„Self-Transcendence" – or: How to Deal with Questions of Spirituality and Meaning in Religious Nones?

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Number of Words: 5,772

Number of Signs: 39,237

The author received no funding and has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Abstract

More and more people around the world are not identifying themselves with a religion. This leaves scientists and caregivers alike with the challenge of responding to questions of spirituality and meaning among this population while, among other things, lacking suitable terminology and concepts. The intention of this essay is to contribute to an interdisciplinary discussion through presenting and organizing psychological research on nonreligion and introducing the concept of "self-transcendence" as one way to talk about issues of meaning, significance and purpose. Reflecting on self-transcendent experiences thus might offer a common ground for dialogue between all different forms of religion, spirituality and nonreligion while avoiding typical dichotomies like religious vs. atheistic; faith vs. unbelief; or equal vs. different.

Spirituality and religious "Nones" - a young and interdisciplinary topic

Discussing spirituality and meaning among nonreligious people is a rather young topic, both scientifically and in terms of the age group to which it is most relevant: In 46 out of 106 countries of the world, younger people (18-39) are less religious than older people (40+): They identify less often with a religious group, consider religion as less important, they are less likely to attend worship weekly and to pray daily.[1] Furthermore, while 27% of the general population in Western Europe say that they believe in God as described in the Bible, 38% say that they believe in another higher power or spiritual force and 26% say they do not believe in any higher power.[2] The term "religious Nones" is thus a term for all those people who do not (any longer) identify with a religion and for whom religion is no longer part of their self-concept. Even in cases where quasi-religious behaviour/attitudes might still be present, the individual does not classify it as such. The self-designation as "nonreligious" can be used to emphasize the *rejection* of religion, but it might also be used to express *indifference*.

For pastoral care and psychotherapy, the increasing number of people who describe themselves as nonreligious or atheistic leads to questions like:
- How do nonreligious people deal with and communicate existential fears and questions?
- How can we talk with them about topics of meaning, significance and purpose?
- Are there also nonreligious spiritual experiences?
- How can a pastor or ministry worker competently support nonreligious people who seek pastoral advice? How can a psychotherapist competently support nonreligious people who seek advice about questions of meaning, significance and purpose?

These questions are important for pastoral care as well as psychotherapy for two reasons: First, it will become increasingly common that people who are still socialized in the

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[1] PEW RESEARCH CENTER, The Age Gap in Religion Around the World. The opposite is only true for two countries: The former Soviet Republic of Georgia and Ghana. The difference of percentages who identify with a religion between young and old is between 9% and 26% for European countries.

[2] PEW RESEARCH CENTER, Being Christian in Western Europe.

church and thus seek pastoral advice are nonreligious (i.e. agnostic, atheistic, seeking, indifferent...) or at least doubting mainstream religion. On the other hand, religious people are more and more confronted with an environment that puts their faith in question - either through direct criticism or simply through alternative life concepts - which can lead to existential doubts and stress and thus can constitute a possible reason why people seek pastoral counseling or psychotherapy.[3]

While we can measure the number of people who identify as "nonreligious" fairly easily, a (psychological) description of how this group deals with questions of spirituality and meaning is extremely complex. The difficulty lies, among other things, in the fact that many nonreligious people resist terms such as "spiritual" or "quasi-religious", and feel extremely uncomfortable with this description, even if their behaviour is very similar to traditional religious behaviour, e.g. in terms of its psychological functions. Scientists as well as caregivers here need to find neutral terms that can be used to describe both religious and nonreligious behaviour in their similarity without imposing vocabulary that has religious connotations. A proposal for such a neutral term is the concept of self-transcendence, which will be described below.

This essay is intended to make a contribution to an interdisciplinary discussion through a) presenting and organizing the psychological research on nonreligion; b) explaining the concept of self-transcendence c) offering some statements in order to start a discussion between theology and psychology - or pastoral caregivers/psychotherapists and their nonreligious clients - of how to talk about issues of meaning, significance and purpose in a nonreligious environment.

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[3] See also Julie Exline's research about „religious struggles", e.g. EXLINE & ROSE, Religious and spiritual struggles or EXLINE I.A., The religious and spiritual struggles scale.

Summary of psychological research on religious Nones

Much of the psychological research on nonreligion was and is prompted by secularization, i.e. the phenomenon that a continuously decreasing number of people believe in God or identify as religious.[4] Research in this area is driven by the desire to understand and acknowledge this process and to offer scientific information. Nonreligion is still a young topic in psychology: So far, the community of researchers in the field "Psychology of Religion and Spirituality" has been struggling - like theologians – to find *terms* that are able to describe nonreligious, but spiritual phenoma, and *concepts* that are able to capture differences as well as similarities between religious experiences *and* nonreligious spiritual experiences.[5] This essay does not offer a comprehensive theory, but wants to describe an ongoing process and thus will conclude with some discussion statements.

When looking at research about nonreligion in the field of psychology of religion and spirituality, there are two different approaches:

1. empirical-experimental research with the starting point of classical research on religion: This approach uses existing knowledge about religion and examines whether other phenomena and concepts have similar effects. This approach follows a functional concept of religion; the comparison points with religion are easy to identify.

2. empirical-experimental research without a clear religious reference, but with a description of religion-like phenomena and processes. Examples of those are experiences like mindfulness or flow, which Yaden, Haidt, Hood, Vago and

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[4] For the US see PEW RESEARCH CENTER, US less religious; for Europe see SMITH, Belief about God; for.countries around the world see: PEW RESEARCH CENTER, The Age Gap in Religion Around the World.

[5] What seems to complicate things ist hat many religious Nones seem to reject or at least feel very uncomfortable with terms such as „ spiritual" or „quasi-religious", even in cases where a behavior seems to resemble traditional religious behaviors, e.g. from its psychological functions. Thus, it seems necessary to use a terminology that does not come with specific connotations.

Newberg summarize as "self-transcendent experiences", as well as self-transcendent emotions such as reverence, admiration or compassion.

In the following, results from the two approaches are summarized. I will explain the contribution of religion in fulfilling certain cognitive, emotional and social needs. In a next step, I want to show how alternative phenomena can take over the same effects with the aim of showing points of comparison between religiosity and nonreligion and enabling dialogue about self-transcendent experiences. Clearly, I am following a functional definition of religion as opposed to a substantive one. For the description of religion I follow Saroglou, who states that there are four dimensions that constitute the basis of every religion, even if a religion might have specific cultural and religious characteristics.[6] The four dimensions are:

a) cognitive dimension (Believing): Religions typically establish beliefs and dogmas that give order to the world and form the specific worldview.

b) emotional dimension (Bonding): The feeling of emotional attachment to a God, Gods or a greater principle.

c) behavioral dimension (Behaving): Religion describes and deals with what is considered good behavior and helps to implement behavioral standards derived from the world view.

d) a social dimension (Belonging): Religion creates feelings of connectedness, community and a sense of identity, e.g. with a local church.

Cognitive dimension: dogmas

A constitutive characteristic of religion is that it consists of beliefs and convictions that give order to the world, which describe the relationship between deity and humanity as well as the relationships among human beings. All those convictions contribute to the

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[6] SAROGLOU, Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging. He develops his theory discussing and interpreting earlier scholars like Glock, Verbit, Hervieu-Léger, Hinde, Tarakeshwar, Stanton, Pargament, Atran, Norenzayan and Voas.

specific worldview of an individual.[7] Often these beliefs include an explanation of the beginning and end of the world and one's own life and in consequence help in dealing with experiences of injustice, death and contingency. Religion thus offers order and structure in a world that sometimes seems chaotic and random, which has been confirmed by psychological studies showing that religious faith can compensate for feelings of low control.[8]

However, further experiments have shown that other institutions/worldviews can also establish this sense of structure and control. The support of social and governmental structures and institutions can have a similar compensatory effect on feelings of lack of control as religion, at least as long as these structures or institutions are considered benevolent.[9] Similarly, other ideologies and movements can offer a largely coherent (i.e. order and structure-giving) view of the world and/or benevolent views of humanity, such as humanism[10]; the belief in human development (Belief in Human Progress)[11]; or the belief in science as a superior principle for understanding the world and one's own life.[12]

Emotional Dimension: Bonding Experiences

The emotional dimension describes a bonding experience, which takes place between the individual and the deity, deities or a higher principle. This experience can be facilitated through rituals and traditions such as prayer, meditation, worship, ceremonies and/or music[13]. During these bonding experiences the individual connects with the transcendent and experiences him- or herself as part of a larger entity. This is reflected in neurological findings showing that spiritual experiences go together with a reduced activation of the

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[7] IBID.

[8] Compare KAY I.A., Compensatory Control. However, these results have recently been questioned. For more information see HOOGEVEEN I.A., Compensatory Control and Belief in God.
[9] IBID.

[10] Compare FROMM, Jenseits der Illusionen.

[11] Compare RUTJENS, VAN DER PLIGT & VAN HARREVELD, Things will get better.

[12] Compare FARIAS I.A., Scientific faith.

[13] Compare SAROGLOU, Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging.

right parietal lobe,[14] the region of the brain in which self-other-boundaries are represented.

However, this does not only happen in religious ceremonies: In an article from 2017, Yaden, Haidt, Hood, Vago and Newberg state that similar experiences of a "decreased self-salience" with simultaneous feelings of connectedness are also present in phenomena like mindfulness, flow, reverence or mysticism, which are summarized as self-transcendent experiences.[15] Such experiences of a "diminished self" are are present in self-transcendent emotions such as awe,[16] elevation[17] or compassion[18], all of which are characterized through "seeing something or someone greater or better than the self"[19]. They lead to a changed sense of time,[20] a sense of meaning and purpose,[21] feelings of connectedness[22] and prosocial behaviour.[23]

Behavioural dimension: Moral guidelines

Religious worldviews are also expressed in specific behaviours and ideas about good and bad, i.e. morality.[24] It is probably intuitive that religiosity goes hand in hand with certain moral concepts. Most religions also have moral guidelines or rules, such as the Ten

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[14] Compare JOHNSTONE I.A., Right Parietal Lobe-Related "Selflessness" as the Neuropsychological Basis of Spiritual Transcendence.

[15] Compare YADEN I.A., The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience.

[16] Compare KELTNER & HAIDT, Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion; PIFF I.A., Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior, and SHIOTA, KELTNER & MOSSMAN, The nature of awe: Elicitors, appraisals, and effects on self-concept.

[17] Compare HAIDT, The Positive emotion of elevation.

[18] Compare STELLAR I.A., Self-Transcendent Emotions and Their Social Functions.

[19] VAN CAPELLEN I.A., Self-transcendent positive emotions increase spirituality, 1379.

[20] Compare RUDD, VOHS & AAKER, Awe expands people's perception of time.

[21] VAN CAPELLEN I.A., Self-transcendent positive emotions increase spirituality, see also KING I.A., Positive affect and the experience of meaning in life.

[22] Compare OLIVER I.A., Media-induced elevation as a means of enhancing feelings of intergroup connectedness.

[23] Compare PIFF I.A., Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior.

[24] Compare SAROGLOU, Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging.

Commandments in Judaism and Christianity or the five Silas in Buddhism. These are expressed in certain values and priorities. Rokeach, for example, showed that American Catholic and Protestant participants considered the value of "pleasure" as less important, but forgiveness as more desirable, than nonreligious participants. Nonreligious participants, on the other hand, considered values like justice, the feeling of success and having an exciting life more important.[25] Similar results could be shown internationally: Religiosity correlates with values supporting the preservation of social and individual order (tradition, conformity, security), and the value "benevolence" is more important to religious people while "power" and "achievement" were considered less important.[26] At the same time, one cannot deny that many Christian groups in the US have prejudices against homosexuals based on certain moral concepts founded on religion.[27]

One function of morality is to enable successful interactions.[28] At the same time, moral concepts can guide our actions and can help us to interpret our in-group's decision later on.[29] Such processes, however, do not only take place in the religious sphere, but also in the political,[30] for example, when it comes to health issues[31] or environmental protection.[32] Studies on moralization, i.e. the process of understanding something in moral categories, show that moralized topics tend to get attention, spread more quickly

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[25] ROKEACH, Value Systems in Religion.

[26] SAROGLOU, DELPIERRE & DERNELLE, Values and religiosity: A meta-analysis of studies using Schwartz's model.

[27] See e.g. JOHNSON, ROWATT & LABOUFF, Religiosity and prejustice revisited.

[28] Compare DE WAAL, Joint ventures require joint payoffs; and CLAY I.A., Bonobos vocally protest against violated social expectation.

[29] Compare GEBAUER, SEDIKIDES & SCHRADE, Christian Self-Enhancement; DUFNER I.A., Self-Enhancement and Psychological Adjustment and BATSON I.A., Moral hypocrisy..

[30] See e.g. MARIETTA, The Absolutist Advantage; MULLEN & SKITKA, Exploring the psychological underpinnings of the moral mandate effect and RYAN, No Compromise.

[31] Compare ROZIN & SINGH, The moralization of cigarette smoking in the United States; and MAHONEY I.A., The Sanctification of the Body and Behavioral Health Patterns of College Students.

[32] Compare VAN DER WERFF, STEG & KEIZER, It is a moral issue; FEINBERG & WILLER, The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes; and FREY, Morality and Rationality in Environmental Policy.

and are internalized by individuals and thus become more important for the individual.[33]
Of course, this is not only true for moralizations for religious reasons, but also for moralizations for political reasons, such as the strive for environmental protection. Furthermore, we know from philosophy that rules of conduct are not only obtained through religion, but also through philosophical thinking, i.e. Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative.

Social Dimension: Community

Another core characteristic of religion is community.[34] In a religious community, people come together and develop a common (group) identity. This happens by believing in the same principles/dogmas and sharing a similar worldview (see above), but also through behaviours that help to establish and sustain community - think for example of the biblical commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself" or rituals of confession and forgiveness. The need to belong to a group is one of the basic human needs,[35] are there are serious consequences if it is violated.[36] Religion offers people the opportunity to be part of a community – locally as well as globally. Apart from the positive outcomes of belonging, these feelings of community might also be expressed in the discrimination of an outgroup, which explains why religiosity often correlates with prejudices or even aggression towards an outgroup.[37] Again, these phenomena are of course not limited to religion. There are also groups outside religion that convey a sense of belonging. These

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[33] Compare e.g. ROZIN, The process of moralization; and ROZIN, MARKWITH & STOESS, Moralization and becoming a vegetarian.

[34] See e.g. DURKHEIM, The elementary forms of religious life; or: SAROGLOU, Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging.

[35] Compare FISKE, Social beings: Core motives in psychology.

[36] Compare BAUMEISTER, LEARY, The Need to Belong-Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a fundamental human emotion.

[37] Compare JOHNSON, ROWATT & LABOUFF, Priming Christian Religious Concepts Increases Racial Prejudice;
JOHNSON, ROWATT & LABOUFF, Religiosity and prejustice revisited; and BLOGOWSKA, LAMBERT & SAROGLOU, Religious prosociality and aggression.

can be loose associations, e.g. in a class or an institute, up to more identity-forming groups such as one's own football club, group of friends or political party.

Meaning-making as a crystallization point of religion

It is an ongoing discussion among scholars whether there is something that occurs in all religious and spiritual experiences.[38] Among scholars of the psychology of religion and spirituality, "Meaning-Making" is emerging as a framework that connects both religious and spiritual experiences: "Given its breath, we propose that the model of meaning systems is capable of containing the whole span of research topics and dialogue within the psychology of religion."[39] Meaning-Making also seems to mediate the positive relation between religiosity and well-being.[40] Presumably it is also this sense of purpose in life that explains why religion has a soothing effect on fear[41] and emotional stress,[42] especially the fear of death.[43] A benevolent image of God additionally allows for a positive reframing of negative experiences.[44]

So far, there is only little research on similar nonreligious concepts and ideas regarding meaning-making. However, the studies done so far have interesting results. It could, for

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[38] See e.g. GEYER & BAUMEISTER, Religion, Morality, and Self-Control and HOOD JR, HILL & SPILKA, The psychology of religion.

[39] PALOUTZIAN & PARK, Recent progress and core issues in the science of the psychology of religion and spirituality, 12.

[40] Compare PARK, Religion as a meaning-making framework. Similarly: CHAMBERLAIN & ZIKA, Religiosity, Life Meaning and Wellbeing.

[41] Compare INZLICHT, TULLETT & GOOD, The need to believe: A neuroscience account of religion as a motivated process and NORENZAYAN & HANSEN, Belief in supernatural agents in the face of death.

[42] Compare PARGAMENT I.A., Religion and HIV.

[43] Compare ARNDT, GREENBERG & COOK, Mortality salience and the spreading activation of worldview-relevant constructs. Terror-Management-Theory, however, has been discussed recently in the scientific community, as not all mentioned effects could be replicated. See e.g. STERLING, JOST & SHROUT, Mortality Salience, System Justification, and Candidate Evaluations in the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election.

[44] Compare PARGAMENT, The psychology of religion and coping; PARGAMENT, KOENIG & PEREZ, The many methods of religious coping; and PARGAMENT I.A., Patterns of Positive and Negative Religious Coping with Major Life Stressors.

example, be shown that the belief in science and scientific principles was higher in a sample of (largely nonreligious) athletes who were just facing a stressful situation than in a sample of athletes in non-stressful training.[45] Thus, faith seems to be more important in stressful situations, regardless of the content of what the individual believes. With regards to the fear of death, writing about one's own death also led to an increased belief in science.[46] From other studies we know that also adherence to atheistic principles can lead to an increased sense of purpose, at least if it is accompanied by a high level of commitment[47] and that the experience of meaning is in turn associated with an overall high level of well-being.[48] This suggests that other nonreligious concepts can also lead to an experience of meaning, provided they fulfil similar functions as religion - a hypothesis tested below for the example of science.

Conclusion

In the synopsis it becomes clear that many of the functions of religion can also be taken over by other worldviews and structures, e.g. political (in the form of political structures or ideologies) or philosophical (in the form of currents such as humanism or the belief in science) art. This seems to apply to individual cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social functions as well as to the fact that religion as a whole, i.e. in the interplay of the dimensions mentioned, contributes to a life of meaning. The difficulty that still remains is that of naming those experiences that fulfil similar needs and functions as religion, but are explicitly not perceived and described by individuals as religious or spiritual.

Here, the above research on flow and mindfulness could help, which refers to those experiences as "self-transcendent"[49], which are characterized by the fact that something/someone other is experienced as greater than the self. This description can be

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[45] FARIAS I.A., Scientific faith.

[46] IBID.

[47] Compare SCHNELL & KEENAN, Meaning-Making in an Atheist World.

[48] Compare PARK, Religion and Meaning.

[49] Compare YADEN I.A., The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience.

useful for dialogue, as it offers a way to talk about self-transcendent emotions as well as self-transcendent experiences in a neutral and unbiased way. It relates to the theological discourse, but might also be used for discourse within religious studies, sociology or psychology. The term "self-transcendent" reduces the complexity of different forms of spirituality, perceptions of God, or right/wrong by focusing on the notion that something else is considered greater than one's own self.

Discussion statements

The aim of this essay was to give an overview of the current psychological research on nonreligion. This research is complex and currently suffers from the lack of suitable terms and concepts that can be applied to both religiosity and nonreligion. This essay tried to summarize *past* research; but also to take a look where future research might develop: A concept of self-transcendence that enables the comparison of and dialogue between different worldviews. It thus also wants to point at opportunities for caregivers to engage with different forms nonreligion in pastoral care and psychotherapy, which now shall be summarized in some discussion statements:

1. Surveys[50] suggest that the number of people who describe themselves as nonreligious (further being divided into subgroups such as atheistic or agnostic) will increase in the coming years, thus raising the question for both pastoral care and psychotherapy of how to engage with this group, their spiritual questions and their search for meaning.

2. This process and conversations about it might be quite painful for pastors and other religious caregivers, because it raises awareness to the decreasing significance of religion. Additionally, it might also confront the individual with his/her own non-religion, his/her own doubts, or his/her own criticism of religious structures and beliefs. A look at the research on nonreligion shows that there are

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[50] For the US see PEW RESEARCH CENTER, US less religious; for Europe see SMITH, Belief about God; for.countries around the world see: PEW RESEARCH CENTER, The Age Gap in Religion Around the World.

various other concepts and worldviews that take on similar functions, i.e. fulfill similar needs as religion. Pastors/therapists might be asked to guide people in their spiritual journeys and their search for meaning who describe themselves as nonreligious. On the other hand, religious believers might experience the confrontation with nonreligion as stressful and will thus seek counseling.

3. It also depends on the pastor/therapist to shape and guide this confrontation with nonreligion. It might be communicated as dichotomies (religious vs. atheistic; faith vs. unbelief; equal vs. different), but it is also possible to find common ground and thus exciting topics for discussion. The concept of "self-transcendence" and the realization that other (nonreligious) people are also looking for something greater than their own selves opens opportunities to discuss questions of meaning beyond the limitations of religious vocabulary and avoids terms like "quasi-religious". Thus, it may also create a safe space for the individual to admit his/her own questions and doubts.

4. In dealing with clients who describe themselves as nonreligious (atheistic, agnostic...), it should be noted that nonreligious self-transcendent phenomena might have a similar effect on the individual as religion, by creating meaning, creating community, offering behavioral guidelines and a coherent worldview. When talking about those self-transcendent principles and experiences, caregivers should be as sensitive as they are towards questions of faith/spirituality.

5. In addition to offering common ground for dialogue, reflecting on what one considers as self-transcendent might also help one to identify what makes one's own faith different from other concepts of life. This, of course, depends on one's own denomination and/or personal beliefs. For a Christian member it might be the realization that one not only believes that the world has an order, but that it is a *benevolent* order; that bonding experiences are not just immersion with the universe, but a God/power described as love; the belief in behavioural guidelines that also care about the other, and/or belonging to a community in which love and forgiveness play an important role.

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