

*Sonderdruck aus*

Herman Westerink (ed.)

# **Constructs of Meaning and Religious Transformation**

Current Issues in the Psychology of Religion

With 12 figures

V&R unipress

Vienna University Press

ISBN 978-3-8471-0099-7

ISBN 978-3-8470-0099-0 (E-Book)



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## **The Construction of Atheist Spirituality: A Survey-Based Study**

The aim of this chapter is to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of secular spirituality utilizing the European Value Survey as a data base. Contemporary atheist spirituality – defined *in brevis* here as non-deistic belief in the sacred or supernatural (cf. Schnell & Keenan, 2010) – is set within the light of salient historical precedents and the predominance of agency over structure in late modernity. Key components of atheist spirituality are identified. By relating them to a larger circle of beliefs, values and commitments, an evidential basis of the personal construction of atheist spirituality as a variety of contemporary personal identity and world-view is provided.

### **Late Modernity: The Shift from Structure to Agency**

Despite the general decline in the authority of the Christian church in the West, there is a perceptible flourishing in implicit and personalised religiosities (Bailey, 1997; Beck, 2008; Schnell, 2009). The “de-traditionalization” (cf. Giddens) of inherited patterns of belief proceeds together with individualization and differentiation of meaning systems (Bellah et al., 1996; Schnell, 2008a, 2011a). Unconfined by bonds and sanctions associated with dogmatic religious traditions, individuals are generating idiosyncratic meaning systems and validate them experientially (Schnell, 2008b, 2011b). This freedom of belief seems to have liberated a contemporary striving for *selftranscendence*. In terms reminiscent of Foucault, one might depict this profound cultural transition as an emancipatory movement out from under hegemonic religious regimes towards a new, unburdened and vital spirituality (cf. Heelas, 2008). Instead of following a predetermined traditional trajectory, decisions concerning religion are made by the individual (cf. Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Keenan, 1999). The authority for the meanings we make of our lives shifts from external constraints to internal resources, from the organized tradition to the privatized self, from the “church without” to the “God within”, as Barker (2004) puts it. Agency casts off structure

– at least its explicitly coercive expressions. Personal free choice spirituality trumps institutional church authority and, in consequence, a “given” shifts to a “task” (Bauman, 2000, p. 31). Not, *What creedal formularies and moral-theological prescriptions mark out my religion?*, but, *What set of personally meaningful commitments compose my spirituality?*, expresses readily this paradigm shift occurring in matters of meanings and beliefs in the late modern period.

Within this process, the conceptualization of “God” and “the sacred” is placed at the individual’s disposal. Your God is where your heart is (Luther); the sacred is what is ultimately meaningful to a person (Bailey, 2001; Schnell, 2009; Tillich, 1955). Reference to a transcendent reality is, thus, not necessarily a given within personal conceptualizations of selftranscendence. As a consequence, the somewhat paradoxical term of “atheist spirituality”, signifying a non-deistic or immanentist search for the sacred, becomes an intelligible manifestation of developments in today’s cartography of world-views. However, it is not an exclusively late modern endeavour to conceptualize spirituality without reference to a transcendent reality.

### **Precursors of Contemporary Secular Spirituality**

Historically, secular spirituality has had precursors which, while eventuating from different metaphysical and ontological premises, appear to arrive at comparable assumptions. Examples of such belief-systems range from pantheism to modern atheist theology. In pantheism, nature and the cosmos are considered divine, as the only and all-encompassing reality. In contrast to *panentheism*, which sees the world as one of the manifestations of god (Plotin, Krause), immanent-transcendent pantheism assumes god to come true through the world (Spinoza, Goethe, Schleiermacher), and physiomonistic pantheism sees the world and nature *as* god, thus denying an independent existence of god (Stoa). For Schopenhauer, pantheism, therefore, was a “refined kind of atheism” (Schischkoff, 1991). Nonetheless, representatives of both immanent-transcendent and physiomonistic positions readily ascribe *god-like* qualities to this all-encompassing natural reality. Experiences of awe, respect, even gratitude and devotion express the spiritual dimension of these world-views devoid of the idea of an external, transcendent god.

Atheist theology stands for another significant orientation to belief resonant with spiritual atheism. Representatives of this seemingly self-contradictory standpoint declare to treat of God and the gospel with radical seriousness. Through incarnation, atheist theologians argue, God has become one with humankind. Any supernatural location of the deity is thus inadequate. God can only be recognized in our neighbour’s face (Sölle, 1969). By committing our-

selves to the sacred cause of humankind, absolute immanence becomes “contemporary and kenotic realization of the Kingdom of God” (Altizer, 1966, p. 151 f). With secularists, atheist theologians share the assumption that there is no god in the sense of a primal origin, an ultimate end, transcendent and eternal (Winquist, 2001). The givens of existence are the same for everybody. Being Christian, according to Sölle, is not about seeing things others cannot see, or where others cannot see. It is about seeing the *one* reality differently (1969). This specifically Christian view is characterized by a desire for the Absolute. Though psychologically impracticable, philosophically untenable and exaggerated to the rationalist, atheist theologians reach out beyond the confines of “realworldism” (cf. Keenan & Schnell, 2012). Instead of adjusting desires to what is offered, an atheist theologian’s approach strives for more, for meaning, love and purpose (Sölle, 1969). In line with Luther, fulfilment is not aspired for by means of deeds or creeds, but through a way of being, i. e. *not* being for one’s self (Luther: *incurvatus in se ipsum*), but selftranscending (Sölle, 1969). It is in this aspect of immanent selftranscendence that secular spirituality, as introduced by psychologists and philosophers, converges with atheist theology.

## Secular Spirituality Today

In his aim to promote existential well-being, Abraham Maslow endeavoured to demonstrate that spiritual values have naturalistic meaning, that they are not the exclusive possession of organized churches, that they do not need supernatural concepts to validate them, that they are well within the jurisdiction of a suitable enlarged science, and that, therefore they are the general responsibility of all mankind (Maslow, 1970, p. 33).

Through the advancement of Humanistic Psychology, Maslow’s theories have enriched models of personality by setting them within a wider, existentialist dimension. Psychologists have long shied away from relating it to religious or spiritual phenomena, as Maslow has done with ease and daring. However, his views have influenced recent developments in the conceptualization of subject-adequate religiosity, as in the theory of implicit religiosity (Schnell, 2003, 2009), and inspired the conceptualization of a humanistic model of spirituality (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988). Authors of the latter model aimed to define, describe and operationalize spirituality in a way that would be sensitive to both religionists and secularists. After reviewing writers who approached spirituality from a phenomenological perspective, they provide the following definition of spirituality:

“Spirituality, which comes from the Latin, *spiritus*, meaning “breath of life”, is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate.” (Elkins et al., 1988, p. 10)

Nine major components are identified as core dimensions of spirituality. They are

1. An experientially based belief that there is a *transcendent dimension* to life, natural or super-natural;
2. Confidence that life is deeply *meaningful* and that one’s existence has purpose;
3. A sense of vocation or *mission in life*;
4. Belief that life is infused with *sacredness*;
5. Not seeking ultimate satisfaction from *material values*;
6. A strong sense of social justice and commitment to *altruistic love and action*;
7. Visionary commitment to the betterment of the world (*idealism*);
8. *Awareness of the tragic* realities of human existence (pain, suffering, and death); and
9. Discernible *fruits of spirituality*, effecting relationships to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate.

For philosopher Comte-Sponville, whose work explicitly expounds the concept of atheist spirituality (2008), spirituality is the life of the mind – as spirit. Inherent in the *res cogitans* (Descartes) is the potential to access truth, universality, and laughter (p. 160). Through the capacity to think, we are receptive to eternity. Spirituality is the awareness and realization of this potential, by relating to an Absolute. The Absolute is not conceptualized as transcendent and personal, but as the totality of all conditions (nature), of all relations (the universe) or the totality of all possible and real positions (truth). This totality is necessarily unconditional, absolute and all-encompassing, and it can be experienced. Comte-Sponville uses the term *immanensity* to denote this – quasi mystical – experience of an Absolute. The infinite, eternal Absolute is immense in its scale, and completely *immanent*. A spiritual atheist’s attitude towards it is, according to Comte-Sponville, characterized by affirmation – not belief; by action – not hope; by love – not fear and submission. Consequences of encountering the Absolute are feelings of unity, abundance, simplicity, eternity, serenity, independence, and acceptance of death. But spirituality, Comte-Sponville contends, is not about reaching altered states of consciousness, about interiority and the self. Rather than encourage introspection, spirituality should support self-transcendence, and open up toward the world.

A similar position is held by Solomon (2002) in his case for “spirituality for

the sceptic". Spirituality, for him, is a mode of being, characterized by self-overcoming and growth: "In place of the dubious purpose of transcending life, let us defend the ideal of transcending ourselves *in* life" (p. 24). After ardently distinguishing spirituality from anything to do with religion –

"a nonreligious, non-institutional, non-theological, non-scriptural, nonexclusive sense of spirituality, one which is not self-righteous, which is not based on Belief, which is not dogmatic, which is not anti-science, which is not other-worldly, which is not uncritical or cultist or kinky" (p. xii) –

he describes his understanding of spirituality as

"the grand and thoughtful passions of life and a life lived in accordance with those grand thoughts and passions. Spirituality embraces love, trust, reverence, and wisdom, as well as the most terrifying aspects of life, tragedy, and death" (p. 6).

Passionate commitment to this world is central to this conceptualization of spirituality. It is grounded in a kind of *Urvertrauen* (Erikson), which Solomon refers to as "cosmic trust" (p. 44). This trust allows us to forgive "the world for the misfortunes it (inevitably) inflicts upon us" (p. 57), even to give meaning to suffering and be grateful (p. 88).

The three approaches by Elkins et al., Comte-Sponville and Solomon diverge in several ways. While Elkins and colleagues as well as Comte-Sponville relate to an ultimate, absolute reality and express an affinity to extraordinary, mystical experiences, Solomon is critical of any idea of the "Beyond" and finds mystical experiences rare and unhelpful. Some key components, however, are part of all three models. They include an affirmative and trusting attitude towards the world, a committed, engaged life, an ethics of love, and acceptance of the tragic of life. What is more, all three speak out for spirituality as a process of self-transcendence, of overcoming egocentric concerns and entering into a "broad and rich relationship with the world" (Solomon).

## Integration into the Ongoing Discourse on Spirituality

Reflections on secular spirituality are part of an ongoing discourse on spirituality, fuelled by an increasing popularity of personalized, experientially validated approaches to the sacred (cf. Schnell, 2011b and the Special Issue of *Implicit Religion*, Schnell, Francis, & Lewis, 2011). By considering as religious what ultimately matters to people, scholars of Implicit Religion (Bailey, 1997, 2001; Dupré, 2007; Nesti, 1990; Schnell, 1999, 2003, 2009) have been among the first to study phenomena of the sacralisation of the secular. The current discourse on spirituality has taken up the challenge to do justice to the complexity of per-

sonalized paths to the sacred. Numerous and incongruous attempts to define spirituality mirror the intricacy of the subject. The majority of recent definitions can be summarised as “referring to a personalised, active relation to a greater reality, implying preparedness for selftranscendence, and validated by experience” (Schnell, 2011b). The location of this “greater reality”, however, remains a stumbling-block for agreement on a definition. While, for some, reference to a transcendent reality is by no means a necessary criterion of spirituality (e.g., Nasrin & Dunning, 2009), it is a crucial element for many others (e.g., Gomez & Fisher, 2003; Kass et al., 1991; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). Hill and Pargament’s (2003) broad and inclusive definition of spirituality as *a search for the sacred* seems to circumvent the problem. They consider as sacred “concepts of God, the divine, Ultimate reality, and the transcendent, as well as any aspect of life that takes an extraordinary character by virtue of its association with or representation of such concepts” (2003, p. 65). The apparent inclusion of secular phenomena is qualified by Pargament’s elaboration on the sacred: “Only when they are invested with divine qualities (e.g., transcendence, boundlessness, ultimacy) or are perceived to be manifestations of the divine do important matters become sacred matters” (p. 51, 2007).

## A Structural Definition of Spirituality

In order to generate a common ground for discussion, whilst respecting different standpoints, a *structural* definition of spirituality is suggested (cf. Ruschmann, Ruschmann, Schnell, 2011). Drawing on content-analysis of experts’ subjective theories of spirituality (Schnell, 2011a) and integrative theoretical approaches to spirituality (Ruschmann & Ruschmann, 2011; Schnell, 2009), core dimensions of spirituality have been identified and related to each other. By use of the distinction of *horizontal* and *vertical selftranscendence* (Schnell, 2004, 2009, 2011b; Schnell & Becker, 2006, 2007), secular as well as non-dualist and deist approaches can be included in the model. The resulting structure can be applied to multi-faith and non-faith contexts. By linking it to world-view specific *contents*, *types* of spirituality ensue. Figure 1 shows the core dimensions of spirituality.

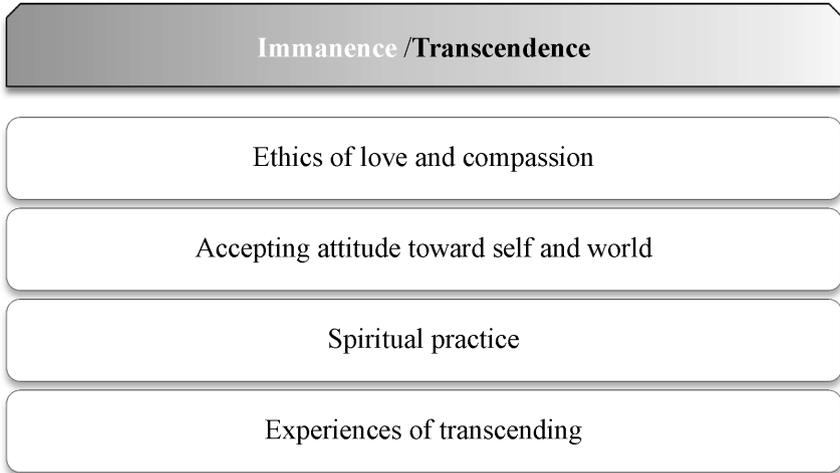


Figure 1. Structural model of spirituality

The lower four dimensions, from experiences of transcending and spiritual practice to an accepting attitude toward self and the world and an ethics of love and compassion, represent an approach to life that is either motivated by *horizontal selftranscendence* ('Immanence') or by *vertical selftranscendence* ('Transcendence'). Accordingly, immanent as well as transcendent types of spirituality can be posited (see Figure 2).

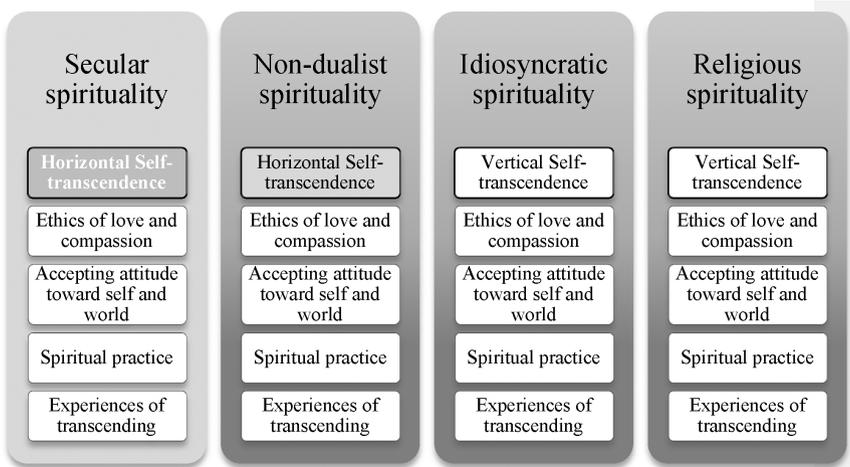


Figure 2. Secular, non-dualist, idiosyncratic and religious types of spirituality

The three theories of secular spirituality described above, by Comte-Sponville, Solomon, and Elkins et al., relate well to the type of secular spirituality depicted in Figure 2. They include *experiences of transcending*, such as awe, reverence, or unity; *spiritual practice* in the sense of both meditation/contemplation as well as active, engaged commitment to this world; an *attitude of acceptance* of life, the tragic, and death, and the importance of an *ethics of love and compassion*. All this, they propose, should be part of a process of self-transcendence, albeit within the context of immanence.

How common are these positions among contemporary atheists? And how representative are they of those atheists who self-describe as spiritual? Available data from the 2008 wave of the European Values Survey allow for the identification of self-declared atheists; they also include self-ratings of spirituality. The present study draws on these data to provide descriptive information on the distribution of spirituality among atheists in Europe, and test hypothesized relationships between their spirituality and several of the components of spirituality identified in the structural model above.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

Inspired by the conception of secular spirituality as put forward by Comte-Sponville, Solomon, and Elkins et al., several research questions and expectations are formulated. A question of particular interest is the relevance of spirituality among contemporary atheists. How many convinced atheists actually claim an interest in the sacred or supernatural? Is this interest related to demographics? And which other beliefs and characteristics are associated with spirituality, thus assessed? While these questions will be dealt with exploratively, several hypotheses have been formulated in line with Comte-Sponville, Solomon, and Elkins et al., and will be tested:

Atheist spirituality is associated with both contemplative practice and active commitment to the world. It is linked to a sense of personal happiness and satisfaction, and it relates positively to trust in other people. Spirituality among atheists is further associated with values indicative of love and altruism.

## Method

### The Sample

Variables which identify secularists and assess their self-rated spirituality are available in the 2008 wave of the European Values Study. This dataset comprises

representative samples from 46 European countries, with an overall N of 67,786. Table 1 displays countries involved in the dataset used for the present study, and number of participants per country.

Table 1. Countries involved, number of participants per country and percentage of self-description as religious/non-religious and atheist per country

	Religious person (%)	Not religious person (%)	Convinced atheist (%)	N
Albania	90,9	6	3,1	1534
Azerbaijan	90,1	9,8	0,1	1505
Austria	64,1	31,2	4,7	1510
Armenia	88,9	9,6	1,4	1500
Belgium	59	30,1	10,9	1509
Bosnia Herzegovina	95	3,3	1,7	1512
Bulgaria	60,5	35	4,6	1500
Belarus	32,4	60	7,6	1500
Croatia	82,7	12,6	4,8	1525
Cyprus	92,4	7,1	0,5	1000
Northern Cyprus	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	500
Czech Republic	32,4	51	16,6	1821
Denmark	71,4	21,4	7,2	1507
Estonia	41,2	51,6	7,2	1518
Finland	54,4	37,4	8,2	1134
France	41,6	39,9	18,4	1501
Georgia	97,3	2,1	0,6	1500
Germany West	56,7	37,7	5,6	1071
Germany East	17,9	58,6	23,5	1004
Greece	85,9	11,4	2,8	1500
Hungary	55	41,4	3,6	1513
Iceland	67,6	26,1	6,2	808
Ireland	65,4	33,1	1,5	1013
Italy	86,1	9,2	4,6	1519
Latvia	75,9	20,4	3,7	1506
Lithuania	84,8	13,9	1,4	1500
Luxembourg	57	33,1	9,9	1610
Malta	67,3	31,9	0,8	1500
Moldova	82,8	16	1,2	1551
Montenegro	87,4	7,5	5,1	1516
Netherlands	60,2	33	6,8	1554
Norway	46,5	47,8	5,7	1090
Poland	88,4	9,3	2,3	1510
Portugal	75,5	18,2	6,3	1553
Romania	82	17,1	0,8	1489
Russian Federation	73,7	19,8	6,5	1504
Serbia	89,9	7,2	2,8	1512
Slovak Republic	81,2	16	2,7	1509
Slovenia	72	16,4	11,6	1366
Spain	53,8	34,7	11,5	1500
Sweden	32,1	52,9	15	1187
Switzerland	61	32,4	6,6	1272

Table 1 (Continued)

<b>Turkey</b>	90	9,9	0,1	2384
<b>Ukraine</b>	86	12,2	1,8	1507
<b>Macedonia</b>	84,7	10,3	5	1500
<b>Great Britain</b>	45	47,3	7,6	1561
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	61,4	36,5	2,1	500
<b>Kosovo</b>	99,5	0,2	0,2	1601
<b>Total</b>	70,6	24	5,5	67786

### Operationalization

In order to establish preliminary access to spiritual secularists' world-views and test hypotheses, key concepts are operationalized (albeit tentatively) using variables available in the EVS 4<sup>th</sup> wave data set. Atheists, in the EVS 2008, are identified through self-description as "convinced atheist", in contrast to "religious person" or "not religious person" (for percentages of atheists per country see Tab.1). Spirituality, in the EVS 2008, is (rather fuzzily) assessed through the following question:

*Whether or not you think of yourself as a religious person, how spiritual would you say you are, that is how strongly are you interested in the sacred or the supernatural?*

With the purpose of locating the phenomenon of secular spirituality within a context of demographics, religious belonging and beliefs, the following EVS variables are drawn on as potential predictors of secular spirituality:

1. Sex
2. Age
3. Education
4. Belonging to a religious denomination
5. Belief in life after death
6. Belief in re-incarnation
7. Belief in lucky charms

Operationalization of the dimensions of secular spirituality as described above (Fig. 2) is subject to the availability of variables in the EVS data set. Experiences of transcending are not assessed in the EVS. For measurement of spiritual practice, several variables offer themselves: Contemplative practice is tapped by the following two questions: *Do you take moments of prayer, meditation or*

*contemplation?* and *Do you have (your) own ways of connecting with the Divine?* Practice of active social commitment is assessed by variables asking about *belonging to* and *working unpaid for activist groups*. An accepting attitude toward self is measured by items asking about a *feeling of happiness* and *satisfaction with life*. An accepting attitude toward the world is tapped by a question about the *trustworthiness of people*. Several variables are interpreted as operationalizing an ethics of love and compassion; one set of items asks about acceptance of minorities (e.g., people with criminal record, people of different race, large families, Muslims, etc.) as neighbours; the other asks about values children should learn at school (feeling of responsibility, tolerance and respect, and unselfishness). Horizontal transcendence is identified through self-declaration as “convinced atheist” and self-rated spirituality.

### Results

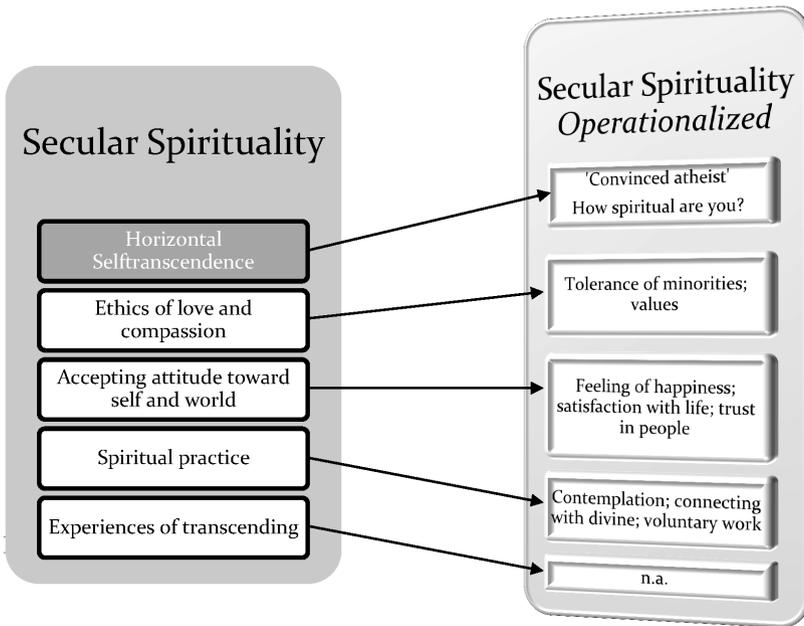


Figure 3. Operationalization of the dimensions of secular spirituality by EVS variables

## Descriptive Results

Table 1 displays percentages of self-described “religious persons”, “not religious persons”, and “convinced atheists” in each country. The number of convinced atheists varies considerably between countries, from 0.1 % in Azerbaijan and Turkey, to 24 % in East Germany. Among the  $N = 3374$  convinced atheists, a majority of 57 % self-describe as not spiritual, at all; 21 % claim little interest, 17 % some interest and 5 % strong interest in the sacred or supernatural. Countries with the highest percentage of highly spiritual atheists, in this sense, are Armenia (19 %), Montenegro (17 %), and Iceland (15 %), while there is *no* evidence of spiritual atheists in Bulgaria, Albania, and Poland, for example. This variance suggests links between variations of atheism and cultural and/or political contexts that will have to be explored in future studies. However, due to the generally low number of spiritual atheists, national differences will be disregarded in the present study.

### Who are the Spiritual Atheists? Demographics, Religious Belonging and Beliefs

Spirituality, in the EVS, is assessed as an interest in the sacred or the supernatural. It thus covers a wide range of possible beliefs to be associated with it. Through multiple regression analysis, world-view related predictors of spirituality among convinced atheists are identified. In order to clarify if “believing” has predictive power over and above demographics and “belonging”, hierarchic regression is employed. Table 2 shows beta coefficients and explanation of variance in the three consecutive models. Demographics only account for 3 % of the variance in secular spirituality, with female, younger, and more educated atheists being slightly more spiritual. Inclusion of religious belonging only adds two more percent of explained variance: atheists who belong to a religious denomination (16 %) are slightly more spiritual than those who do not belong. With inclusion of beliefs, sex and age lose their predictive power, but as much as 19 % of variance in spirituality are explained altogether. *Belief in re-incarnation* and *belief in life after death* contribute substantially, independently of each other, as does the *belief that a lucky charm protects*.

Table 2. Hierarchic multiple regression for prediction of secular spirituality among convinced atheists. Step 1: demographics; step 2: religious belonging; step 3: beliefs (N = 3118)

Model	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	R <sup>2</sup>
	Beta		
1			
Sex	.08	.000	.03 (p<.001)
Age	-.11	.000	
What age did you complete your education	.09	.000	
2			
Sex	.08	.000	.05 (p<.001)
Age	-.10	.000	
What age did you complete your education	.09	.000	
Belong to religious denomination	.14	.000	
3			
Sex	.02	n.s.	.18 (p<.001)
Age	-.02	n.s.	
What age did you complete your education	.10	.000	
Belong to religious denomination	.11	.002	
Believe in: life after death	.14	.000	
Believe in: re-incarnation	.19	.000	
Lucky charm protects	.16	.000	

Note: sex: 1 = male, 2 = female

### Atheist Spirituality and Spiritual Practice

Atheist Spirituality has been conceptualized as being expressed through both contemplative practice and active commitment to the world.

Spirituality is positively related to an *own way of connecting with the divine* ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and *taking moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation* ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The relationship between spirituality and *belonging to an activist group* is very small ( $r = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ); that between spirituality and *volunteering for an activist group*, albeit significant due to the large sample size, is negligibly small ( $r = .08$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Atheist Spirituality and an Accepting Attitude toward Self and World

Analyses were expected to reflect positive relationships between spirituality among convinced atheists and their happiness, satisfaction with life and trust in people. However, results do not confirm these expectations; spirituality is neither related to happiness and satisfaction with life, nor to a trustful approach to other people.

### Atheist Spirituality and an Ethics of Love and Compassion

When relating spirituality to tolerance toward minorities, results do not reflect any signs of *intolerance*, but correlations in the expected direction are negligibly small ( $< .10$ ). Relationships between spirituality and the three values of a) feeling of responsibility, b) tolerance and respect, and c) unselfishness are also significant in the expected direction, but negligibly small ( $r = .03/.09/.03$ ).

## Discussion

Atheist spirituality, as described by philosophers and psychologists, is a complex and sophisticated approach to life. “Spiritual” attitudes, values and commitments are distanced from religious world-views and the supernatural, and then established in an immanentist context. This seems to be especially intricate when it comes to one of the core elements of spirituality, transcendence. For the majority of spiritual secularists, from the past to today, a transcendent dimension plays a crucial part in a spiritual approach to life. To transcend is to “go beyond”. The realm of “beyond” is conventionally associated with a (vertically) transcendent reality. However, transcendence can also occur horizontally (Goodenough, 2001; Schnell, 2009; Schnell & Becker, 2007). It can take place in encounters with the *inner* (the medial, “true” self), the *outer* (social and natural environment) or the *other* (supernatural) (cf. Bailey, 1997; Schnell, 2009). Central to the concept is the *act* of transcending (Ruschmann, 2011). In a secular context, transcendence can thus be construed as entirely immanent by defining it as an act of *selftranscendence*.

As a core element of spirituality, selftranscendence – be it immanent or transcendent – is assumed to underlie and motivate spirituality in its various expressions. In line with the structural model of spirituality, these dimensions have been identified as experiences of transcending, spiritual practice, an accepting attitude toward self and world, and an ethics of love and compassion. An immanentist selftranscendence would thus be marked by a compassionate,

loving and accepting mindset, capable of and ready to contemplate as well as to passionately commit to concerns beyond one's immediate needs, to relate to and become part of an ultimate reality. In Elkins and colleagues', Comte-Sponville's and Solomon's accounts of "ideal types" of secular spirituality, all of these facets figure. But are they representative of atheists who self-describe as spiritual?

First of all, EVS data show that spirituality is a rare phenomenon among convinced atheists. Only five percent of European atheists describe themselves as very spiritual – that is "very interested in the sacred or supernatural". Fifty-seven percent say they are not spiritual at all; 21 % report little interest and 17 % some interest. By relating self-reported spirituality to demographics, religious belonging and beliefs, more information on this vaguely assessed spirituality has been gathered. Independently of sex and age, spirituality is slightly more common among more educated atheists. Breadth and complexity of knowledge thus seem to be conducive of interest in the sacred or the supernatural. Spirituality is also a little more common among atheists who (nominally) belong to a religious denomination. Here, the institutional confrontation with symbols and images of transcendence might inspire interest in the sacred or the supernatural – or, the other way round, interest in the sacred or the supernatural might be the motivation for atheists to remain associated with a religious denomination.

Maybe surprisingly, spiritual atheists, though, by self-definition as atheist, adverse to the idea of supernatural deities, tend to believe in reincarnation and life after death, and even in the protective power of lucky charms. At this point, the agentic and idiosyncratic character of today's meaning systems becomes particularly apparent. While denying belief in supernatural powers, a desire for a "beyond" is expressed. However, these creeds are primarily self-serving. Belief in reincarnation and/or life after death communicates a wish for eternity and personal continuity beyond death. Belief in the protective power of lucky charms seems to indicate a hope of outwitting contingency. Hence, acceptance of contingency and death as existential givens is avoided; this core characteristic of secular spirituality, as described by its theorists, does not feature in the majority of spiritual atheists' world-views.

One of the more prominent attributes of atheist spirituality in the EVS sample is the practice of taking moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation. Spiritual atheists also profess to use personal ways of connecting with the divine. But do these acts of contemplation and relation to an ultimate reality have real-world consequences? Do they strengthen personal well-being and ethical conduct? Here, again, the picture painted by the data is quite disillusioning. Spiritual atheists are neither happier nor more satisfied with their lives than non-spiritual atheists. Their spirituality does neither encourage trust in other people, nor does it enhance voluntary commitment, tolerance, responsibility or unselfishness.

## Conclusion

Summarising the findings, spirituality among atheists appears to be a predominantly personal issue, without social or ethical consequences. Alongside the declaration of interest in the sacred or supernatural, beliefs in life after death and supportive immaterial powers at work in this world express a desire for meaning and connectedness (see also Schnell & Keenan, 2011). However, this desire is probably not fulfilled, since neither personal nor interpersonal well-being are enhanced. How might these findings be interpreted? For the majority of atheists, a pronounced interest in the sacred or supernatural seems to be an expression of a need for meaning and transcendence rather than a conviction. Selftranscendence does not appear central to their identity. And, due to the complexity and sophistication of this orientation, it surely is difficult to anchor it in an immanentist world-view. Models and examples of immanent self-transcendence are rare, resulting in weak “plausibility structures” (Berger). Longitudinal studies are necessary to determine the stability of this kind of atheist spirituality. Is it a temporary disorientation, perhaps initiated by a drastic experience? Or is it an expression of increased openness toward another dimension of reality, the parameters of which are yet to be established?

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We would like to thank the University of Innsbruck research platform ‘Organizations and Society’, especially for their ‘Publishing with a View’ grant support to fund a four-day residence in the Pumafalle, Gschnitztal.