deemed to be “religious” by the person carrying out the act and/or displaying the emotion (Taves 2009). If there is anything that could be considered an inherently religious act or emotion, we know that this act or emotion can be fulfilled in secular ways as well (Vergote 1997, 45; Paloutzian and Park 2013; cf. Hood 1975). If the notion of “religion” is not oriented around a belief in the transcendent, then it remains a paradox (i.e. the scientific endeavor can then be considered “religion”) (e.g. Geertz 1973, 90), as we as researchers end up not merely as scientists, but could be considered clergymen proselytizing our favorite scientific theory to the laity. As Vergote says, “The broadening of the object of psychology of religion is done for bad reasons and leads to absurdities” (1986, 68).

Approaching the issue of religious language from another direction, Berger and Luckmann state in The Social Construction of Knowledge that ‘I cannot use the rules of German syntax when I speak English’ (1966, 53). If we apply their idea to researching atheists and non-believers in God, you cannot use religious language (German syntax) with ‘religious baggage’ when you want to speak to, research, or describe non-believers and the non-religious (‘English speakers’) or as Vergote states, ‘religious terminology is deprived of clarity’ (1997, 15). All in all, perhaps we need a theory of ‘implicit atheism’ to function as a rhetorical device allowing non-believers to control the discourse on belief or non-belief. If the concept of implicit religion can be found ‘beneficial’ in any way to the social sciences, then so too can a concept of implicit atheism. Intuitively we would assume that atheists do not typically go to church and if you identify as ‘religious’ and don’t go to church, your behavior is atheistic, albeit implicitly so! See how this works,
implicit frameworks are a tyrannical hegemonic enterprise – explicitly so. Thus when addressing the notion of HT as ‘implicit religion’ it will be unlikely to serve future scientific investigation less it assume nothing more than the stance of a school yard bully.

Science has been unable to determine anything to be inherently sacred however, such things people refer to as “sacred” are likely a conglomerate of several things that, when combined in varying fashions, may be perceived as such (i.e. as sacred) (Paloutzian and Park 2013; Taves 2009). Moreover researchers have largely given up the search for actual things that might be labeled as inherently sacred (c.f. Taves 2009; Paloutzian and Park 2013). This is good news for non-believers as this quite literally implies – nothing is sacred – well at least nothing tangible. However, what might we be able to include in this horizontally transcendent category? What are some possible starting points? Are atheists more like the popular polemicists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, that many researchers (and the public) take their understanding of atheism or non-belief from (e.g. Geertz and Markússon, 2010; Johnson 2012)? Might non-believers and atheists have more in common with Carl Sagan than with Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris?

While religious studies scholars like Mircea Eliade (1959) and other perennialists’ of the homo-religious school deny the nonbelieving /nonreligious human being the wondrous, meaningful and awe-inspiring experiences they so closely associate with only the religious, the non-believing biologist Ursula Goodenough contributes to the reclamation of such wonder and meaning in her 1998 book titled *The Sacred Depths of Nature* which can easily be considered a rebuttal of sorts to both Eliadeians of the past and future. Although Goodenough considers her work in terms of what she calls “religious naturalism,” the concept of a God plays no part. Goodenough appears to have been more or less forced by the use of religious language (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 53) in expressing such profound experiences and thoughts than any suspicious intent to paint humans as religious in their nature. Even psychologist William James considered what to call his collection of experiences in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as, pragmatically speaking of course, a debate about names noting it was merely his personal choice to call such things “religion” (1985). Horizontal transcendence cannot be considered explicit religion, as it finds itself in a space occupied by primarily non-believers and the non-religious, it cannot be considered implicit religion lest it be seen as a sorts of “will to religion” (i.e. everyone is religious). Furthermore, James’ (although he chooses to call such things religion) allows us quite easily to choose what we might call our object of investigation. Putting aside what horizontal transcendence is not; it has much to offer social scientific investigation based on what it is!

A reconceptualization of the social scientific study of non-belief and religion as horizontal and vertical transcendence (HVT) has not only methodological and pragmatic benefits (as noted by Streib and Hood 2013), but it offers up a very humanistic approach in examining humans. Quite simply, HVT conceives of values, meanings, experiences and the intensity of such things to operate along a continuum that takes into account the individuals ontological positioning in the world. The very ground one stands on regarding a life outlook and the very presuppositions and metaphysics with which a person frames their world is of primary importance for research (Bruner 1986). HVT takes into account
both Belief and nonbelief recognizing the continuous nature of the religion and non-religion dialogue. It also takes into account that if we want to look at raw experience as William James did, we must acknowledge that this is a debate about names, so let's take this notion into account. We must recognize that this is a debate about names/labels (semantics) and take that into account as we proceed forward with research.

In keeping with good science HVT is not methodologically atheistic as many operate under such grounding (e.g. Berger 1967), HVT is methodologically agnostic (c.f. Porpora 2006; Hood 2012). It neither confirms nor denies the existence of what McCauley and Lawson term “culturally postulated super-human agents” (CPS) (2002). It does not discern between one label being more meaningful that the other. With HVT neither is presumed as more special, more important or more real than the other and as such, is an attempt to avoid what has been termed by some as “metaphysical chauvinism” (Beck and Miller 2001; Ladd and Borshuk 2013). HVT is a pluralistic framework that is best conceived not as relativism, but to use Berger and Luckmann’s term, (1966) “relationism.” In other words, HVT functions as a way to examine relations of things with other things based off of a person's belief in a CPS or lack thereof. Belief or non-belief is the starting point for all scientific inquires under this research programme. Perception creates reality, which to the large extent is socially constructed, so for psychological purposes at least, a modified version of the “Thomas theorem” (Merton 1995) should hold true – things, which are held to be true, will be acted upon as if they were true.

4. Horizontal Transcendence: Atheists are not Immune!

If you want to be awe inspired… than let me say, let me just tell you those of us who do not believe we are divinely created, let alone divinely supervised, are not immune to the idea of awe and beauty and the transcendent.

– Christopher Hitchens 2008

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the great many words spoken over the years by noted late atheist activist and anti-theist Christopher Hitchens, this succinct and powerful quote certainly transcends the typical hubristic remarks he is known for in a very awe inspiring way of its own. Another popular atheist activist/rights advocate and author Greta Christina (2007) writes:

To me, the idea that consciousness and emotion and experiences like ecstasy and joy are physical, biological phenomena – it doesn’t diminish these experiences. On the contrary. It makes them more amazing, more awe-inspiring. We are made up of essentially the same stuff as rocks and water and dirt and stars... and yet, out of this stuff, out of these atoms and molecules, we can be aware of ourselves, and of one another, and of the world around us. And we can shape that awareness, and create experiences that bring joy and delight to ourselves and one another. We can make vows to stick together for better or for worse... and we can dance for hours celebrating those vows, using our bones and nerves and muscles to generate connection and meaning, transcendence and joy.
What is most promising for researching such moments of awe-inspiring profundity is that these two popular examples aside, Silver and Coleman’s (2013; Silver 2013) research on the six types of non-belief have yielded data from participants that not only support, but also build on the above statements. In other words, these seem to be less of a ‘popular notion’ and perhaps such horizontal transcendence is widespread in those who don’t believe in God? Perhaps most interesting is Keltner and Haidt’s (2003, 300) remark, building off of Durkheim (1915) that “the elicitors of these social sentiments [awe and wonder] have to do with collective interests.” They go on to note that such collective sentiments often stem from collective values and goals.

Certainly, as noted by many others (e.g. Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Silver 2013), is that fact that non-believers in a God share a strong connection with, show strong support for and highly value science. The research conducted by Silver and Coleman (2013; Silver 2013) and the previous more popular examples from Hitchens and Christina show support for extremely analytical/scientific accounts in the recall and expression of such awe and wonder. Perhaps if believers use the language and framework of religion to relay such intense, moving and life changing experiences (Keltner and Haidt 2003) non-believers use the language and framework of science to relay theirs. Examples are published here for the very first time from Silver and Coleman’s (2013, Silver 2013) research when they asked participants if they believed whether or not there were experiences that were profound in this life but are not accurately described in the terms spiritual or religious:

The nature and scope of the Universe is something that I enjoy learning about and reflecting on to give me profound revelations which I find far more satisfying than religion ever was for me.

I am awestruck by the vastness of the universe and the beauty and elegance of nature, including those parts that are “violent,” such as how there are predators that kill and eat their prey.

Yes, I have cried tears of joy looking at clouds in the sky, watching an inspirational music video, or even listening to Carl Sagan talk about the universe.

There are profound moments when one realizes beauty or their own place/importance in the universe. I do not believe these are either spiritual or religious.

Certainly. The feeling you get when you are face to face with the wonders of nature or of humanity – on top of a mountain, or being the first person to see a particular galaxy of stars, or watching a rocket launch – or being in love – or deep intellectual experiences like understanding the gravitational field equations for the first time – there are plenty of profound experiences that come from our brain’s software being stretched in new ways, when you appreciate the complexity and majesty of the
world and of our own makeup. I don’t call them spiritual because I associate that
description with people who believe in a soul that is separate from the hardware it is
running on.

The human experience is subjective. We cannot observe the rim of the Grand
Canyon, or lock eyes with a wild animal, or even share a meal with a new friend
without experiencing a deeply sublime connection to this world and to each other.

Absolutely. Summiting a 14er, seeing an amazing western sunset over the Rockies,
skiing deep powder in trees on a bluebird day, getting engaged – all amazing, and
profound experiences that have made me the happiest I’ve ever been. It’s never
occurred to me that I should thank God/The Universe in those instances. I just feel
grateful, lucky, and happy.

Yes, realization of the vastness of the universe and individual place in it.

Yes. The experience of wonder at the incomprehensible beauty of nature and
complexity of science.

Yes. There are many experiences which are profound and made more so by the lack
of belief that they are intentionally god-created. Sharing love, creating children,
holding a loved-one’s hand as they die, watching things get incredibly green after a
heavy rain, eating a delicious, beautifully ripened pear from your own tree, walking
out into the sun on the first really warm day of spring... These experiences are every
bit as affecting without god(s).”

Music, art, birth of a child, visually striking nature scenes, moments of true
cohesiveness with other people, hugs, “I love you” from your children... Life is full
of beautiful moments that deeply stir the emotions.

Clearly, as Christopher Hitchens stated previously and these vignettes demonstrate,
non-believers are not immune to the transcendent feelings of awe and beauty. These brief
excerpts seem to support notions of Keltner and Haidt’s groundbreaking work theorizing
“awe” (2003), fitting such categories as awe extended to nature (e.g. mountains and the
Universe), awe extended to human art/artifact (e.g. music and art) and its extensions to
epiphanic experience (e.g. gravitational field equations and other scientific frameworks).
Such conceptualizations of awe fit snuggly into the idea of horizontal transcendence
defined by Coleman, Hood, and Silver (2013) as “the experiential dimension to human life
of interconnectedness that is profound, exceptional, and wondrous while requiring no
religious, spiritual, or theistic framework or narrative in which to force the structure of the
discourse.” Such a framework and definition is important as it serves to take an
individuals’ absence of a belief in a God or gods as an underlying assumption moving
research forward. That is, with horizontal transcendence, there is no “will to religion”
(Beaman, 2013), no “implicit belief” or “implicit religion” to be found. Moments of profundity, awe and beauty are accepted as phenomena that can be critically important objects of study without the need for religiously tinged language and terms or the need to provide an identity that states what you do not believe, as again, it is an underlying assumption that forms the very outlook from which the world is viewed.

5. Focusing on What is – Not What’s Not

What should be the focus of “non-belief” research? If we shift the focus from the one thing this population does not believe exists (God) we can explore a category that is filled with a great many wondrous things while valuing such an ontological stance as it forms the very discursive from within which the world is viewed. Experiences of horizontal transcendence and how they relate to, or differ from, those of vertical transcendence will allow the sciences to get away from negative juxtapositions against religion, even if some atheists may define themselves as such. Just as James chose to focus on “religious experience” perhaps it would serve academics well to focus on “horizontally transcendent” experiences.

If people who don’t believe in a God believe in so many other things, let’s lift the curse of forced identifications about what people do not believe in and start looking at what they do believe in and experience. Returning to Kluger’s article (2013) and Valdesolo and Graham’s research (2013), we strongly invite further conceptual and methodological sophistication to provide greater details into awe, moving beyond the nominal centrality of the religious variable. This is not only an academic problem, but a social problem as well. Maybe the awe elicited by Valdesolo and Graham’s research is less of a religious phenomena and more of a shared human experience that some interpret as ‘religious’, while others find such a religio-spiritual framework limiting and a false representation of their beliefs, or lack thereof? Focusing on horizontal transcendence provides a start at a new direction that moves the focus away from religio-spiritual variables and constitutes much more than a non-belief.

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NOTES

1. For direct access see http://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/publication/1856797.
2. For the text in its original form see http://blog.nsrn.net/.
3. Dr. Ralph W. Hood Jr. does not hold a degree in theology.
4. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6UU9C-WmvM&safe=active.

REFERENCES


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