

SUPPORT FOR A SPIRITUAL LIFE AMONG THE NON-RELIGIOUS:
DISCOVERING THE SPIRITUAL EMOTIONS THAT CONTRIBUTE
TO WELL-BEING IN SECULAR LIFE

A Thesis

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University Dominguez Hills

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Humanities

by

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Summer 2018

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing population of non-religious people in the United States, and a gradual shift towards secularization. Additionally, there has been a renewed interest in the idea of spirituality as more people have denounced religion and the supernatural. A secular spirituality can provide spiritual growth for people looking to find meaning and purpose in their lives. In order to study secular spirituality, this thesis looked at the differing groups of belief systems in the non-religious category, definitions of spirituality, and previous studies of well-being in the non-religious. Then the thesis reviewed a number of different secular authors and their spiritual experiences. After compiling the experiences and the different emotions, it was discovered that secular spirituality commonly consists of feelings of transcendence, awe, and wonder. Atheists and other non-religious groups can use these findings to focus on eliciting transcendence, awe, and wonder for an increased spiritual well-being.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Secular World is in Need of Spirituality

How does the unaffiliated population find spiritual peace and well-being? For most of the US population, the only answer is through the supernatural beliefs found through religion. This thesis will explore spiritual experiences and emotions that the secular person can practice in order to find spiritual peace and well-being. These methods are founded on scientific medical and psychological research to give the unaffiliated population, over a fifth of the US population, alternative and substantiated options when faced with difficult life problems. There has been a recent surge in popularity of new age spirituality. But if there is no scientific evidence to support these ideas then it cannot be realistically practiced by someone with a secular or atheistic viewpoint. This limits the available options to fulfill the spiritual side of well-being for the secular.

This thesis will be exploring some alternative options for the growing non-religious population to find ways for spiritual self-improvement through secular spiritual emotions. In the first section, this thesis will look at the differing viewpoints of spirituality and delve into the different groups found within the non-religious population. It will address the secular minority in the United States and the breakdown of different sub-groups within the non-religious. Then the thesis will look at the current state of research regarding secular groups, spirituality, and well-being. The third chapter will

explore the methodology used to determine the predominant spiritual emotions in secular life while also examining what experiences triggered those emotions. Then chapter four will describe each of the spiritual emotions in more depth along with a look at the more common ways to elicit those emotions. At the end of the section, some alternate perspectives on secular spirituality will be examined. The conclusion will present a way forward and go through some additional research studies that could further the results of this thesis.

Many atheists disregard spirituality as being supernatural or religious and therefore miss out on finding spiritual growth. By relying only on science for a source of answers to questions in life, the secular cannot find comfort in supernatural beliefs. The more rational way to figure out what types of spiritual activities the secular should add to their lives would be to examine scientifically which activities increase well-being. Through analyzing the different types of spiritual experiences of a small number of secular authors, a couple different emotions emerge as common throughout these experiences. Specifically, this thesis will show that the secular can benefit from the experiences that elicit the feelings of awe, wonder, and transcendence. These emotions will encourage spiritual growth and increase overall well-being.

Spirituality and the Non-Religious

Before exploring what spiritual experiences and emotions may benefit the secular, one must first know what these groups believe. These are the basis of facts that are the foundation to further study. There are many varying levels of supernatural belief even

within the non-religious groups but the assumption going forward is for those who consider science as the only truth. To assist in clarity, this thesis will use the term secular, atheist, and non-religious interchangeably while understanding there are varying viewpoints within these categories. These secular groups look at what science has discovered. Some of the clearest and succinct explanations of materialism and all that comes with it have been written by declared atheists. As materialists and through scientific inquiry, many atheists, scientists, and philosophers have come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a soul and the self and free will are an illusion of the brain. There is no evidence as of yet for the existence of an immaterial soul which leads to the conclusion that nothing happens after death. If all thought and feelings of self are created by the brain, when the body and brain dies, the sense of self dies along with it. The physical processes in the brain create the illusion of the self which contributes to the feeling of having a soul. The reasons for why and how the self or consciousness evolved in humans is still a mystery.

Materialists also hold to the idea that free will does not exist. This is difficult for many people to grasp as it feels like they are in control of their own actions. But since the brain is a physical system and all acts and forces in life could technically determine someone's next moves and decisions, the feeling of free will is really an illusion. However, at this time all of those forces on someone's life are too complicated to compile and database and much too complicated for our brains to understand so the feeling of free will remains (Rosenberg 236-238).

Many atheists argue that humanity's morality was created by evolutionary forces,

genes, and the cultural and environmental forces in a person's life. There is no clear agreement on universal moral values although evolutionary scientists generally agree that humanity has evolved to be nice to each other. With the advent of macroeconomics and powerful computers, scientists were able to show that the theory of tit-for-tat is the most beneficial method of working with another person. This evolved over time to the notion of being kind to each other in the expectation that one would receive kindness back. Psychologists would add that the power of reciprocity is at work here as well (Rosenberg 131).

For many people, spirituality is synonymous with religion. The word spirit comes from the Latin *spiritus* meaning breathing. In the early 1200s, the last breath of a dying body also signified the soul or spirit leaving the body. Now the word spirit is most commonly associated with consciousness and more often the soul. As atheists do not believe in a soul due to a lack of scientific evidence, they could be turned off by the idea of incorporating spiritual growth into their life. However there is an aspect of all human life that deals with spirituality. This aspect is something more than just having good physical and mental health and keeping the brain intellectually active. This somewhat ambiguous aspect of humanity deals with one's purpose in life and what motivates someone to get out of bed each morning with the inevitable knowledge of one's mortality. How people cope with this mortality and meaning is more than just emotional or intellectual, it is spiritual. No matter what one believes in, everyone eventually must face questions pertaining to the purpose of life, finding meaning, and death.

From an atheist and neuroscientist's viewpoint, Sam Harris understood the

importance in defining exactly what spirituality is without the context of religion in his most recent book, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*. He states that he does not mean spiritual as it has been associated to immortal souls, ghosts or the mystical. For him, there is no better term than spirituality to describe alternative states of consciousness found through meditation or other methods. Harris argues that there is a connection between scientific facts and spiritual knowledge. By looking at how spiritual knowledge can be tested within psychological or medical fields, researchers can scientifically study what the impacts are on human well-being (6-7).

In philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville's book, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, he describes spirituality and the spirit as similar to consciousness and to what is doing the thinking in our brains. The spirit can be found in the processes of the brain and is compatible with materialism. He argues, "The spirit is not a substance. Rather, it is a function, a capacity, an act ... and this act, at least, is irrefutable, since nothing can be refuted without it" (135). Although spirituality is usually tied to religion, specifically Christianity, Comte-Sponville argues that there are some Eastern religious traditions and older traditions from the past in which spirituality is not tied to the supernatural.

All of these truths of materialism, such as mortality, lack of free will, lack of self, and evolutionary morality are believed by atheists and many secular people. Although many non-religious people struggle with the somewhat cold-hearted facts of science and continue to search for answers in the supernatural, they could actually find some comfort in science by discovering what it has to say regarding spirituality. There is a clear need to separate spirituality from religion. Religion is about culture and learned values that come

from being taught whereas spirituality is more innate and introspective. Through practice, a secular spiritual growth can help those looking for answers.

The Importance of Spiritual Growth

Materialist truths don't provide the most cheerful outlook on life since science is somewhat impartial to what people think or how they feel. Luckily, people can take advantage of science to study, test, and explore what types of activities can increase spiritual well-being. By discovering what types of activities trigger emotional reactions to bring about spiritual growth, scientists can help point the non-religious in the right directions.

This thesis is not looking at increasing peoples' happiness. This study is focusing solely on spiritual growth and spiritual well-being. A side effect of these activities could be happiness but that is not the goal here. There are a lot of different activities people can do in their lives to increase happiness that having nothing to do with religion or spirituality. But the focus is on what type of spiritual growth can the secular experience without God and religion that will increase well-being. The term spirituality can have many religious and supernatural connotations. But for the sake of this thesis, spirituality is defined without religious or supernatural meaning. In the next section, the literature review will cover recent psychological and medical research that provide evidence for the importance of spirituality and some struggles that exist when studying religion and spirituality.

A part of spiritual growth is understanding that emotions and thoughts are the

product of the evolved human brain. Once this realization occurs, there are different practices that can help gain control and rise above strong thoughts and emotions. This leads to greater control over more negative behaviors and habits, which has a positive impact on the survival of the human race. Another aspect of spiritual growth is letting go of physical desires, which can help people become more outwardly focused than inwardly focused. This can encourage people to take better care of those that are alive today and to take better care of the planet for future generations. At the same time, these spiritual practices can help someone create a sense of purpose and find meaning in their life.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

State of Non-Religious Affiliations

To begin a discussion on spirituality without religion, one must first define who exactly the non-religious are. One would think that this would be anyone identifying as atheist or agnostic but the answer is actually more complicated. In the United States, many different surveys have been conducted to reveal religious affiliations. Depending on what survey is reviewed, affiliation can vary but in “The Religious Landscape Study” conducted in 2014 by the Pew Research Center, 22.8% of the population did not identify with any religion. Of those, only 7.1% associated themselves as atheist or agnostic while the rest stated “nothing in particular” or “don’t know.” These numbers have increased 6.7% from seven years prior which represents the largest change of religious affiliation in that time frame. It is clear that the non-religious category is the largest growing “religious” group in the United States and in the Western world.

Of this unaffiliated group, the survey asked how often they feel spiritual peace and well-being and how often they feel wonder about the universe. The percentage is surprisingly high. 40% feel spiritual peace and well-being at least once a week and 47% feel wonder about the universe at least once a week. Many religious people do not believe that spirituality is possible without reference to God and religion. But these results bring about a curious conclusion. People can feel wonder about the universe and some can find spiritual peace and well-being without religion.

In order to not skew the perception of how many non-religious secular people there are in the United States it's important to highlight one result from "The Religious Landscape Study." Of the 22.8% of the population who reported no religion, 27% of those people have a certain belief in God and therefore do have beliefs in the supernatural. This group might skew the numbers in the previous paragraph. Although the study did not look specifically at the unaffiliated who did not believe in God, 31% of atheists felt spiritual peace and well-being, and 54% felt wonder about the universe at least once a week. The percentage of fully secular individuals is probably somewhere between the atheist and non-religious number.

As the non-religious group in the United States is the fastest growing "religious" group, researchers are realizing how important this minority is when studying spirituality and well-being. Professor of Psychology, Christopher Silver, conducted interviews with fifty nine self-proclaimed non-religious people to determine if there were any subsets within the group. As it turns out, he discovered six different groups within the non-religious: Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic, Activist Atheist/Agnostic, Seeker-Agnostic, Anti-Theist, Non-Theist, and Ritual Atheist/Agnostic.

Looking at the different subsets of the non-religious is important in understanding the spectrum of non-belief. Table 1 shows an overview of many of the categories described in the research articles and books referenced in this thesis with some characteristics of each. As Silver affirms, many of the subsets overlap and people can fall into multiple categories. The Non-Theist category is an interesting group of people who are apathetic and don't think about religion, God, or their place in the universe.

Unfortunately, not a lot of research has been done on the well-being of this specific subset of atheism so there is no way to tell if this group is less healthy because of their lack of spirituality or if their definition of spirituality is strictly supernatural.

Another interesting group from the Silver study is the Ritual Atheist/Agnostic. These people enjoy the traditions and rituals of religion but are also grounded in the natural world around them. In his book, *Religion for Atheists*, author and philosopher Alain de Botton argues that there are many beneficial aspects of religion that atheists should incorporate into their spiritual practices. He argues that individuals should pick out the rituals and traditions that one feels drawn towards such as Christmas carols or religious art to help find a sense of spiritual fulfillment. Although this seems like a nice idea, this could backfire when religious groups realize that atheists are secularizing their religious traditions. There are currently many debates regarding the secularization of Christmas and attempting to secularize more religious holidays could increase tensions between the religious and non-religious.

The other groups from Silver's study are the Intellectuals, Activists, and the Seeker-Agnostic. The Seeker-Agnostic is an agnostic in every sense of the word; they are open to the possibilities of a supernatural being but cannot fully commit to believing. An agnostic and the Intellectual are similar in that they are searching for answers and may read many books to fully educate themselves in philosophy and religion. The only difference is agnostics chose uncertainty and the Intellectual chooses atheism. Activists are vocal about being atheists and attempt to persuade others to abandon religion for their secular viewpoint. The New Atheists, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher

Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett with their many anti-religion books and debate appearances would be considered Activist Atheists.

Silver's study to look specifically at atheist viewpoints was one of the most extensive done on the non-religious. As it becomes clear to the academic world that a large minority of people claim no religion, this group will become more important for additional research and to learn more about the subcategories within. Conducting a survey to analyze each of the different atheist groups and their physical and mental well-being would be beneficial. Researchers could try to determine if certain behaviors within the atheist community are healthier and provide a better lifestyle than others.

In Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, he describes a spectrum of probabilities which lays out seven distinct levels of belief. There is the strong theist who believes there is a 100% probability that God exists. The strong theist doesn't just believe that God exists, they know that God exists. Right in the middle is the impartial agnostic who believes there is a 50% chance of God existing and not existing. At the other end of the spectrum is the strong atheist who believes 100% that God does not exist. In between both strong levels of belief are two levels of varying belief in which people are open to the possibility that there is a small chance they are wrong in their belief. This is where Richard Dawkins claims to be. With theism at 1 and atheist at 7, Dawkins says, "I count myself in Category 6, but leaning towards 7—I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden" (74).

There is one other category of thinkers that Dawkins clarifies cannot fit into his spectrum of belief because they do not believe there can be any probabilities assigned to

the question of God's existence. Dawkins calls this category "PAP or permanent agnosticism in principle," which would refuse to be placed on the spectrum of probabilities as they believe in uncertainty (75). In Table 1, the different categories of non-belief have been laid out based on author, with the stronger atheists on the left and agnostics towards the right.

The word atheist means a lack of faith in God and God's existence but doesn't describe well what atheists do believe in. For that reason, some atheists attempt to use words that describe what they do believe in. Blogger Tim Urban describes his belief as truthism, Philosophy Professor Alex Rosenberg says that he believes in scientism over atheism or secular humanism, and the Humanist Phil Zuckerman claims to be an aweist. Some of these new terms make sense although they could cause more confusion than clarity. Atheists believe in science, rationality, and truth, however the terms truthist and scientism don't have a lot of appeal. A person believing in scientism would be called a scientist which would make the latter label even more confusing. The aweist term doesn't make sense as believing in awe would be like a Christian saying he is a lovist as he believes in love. Secular might be a good term to use as it means worldly, not religious and doesn't have some of the negative connotations that atheism has. But secular has more philosophical associations similar to the term materialism. Until a new term can gain traction amongst the secular community, the term atheist implies a belief in materialism, science, and truth.

Aside from the varying terms that some atheists have created, which have not gained a lot of ground, there are a few secular groups that have developed into church

like organizations. The most popular that come to mind are Secular Humanism, Freethinkers Association, and Naturalism. Some of their mission statements sound familiar to this thesis' goal of increasing human well-being. However, it's not necessary to be a part of any of these assorted secular organizations in order to experience the spiritual emotions focused on in this thesis. These groups do provide a social aspect to spirituality and for those who need additional social support systems, these groups may be a possible avenue. Some other groups to add as secular are rationalism and nihilism. These groups are listed in Table 1, but since they aren't clearly on a spectrum of belief as some of the other groups, they have been paired as closely as possible to Silver's atheist categories in the top row. To get a better idea of the unique aspects of these different groups and their spiritual experiences, efforts were made to find examples from as many different categories of secular viewpoints as possible for this thesis' study.

Table 1

Non-Religious Belief Categories

| Author | Belief Categories | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--------------------|--|--------|
| Silver | Anti-Theist | Activist | Intellectual | Seeker Agnostic | Non-Theist | Ritual |
| Pew Research Center | Atheist | Unaffiliated – No belief in God | Unaffiliated – Unsure | Agnostic | Nothing in particular | |
| Dawkins Spectrum of Probabilities | Strong Atheist – 7 | De facto Atheist – 6 | Agnostic leaning towards Atheism - 5 | Agnostic – 4 | Permanent Agnostic in Principle (PAP) | |
| Secular Belief Systems | | Naturalism / Humanism | Freethinker / Rationalist | | Nihilism | |

Spirituality

While looking at census data can be helpful in determining the religious landscape of America, one must also know what people think about spirituality and religion. This next section will review a number of different studies that look at the word spirituality and what different types of definitions come along with it. Some studies specifically look at traditionally non-religious group like scientists, while others survey people with any religious background. Looking at a variety of different types of research can lead one towards a better view of what spirituality is and where future studies should go next.

By combining four studies concerning spirituality, Professors Lynn Underwood and Jeanne Teresi showed that being a spiritual person had to do with “awe, joy that lifts one out of the mundane, and a sense of deep inner peace” (22). These definitions are interesting in that there are no mentions of God or religion even though religious people provided the descriptions. As such, there is no reason why non-religious people couldn’t experience these feelings and possibly be described as spiritual. The next study shows how different religious and non-religious groups describe spirituality.

Professor Ammerman of Boston University decided to take a closer look at the growing spiritual but not religious group. Researchers have noticed a decline of religion and a growing spirituality both in Europe and in the United States and Ammerman was interested in looking at how those who are spiritual but not religious define spirituality (259). In her study of people with all belief backgrounds, she discovered four different views of spirituality: Theistic, Extra-Theistic, Ethical Spirituality, and a Belief and Belonging Spirituality (258).

Ammerman took a very personal approach and conducted a number of interviews and read oral diaries of ninety-five people that represented over 90% of the US religious landscape (261). She then analyzed both the interviews and the diaries to get at the heart of what people believe spirituality to be. Of all those interviewed only 5% were spiritual but not engaged in any religious community. Ammerman's study found that the spiritual and not religious thought a religious spirituality was one of belief and belonging. This small group did not agree with the idea of going to church to check the box and get to heaven. They all believed that spirituality should be something more (273).

The theistic view of spirituality is one based on God and religion. According to Ammerman, most religiously affiliated people described spirituality in these terms (267). The extra-theistic spirituality is one not associated with God but more with feelings. Some examples from the study include feelings of awe and wonder from nature or works of art, and feelings of losing oneself in big ideas or experiencing something larger than themselves. Ninety-one percent of the non-religious group reported their type of spirituality in this extra-theistic sense while only 50% of religious participants did. The next category Ammerman coins as Ethical Spirituality and both religious and non-religious groups believe that living an ethical life is a part of spirituality (273). This is the one viewpoint that overlaps between groups which is slightly ironic as the religious see the non-religious as lacking good ethics. But both groups find spirituality important to their sense of right and wrong. This is interesting as materialists normally find morality to be a result of evolution as stated in Chapter 1. This finding could be due to the researcher's small sample size or to a lack of expertise of the non-religious individuals

interviewed.

The next article to review concerning spirituality was conducted by Professors Ecklund and Long called “Scientists and Spirituality.” They conducted interviews with two-hundred and seventy-five scientists from around the United States regarding religion and spirituality. The academic world originally assumed that since scientists are not typically religious that they would also not be spiritual. After reviewing the interviews, it was found that 26% of all interviewed considered themselves spiritual and over 20% of the atheists claimed to be spiritual atheists (260). The reason for this might have to do with the fact that 100% of scientists described religion and spirituality as separate and “not overlapping categories” (261). Scientists see religion as relating to organization and spiritual related to the individual. Additionally, many scientists described spirituality as “meaning-making without faith” (262).

In Dean Hamer’s *The God Gene*, he looks specifically at what spirituality means as its own human trait. Based off the research done by Robert Cloninger, three different categories have been defined when studying spirituality: self-forgetfulness, transpersonal identification, and mysticism. Self-forgetfulness is similar to the flow state that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi first defined as a person losing themselves in a creative task or work. A person with high self-forgetfulness can be strongly creative but also seem absentminded to others. Transpersonal identification is when someone feels connected to the universe and as though they are a part of everything in it. Someone who scores high in mysticism notices the unique and coincidental in life and sees meaning in them. Cloninger believed that mysticism comes from intuitiveness. People with high

mysticism put a lot of trust and meaning into their intuitions and may also be highly curious. Albert Einstein is a famous example of someone who found the mysteries of life and wonder of existence as some of the driving forces for scientific discovery.

Hamer tested out these new traits of spirituality in a number of different studies. In one, he measured the big five personality traits of psychology and added in questions for the three spiritual traits Cloninger had proposed. These questions were then analyzed and compared to see if any answers overlapped or could be considered a part of the traditional traits. Surprisingly, all of the new spiritual traits did not align with any of the big five personality traits. There was one possible exception in “the openness factor, which contains a measure of imagination that is similar to mysticism” (37). Even with the exception, Hamer concluded that a new spiritual personality trait could be tested and evaluated for in future studies.

In his own future study, Dean Hamer analyzed spirituality trait results compared with three important variables: age, race and gender. Surprisingly, there was no difference between the young and old as Cloninger had originally thought that spirituality might be a sign of maturity. However, there did turn out to be a gender difference in spirituality. In terms of the specific component of spirituality, “women scored 18% higher on self-transcendence than men” (36). There is currently no known reason for why this is however, it is interesting to note that the PEW Religious Landscape Survey reflects these results. The study reports 57% of non-religious are men and within that category, 68% of declared atheists are men. There seems to be some reason for women to more easily experience spiritual emotions and connect with religion. Or perhaps there is a

greater desire for social connection and community found in the church. Whether it be due to society and culture or something genetic only further research will tell.

Spirituality has been defined in many different ways depending on the person and their background. Going forward there should be a separation of the term spirituality from religion and a culture change for the religious to view atheists and non-religious groups as spiritual. If atheists were viewed as more spiritual then it might enhance people's opinions of atheists. Sam Harris' activist atheist stance makes him an ideal person to pioneer spirituality without religion. Secular groups need more outspoken people to announce their spirituality and share their experiences with the world. Hopefully, this can help religious groups realize their shared humanity in that everyone can have spiritual experiences.

Current State of Research in Atheism, Spirituality, and Well-Being

Researchers have only recently started to study non-religious groups and whether or not there are any physical or mental health impacts on not believing in God or affiliating with a religion. These studies often do not look at whether the atheists that participated had any spiritual experiences. Unfortunately, current research has been mostly mixed results but the following articles have brought up possible stressors that the non-religious face. Studies looking specifically at spirituality can help provide scientific evidence to atheists that spirituality can increase well-being and can promote health and longevity. Many of the studies done that show increased well-being in the religious do not separate spirituality as its own trait therefore making it difficult to know what aspects

of religion are causing increased well-being.

As discussed in the first two sections of this chapter, some of the difficulties lie in the classification of non-religious groups and in the definitions of the word spirituality. Some studies will not define “spiritual” clearly and the non-religious may take it to have religious connotations. Other times the categories can be too broad and a group of non-religious with those who believe in souls may see spiritual as a supernatural experience. The non-religious make up a small percentage of the population and finding sample sizes large enough to conduct a good study can be difficult. These are only a couple of problems researchers face when conducting psychological or medical studies on these groups. Even with these difficulties, researchers are pushing forward to determine different impacts non-religiousness has on people.

Psychiatrist Samuel Weber and a group of fellow researchers searched psychological and medical articles to find 14 articles studying physical and mental health in the non-religious. They compiled these results in an article titled, “Psychological Distress Among Religious Nonbelievers: A Systematic Review.” Amongst all of these articles, they found varying psychological stressors among the non-religious and evidence to suggest that greater certainty in one’s belief system, no matter what that may be, resulted in better psychological health (72). One of the stressors studied in a Swedish article from Weber’s review looked at how religious and non-believers felt about death. The non-believers indicated greater anxiety than the religious. In a British study from the same review, religious affiliated participants reported less negative feelings in general and better relationships than agnostics (80). Four different articles indicated one specific

source of stress for atheists in particular was a negative perception from others (81).

From Weber and company's analysis there were a couple of positives found in looking at the non-religious' psychological health. The non-religious were just as well off or sometimes better off than the religious in dealing with the death of a public figure, dealing with old age, and in overall happiness. Overall, there were some inconsistencies and mixed results possibly due to limited sample sizes, categorizing the non-religious differently, and inconsistent measures of distress (Weber 81).

Although this analysis of multiple psychological articles showed some contradictory results the different stressors that were looked at can help atheists and the non-religious examine their own life to see if there are stressors present due to their non-belief. One consistent result found from the review of articles is the negative perception that the religious have of the non-religious, specifically atheists. If non-believers embrace their spiritual experiences in life, then perhaps there would be less fear in announcing oneself as atheist or secular.

A different study by doctoral candidate Jonathon Morgan argues that there is no reason to believe that atheism is not healthy. Many recent articles have been published showing the positive effects that spirituality and religion have on health and these seem to imply that not having religion and spirituality will lead to health issues. However, Morgan states that a number of different studies show that increases in health and emotional well-being are more statistically related to personality traits than belief systems (Morgan 18). These studies suggest that belief systems may not be all that important to health after all.

Another interesting study was conducted comparing atheists, Christians and Buddhists on different beliefs, personalities and factors of well-being. In “Exploring the Atheist Personality: Well-being, Awe, and Magical Thinking in Atheists, Buddhists, and Christians” Psychology Professor Catherine Caldwell-Harris et al. asked each group a number of different questions pertaining to well-being, empathy, spirituality and magical beliefs. Some of the problems with the word spirituality immediately became apparent as the atheist group did not respond favorably to any questions with words like sacred, inner spirit, or spiritual. If these types of words were not in the questions then all three groups scored similarly. All groups reported finding meaning in their life, having purpose, striving to reduce excess and being satisfied with who they’d become (Caldwell-Harris et al 665). In a free response survey given only to the atheist group, 71% reported having experienced feelings of wonderment with most claiming nature or science as the cause (668). This goes to show the importance of defining spirituality and on changing the perception of the word. If a sense of wonder is considered a spiritual experience, then this article would suggest that many are having spiritual experiences without religion’s assistance.

Jennifer Stellar, a researcher from University of California Berkeley, conducted research on how positive emotions can boost the immune system and increase health. A survey was given to over 200 students on what type of experiences they had felt in a given day. Then a cheek swap was taken to measure for a specific type of cytokine which would indicate levels of inflammation. The students that had reported the most positive emotions to include awe, wonder and amazement showed the lowest levels of cytokines.

Stellar admits that she cannot be sure whether the lower cytokines are causing the positive emotions or if it's working the other way around as people with inflammation have been shown to withdraw from their environment. The study did show that the lowered cytokines were still present even after controlling for variables of personality and health (Stellar 129).

In another study, the importance of separating spirituality and religion has been identified by Professor Carolyn Aldwin et al. in "Differing Pathways Between Religiousness, Spirituality, and Health: A Self-Regulation Perspective." Aldwin et al. hypothesized that religiousness and spirituality contributed to different factors of health and self-regulation. Many studies combine religiousness and spirituality into one contributing factor but here they have been deliberately separated. In the researchers' model, they posit that religiousness contributes to increased healthy behaviors and spirituality contributes to increased emotional regulation which in turn can positively affect behavior (Aldwin et al. 16).

After reviewing a large number of medical and psychological studies, Aldwin et al. concluded that there is a decent amount of evidence to support their hypothesis however future studies should attempt to separate spirituality and religiousness for greater clarity in results (17). They further show that when spirituality is properly defined, many non-religious individuals who are spiritual are not losing out on the health benefits that religion is shown to support. Their spirituality can increase emotional regulation which then creates healthier coping mechanisms and greater control over their behavioral responses to stressful life events.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Determining Spiritual Emotions to Benefit the Non-Religious

To determine the spiritual emotions that are most accessible to the non-religious, a compilation of atheist and other non-religious authors was analyzed. Many non-religious people are likely feeling a lot of these emotions already however they may not contribute these feelings to their spiritual well-being. In Professor Ammerman's study discussed earlier, over 90% of non-religious reported their spirituality in an extra-theistic manner dealing more with feelings and without mention of God. This type of secular spirituality is exactly the type analyzed here.

Table 2 identifies the authors examined and the belief label they claim hold. By examining books and writings from a broad variety of authors, a large number of experiences were noted that elicited spiritual emotions. Some authors specifically claimed these emotions as spiritual, others said they contributed to helping them find meaning in the world and purpose for their life. The spiritual emotions are examined in the right most column to assist in finding similarities or differences. The focus of the authors chosen are known atheists however there are a few other viewpoints from some scientists, philosophers, and humanists as well. Many authors did not give examples of spiritual emotions from their direct experiences but chose to write about other people's experiences. Therefore, the next section is divided between primary sources and

secondary sources.

Table 2

Spiritual Experiences of the Non-Religious

| Author | Belief | Spiritual Experience / Trigger | Emotional Response |
|-----------------------|------------------|---|--|
| Primary Sources | | | |
| Richard Dawkins | Atheist | Night sky, Mysteries of the universe | Reverence, Awe |
| Sam Harris | Atheist | Mindfulness meditation | Boundless, Connection w/cosmos |
| | | Psychedelics | Connection w/world, Timelessness |
| Alain De Botton | Atheist | Stars | Awe |
| Andre Comte-Sponville | Atheist | Universe, Night sky | Immensity, Puny |
| | | Nature, sometimes these feelings can be triggered spontaneously | Oceanic feeling, Unity w/the world, Serenity, Loss of self, Timelessness |
| Zuckerman | Humanist | Nature | Awe |
| Tom Clark | Naturalist | Meditation | Connection w/world |
| | | Immensity of matter, space and time | Wonder |
| George Levine | Secular Humanism | Nature, birds in Central Park | Fullness, Awe |
| Secondary Sources | | | |
| Charles Taylor | Physicist | Science and Physics | Cosmic awe |
| Ecklund & Long | Physicist | Nature, Existence of things | Awe |
| George Vaillant | Psychiatrist | Temporal lobe seizures | Awe |
| Newberg & Waldman | Atheist | Nature | Connection to world, Peace |
| | | Meditation | Loss of self, space and time |

Primary Source Perspectives

Richard Dawkins, probably one of the most well-known atheists of our time discussed spirituality and religion in an interview with the Sydney Opera House in 2013. Dawkins discusses the importance of separating the term spiritual with any supernatural

meaning. He also describes how many scientists, himself included, are spiritual in this more natural way. “They have a sense of reverence and awe for the mysteries that we still don’t understand about the universe and they have the sense of emotional reaction ... to looking up at the Milky Way for example and some people will use the word spiritual for that” (00:45–01:04).

Sam Harris discusses extensively his personal experiences with mindfulness meditation in his most recent book, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*. Although an outspoken atheist, Harris has spent many years searching for spiritual enlightenment with a number of different gurus and mentors of eastern religious traditions. Harris claims that the most important goal of spirituality is to break free from the illusion of the self. While practicing different types of meditation, Harris was able to achieve spiritual experiences, to lose his sense of self and “experience a kind of boundless, open awareness—to feel, in other words, at one with the cosmos” (43). Harris primarily focuses on the importance of being free from the self while also acknowledging the illusion of the self and of free will.

Somewhat controversially, Sam Harris discusses using hallucinogens to create a spiritual experience and elicit alternate states of consciousness. Harris describes his experience of using psychedelics with descriptions of a higher consciousness, connection to the world, and timelessness. “It is one thing to be awestruck by the sight of a giant redwood and amazed at the details of its history and underlying biology. It is quite another to spend an apparent eternity in egoless communion with it” (194). This makes it clear that spiritual emotions and experiences are created by the brain or neurochemistry

of the brain and there are certain foolproof ways of eliciting these emotions with drugs such as the kind Harris uses. But as demonstrated in Table 2, there are many other experiences or triggers that can help one feel the same spiritual emotions as the drug induces.

Philosopher Alain De Botton's idea of wonder and awe is in the form of perspective. Using the biblical example of the story of Job, Botton argues that religions are good at helping people realize their lives are insignificant in the world and this perspective helps them get through tough times. Botton argues a view of the stars and galaxies could give the same perspective shift in the secular world. "It is through their contemplation that the secular are afforded the best chance of experiencing the redemptive feelings of awe" (201). Botton specifically picks the night sky as a spiritual trigger for awe as he realizes the importance of the stars to both religious and secular spirituality.

The philosopher and atheist, Andre Comte-Sponville writes at great lengths in *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* about the different spiritual emotions atheists can experience. The first is the feeling one experiences when looking up at the vastness of the night sky. He describes his emotional reaction to the sky as peaceful but also a reminder of his smallness. Although some feel dismay or despair when they come up to this vastness, Comte-Sponville says, "the faraway reassures me: It puts my anxieties in perspective. When I contemplate immensity, the ego seems laughable by comparison" (149). Similar to the benefits Harris describes of mindfulness meditation, Comte-Sponville feels as though contemplating the universe helps him to break free from the

confines of his ego.

In another description of spiritual emotions, Comte-Sponville goes into great detail of mystical experiences and oceanic feelings. Although he creates a division between these two experiences, for the purposes of this thesis they have been combined as they both are described as feelings of a loss of self, unity with nature and the world, and timelessness. Comte-Sponville doesn't contribute these emotions to any specific trigger. However, he describes in detail, a spiritual experience that he had while walking through the forest on a peaceful night with a group of friends. "The *ego* had vanished ... No more value judgments; only reality. No more time; only the present. No more nothingness; only being" (157). He goes on to describe the moment as timeless, perfect, joyful and intense. Although it is possible that these types of intense spiritual experiences are spontaneous and random, it is likely that his natural environment was a contributing factor.

As mentioned earlier, Secular humanist Phil Zuckerman declares himself an Aweist as he claims to be often filled with a "profound, overflowing *feeling*" that he can only describe as awe. He says that these feelings can come from a variety of sources such as nature or interacting with people. Zuckerman feels awe when contemplating the mysteries and complexities of the universe but that he can also experience a profound sense of awe in the mundane moments too such as playing football in the mud or going to the beach (209). Of the spiritual experiences that Zuckerman describes, the most common theme and most likely cause of awe is nature.

The naturalist, Tom Clark, describes his viewpoint as "a comprehensive, science-

based worldview, premised on the idea that existence in all its dimensions and complexity is a single, natural realm, not split between the natural and the supernatural.” In Clark’s article from *Naturalism.org* titled “Spirituality Without Faith,” he examines how the non-religious can practice naturalistic spirituality. He argues that there are three aspects to naturalistic reality: connection, mystery and wonder. Connection comes from science describing how humankind is connected to the world around us on all levels. Humans are, “fully linked with our surroundings in time, space, matter/energy, and causality.” Clark says that the feeling of unity can be elicited through meditation as it inhibits the orientation functions in our brain.

The second aspect to naturalistic spirituality is mystery and this helps non-believers come to terms with the universe’s lack of meaning or purpose. Realizing that questions about purpose and meaning are ultimately unanswerable can lead to “a state of profound existential astonishment.” Clark argues that the universe is above questions about meaning and this leads the non-religious to realize they don’t need answers and can instead take in the universe and their lives just as they are. The last aspect Clark discusses is wonder. He writes, “Wonder, although not the only possible response when contemplating the immense scale of matter, space, and time, is surely appropriate once we realize we belong to something so very far beyond us. Such naturalistic wonder and awe counts as deeply spiritual.” Clark explains that spiritual experiences are intrinsically rewarding and they are not a way of knowing something but a way of being. He further claims that these feelings are evidence for how ingrained humankind is in nature.

In George Levine’s compilation of essays titled *The Joy of Secularism*, he

gathered together some of the brightest secularist minds of our time to answer the question of how to find joy in a secular world. In his introduction he describes the need for a satisfactory secularity, one in which the “fullness” of life can be experienced and felt without religion. Levine describes this sense of fullness while feeling joy and wonder from watching birds in Central Park. He hopes for a future in which secularism is an improvement over religion and not a negation of things religion used to provide. In this sense, he argues for a secular humanism in which secularism can reclaim ethics, art, and daily life. He believes that this secular humanism is the only way to reconcile the feelings of emotional needs of humans with reason and rationality (Levine 11).

Secondary Source Perspectives

In the essay “Disenchantment—Reenchantment” from *The Joy of Secularism*, Philosopher Charles Taylor argues that secularism has the capability to bring about enchantment. He brings up an important question about the seemingly cold reality that divides many secularists, “A debate may then break out over what we can or ought to do about this: face the empty world with resolute courage, or call into question the rejection of religion, or perhaps find some new source of meaning” (Taylor 65). He suggests that many still feel a sense of wonder at the complexity of the universe in both evolution and life itself. He argues that although many claim science has disenchanting the world, the discoveries in science have actually helped to reenchant it. Through science, humanity has come to understand how huge the universe is in space and time which brings about feelings of both awe and fragility.

Taylor describes an example of the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter's description of spiritual experience. This experience is taken from one of the scientist's journal articles, "Reductionism and Religion" in which he writes, "perhaps my lifelong training in physics and science in general has given me a deep awe at seeing how the most substantial and familiar of objects or experiences fades away, as one approaches the infinitesimal scale ... This in me evokes a cosmic awe" (67). Taylor states that shifting from a theistic perspective of wonder to a materialistic one should not diminish the strength of the experience only the description in which the experience came from.

Ecklund and Long's "Scientists and Spirituality" article quoted a few different scientists' spiritual experiences and emotions that exemplified the hundreds of interviews conducted. One such physicist explained his idea of spirituality eloquently. "The feeling you get considering the age of all things in existence and how long it could go on. Sort of awe at the totality of things. If that's what spirituality is, then I get it" (qtd. in Ecklund and Long 266). He also describes feeling this way when looking out over the ocean or at the immense biodiversity in the rainforest. The physicist worries that his Christian friends wouldn't understand what he means by this description. The religious could not invalidate his spirituality but could highlight the differences in how religion discusses spirituality with theistic connotations.

Research psychiatrist and professor, George Vaillant reviewed spiritual emotions in his book *Spiritual Evolution: How We are Wired for Faith, Hope, and Love*. In his analysis of the emotion of awe, he reviewed medical research done on temporal lobe seizures and the experiences induced by them. These experiences have many times been

contributed to spiritual experiences and some scientists believe that various religious teachers and leaders throughout history may have been suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy (173). People who have these temporal lobe seizures describe the experience as eliciting feelings of awe, unity, déjà vu, and enchantment. They can also experience a sudden realization of meaning and the feelings evoked can lead to religious conversions (171).

Director of the Center for Spirituality and the Mind at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Andrew Newberg and associate fellow at the center, Mark Waldman wrote about their case study on spiritual atheism in *Born to Believe: God, Science, and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs*. Their study focused on one man who claimed to be an atheist, meditated daily and had spiritual experiences often. This man's first experience, which led him down the path to practicing meditation, occurred while sitting in his office overlooking a garden. He suddenly had an experience of intense silence in which he felt "intimately connected to everything ... It was as if everything in the universe was in its proper place" (215). He stated that he had not experienced anything else like this ever again and although it occurred over twenty years ago, he still remembers the feelings from that time clearly. Now while practicing meditation, he can voluntarily elicit feelings of a loss of self, and a loss of the perception of space and time bringing him closer to the spiritual experience of his past (233).

Now that secular spiritual experiences have been compiled in Table 2, some themes and patterns can be found. Out of the fifteen triggers of spiritual emotions described above, nine experiences elicited a feeling of awe or in one case wonder and six

experiences caused feelings of loss of self and connection or unity with the world. As shown in Table 2, there are a lot of different ways to describe this second feeling: a loss of self, connection with the world, oceanic feelings, timelessness, and boundless. To tie all of these expressions together, this emotion will be referred to as transcendence for reasons that will be explained further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spiritual Emotions that Contribute to Well-Being

After examining all of the spiritual emotions from differing non-religious viewpoints, two distinct emotions were discovered that cannot be easily placed into the mental, social or physical categories of well-being. Looking at the different triggers for these emotions, it seems for most that there is more work and practice involved in attempting to overcome the illusion of the self. These emotions are less commonly felt spontaneously and usually some type of action by the person is required to have this experience like meditation. The fact that awe is felt with an increasing knowledge of science and not just from being in nature shows that awe is almost uniquely geared for the non-religious to experience. Many secular people have a motivation to always find the truth and this search can lead them to feelings of awe and wonder at the complexities and mysteries of the world. This next section will look deeper into each of these spiritual emotions and then discuss some alternate theories of secular spirituality.

Transcendence

Transcendence can be described in many different ways but there is an overarching theme of a loss of self and a connection to the world. In a secular sense, transcendence isn't uplift towards the divine but more of an expansion of the self to the natural world in which we live. Philosopher Matthew Alper hypothesizes in his book *The God Part of the Brain: A Scientific Interpretation of Human Spirituality and God* that a

possible reason for why humans feel this transcendence is to help alleviate the stresses of reality and help them deal with the awareness of death. By essentially shutting down the self which is constantly worrying and thinking, anxiety and stress are eliminated because there is no self to feel those negative emotions (150-151).

In an essay from *The Joys of Secularism* titled “The Wetfooted Understory” Professor Rebecca Stott explores secular spirituality and the types of feelings normally associated with transcendence. Although she prefers to use the word immersion and describes it as a “sink or slide through the facts *downward*, or sideways, not upward as some transcendent epiphany” (219). She claims that Darwin also opposed the term transcendence but describes some spiritual emotions that he was aware of. In Darwin’s exploration of the beauty and strangeness found in everyday life and nature he experienced feelings such as the dissolution of self, wonder, and the sublime (220). Although she doesn’t prefer the term, it is clear that the emotion she wrote about is the same as the one discovered here.

In Hamer’s *The God Gene*, all of Cloninger’s spiritual traits can be correlated to the two found in this thesis. The traits of Transpersonal Identification and Self-forgetfulness aligns most closely to transcendence in that it is a state of losing one’s sense of self and feeling as though part of the universe around them. As mentioned previously with Sam Harris’ experiences and George Vaillant’s studies, Hamer discusses the role that drugs such as psilocybin and temporal lobe epilepsy can play in eliciting transcendental spiritual experiences. Hamer’s central arguments of the God gene theory revolve around the sense of self as being key to spirituality. He argues that a person’s

ability to lose their sense of self and feel one with the universe is the main component of spirituality. To discover what genes might play a role in this activity, it's necessary to know the brain chemistry responsible for these spiritual emotions. Hamer argues that monoamines are what shape a person's values and perspectives in life. The genes responsible for monoamines are likely to be the ones that shape consciousness and the sense of self (137-138).

The well-researched spiritual activity of meditation, specifically mindfulness meditation, has been shown to promote spiritual growth and well-being. Scientists have amassed a large amount of research on mindfulness meditation and increasingly found positive and helpful benefits with virtually no negative side effects. Mindfulness is the state of being aware of the world with all five senses and not thinking distracted thoughts that have nothing to do with what a person is doing at that moment. Meditation is the focused energy of attempting to control one's thoughts in a specific manner. Putting them together, mindfulness meditation is the focus of that energy on one's thoughts and training the brain and body not to react to those thoughts. Although meditation has normally been considered a religious practice, there are now secular magazines all based on the idea of mindfulness with no mention of Buddhism or religion. No matter what religion someone prescribes to, meditation has been shown to increase well-being by giving one a sense of interconnectedness with the world around them and allowing people some control over their thoughts and how they react to them.

Psychologists understand the importance thoughts have to the happiness and well-being of humanity. Realizing that thoughts are a product of the physical brain and the

feeling of self is an illusion helps people to stop identifying with their thoughts and to break free from their control. Neuroscientist and atheist, Sam Harris argues that meditation, specifically mindfulness meditation, holds the key to breaking through the illusion of the self and breaking free from toxic negative thought habits.

Sam Harris describes mindfulness as the simple nonjudgmental attention and awareness of thoughts. Although this can be done at any time, the best way to practice mindfulness is through meditation. Harris recommends the Buddhist tradition of *vipasana* or “insight” meditation as a good starting point for beginners. This type of meditation is most commonly used for study by neuroscientists and psychologists. The practice consists of sitting for a set period of time and being aware of the thoughts that arise and then returning your attention to your breath. Harris explains that the goal of meditation is to create a perspective change in which one can experience the present moment before any thoughts arise. “Being mindful is not a matter of *thinking* more clearly about experience; it is the act of *experiencing* more clearly, including the arising of thoughts themselves” (Harris 36).

An additional scientist that can corroborate with Harris on the importance and helpfulness of mindfulness is psychologist Ellen Langer. In her book *Mindfulness*, she describes some of the benefits of being mindful in different aspects of life. One of the main themes of the results found in her research studies is that mindfulness helps create control of one’s thoughts to avoid mindless thinking and behavior. According to Langer, being mindful can help reverse memory loss in old age (89), increase creativity (129), decrease burnout at work (148), decrease prejudices (167), and increase health (192). By

being aware of automatic thoughts and behavior, one can gain control over those thoughts and change their behaviors for more freedom and control in their lives.

Psychologists Brown and Ryan showed that mindfulness increases psychological well-being through increased “self-regulated behavior and positive emotional states” (822). They argue that one of the reasons why mindfulness increases well-being is that the state of being fully present enhances the current moment. In their mindfulness research, they found that mindfulness was a predictor of greater life satisfaction and self-esteem, lower depression and anxiety, greater vitality and less medical visits (830). In their second study, Brown and Ryan compared mindfulness attributes of Zen center members to adults from the local community. The results highlighted the difference mindfulness training and practice makes to increasing a mindful awareness in life (833). People who scored high in a mindfulness score are more aware of their emotions and capable of altering them. They are also “less likely to be self-conscious, socially anxious, or ruminative” (832).

Awe and Wonder

Many of the secular authors mentioned in this thesis have argued that awe plays a large role in the stories of religion and in people’s conversions to becoming religious. Awe is clearly a common spiritual emotion felt by the religious and similarly, awe is one of the most commonly discussed emotions in secular writings about spirituality. Although awe and wonder are not synonymous they are usually felt concurrently in spiritual experiences. Both will be reviewed in the following section as both play a role to the more spontaneous spiritual experiences many secular people have reported aside from the

more transcendent ones of the previous section.

Paolo Costa goes into great detail to describe the feelings of wonder in his essay, “A Secular Wonder” from *Joys of Secularism*. After going through a few famous philosophers’ descriptions of wonder, Costa explains that to wonder is “to feel a sense of bodily and mental thrill as a result of a sensory (or imaginative or mnemonic) encounter ... with something in our world that appears new and unpredicted” (142). He explains that one of the key aspects of wondering is the absorption and attention one has on the event in the world that triggers the emotion. The emotion of wonder gives one a feeling of presence and joy in being alive. He argues that wonder encourages “respect, compassion, gentleness, humility, and unpossessiveness” (147).

Costa argues that the reason for the human experience of wonder is to help humans cope with the difficulties of life. “When we yield to wonder, we stop and let ourselves be absorbed for a while into the world’s complexity” (148). This is similar to Alper’s theory of why humans feel transcendence mentioned in the previous section. The idea that both of these emotions slowly evolved over time to help humans cope with their consciousness and awareness of death may be the reason why these emotions are normally tied closely to religion and are now considered spiritual. As religions were created to help cope with mortality and the difficulties of life, these spiritual emotions were tied in to ideas of God or some universal entities watching over humanity. It’s possible that as some people denounced God and the supernatural, the difficult life situations did not go away and these spiritual emotions remained to assist in these situations.

In Psychology Professor Jonathan Haidt's book *The Happiness Hypothesis*, he discusses the emotions of awe and transcendence claiming them to be one in the same, "Awe is *the* emotion of self-transcendence" (202). He came to realize in the psychology academic world that awe is rarely if ever studied. After looking back through history, he finds that awe is normally accompanied with feelings of fear and submission to something greater than oneself. Haidt argues that awe is triggered in the following circumstances: "a person perceives something vast; and the vast thing cannot be accommodated by the person's existing mental structures" (203). Whatever triggers awe in people brings out both feelings of powerlessness and admiration.

This feeling of powerlessness or helplessness is explored in more depth in relation to the psychologist Sigmund Freud's theories. In an essay by Adam Phillip called "Freud's Helplessness" Phillip describes one of Freud's theories as to why people create religion. When it comes to the most important events in life like birth and death, humans ultimately do not have full control. This lack of control, Freud posits, is one of the reasons for the creation of religion. Creating or imagining an afterlife in which people are immortal is a way for humans to cope with the helplessness of their life however it's not ultimately a good coping mechanism because people doubt its truth. Instead, Freud argues that the healthier way to deal with this helplessness is to accept and live with it instead of denying it. Although he doesn't talk specifically about wonder, Freud argues that the only way to feel truly satisfied with life is to experience helplessness. A method for feeling helplessness could be through experiences that elicit awe and create a reminder of how beautiful but fragile life is and how small humanity is in the universe.

From *The God Gene*, Cloninger's third scale of spirituality is called "spiritual acceptance versus rational materialism" and is what Hamer prefers to call mysticism (28). People who score high in mysticism tend to find meaning in the mundane and see lucky coincidences as proof of a higher power. After study, Cloninger came to the conclusion that the "psychological function of mysticism is intuitiveness" (29). People who rely more on intuition and feeling than on evidence based thinking tend to score higher in mysticism. Atheists who show this trait, tend to express it in terms of feeling wonder and awe about the universe or the complexity of life, although this is probably the most difficult trait for atheists to experience. Atheists don't tend to see coincidences as anything other than chance and therefore are less likely to feel this spiritual intuition. When they do experience wonder and mystery it is more commonly found in nature or through their pursuit of learning.

In Matthew Alper's book *The God Part of the Brain*, he reviews a number of different medical studies that point almost conclusively towards the biological underpinnings of the emotions of awe and transcendence. Through the work done by Andrew Newberg with the SPECT and more recent studies conducted with fMRI machines, a neurobiological basis for spiritual experiences have been discovered (152-154). These studies further support the assumptions made at the beginning of this thesis for a material and physical world in which there is no evidence of an immaterial soul creating these spiritual emotions.

Alternative Perspectives on Non-Religious Spirituality

Tim Urban, the writer of the Blog *Wait but Why*, has a skill for making very complicated topics into simplified ones through the use of comics and words. In “A Religion for the Nonreligious” he explains how spirituality is important for growth as a person and he sees spiritual growth like steps on a staircase. He argues that overcoming the feelings of the self with mindfulness or other means brings humanity up one step towards a higher consciousness. At the next step of consciousness there are glimpses of awe at the realization of how big the universe is or when studying science and nature. Grasping at those feelings of enormity and complexity brings humanity into an even higher state of consciousness. Based on the authors studied in this thesis, there is some evidence to show that Urban’s steps may actually be in reverse order as the majority of secular claims are ones of awe and wonder while only a few are of losing the illusion of self. It also seems to be more difficult to obtain feelings of transcendence as it usually requires a person to do something versus the more spontaneous nature of feeling awe and wonder.

There are some atheists and non-religious who do not believe in any type of spiritual growth. For them, either the word spirituality has too many religious connotations or perhaps they do not feel that wonder or losing the sense of self are spiritual emotions. Either way, these famous thinkers do not mention or discuss personal experiences of spirituality in their literature. Philosophy Professor Alex Rosenberg would argue that emotions are chemical reactions that occur in the brain and they should not be identified with. The two New Atheists not mentioned in this thesis, Christopher Hitchens

and Daniel Dennett, do not seem concerned with spiritual growth and have not discussed spirituality in the same ways that Dawkins and Harris have. Professor Bruce Robbins discusses enchantment in his essay “Enchantment? No, Thank You!” He associates enchantment with a time of magic and supernaturalism and does not want to see those types of ideas reappear. Some New Age spiritualities do bring up new and old supernatural ideas that don’t have any basis in science so Robbins’ concerns may be valid. But as this thesis argues, there are ways to be spiritual while keeping a materialistic mindset.

Another viewpoint from psychiatrist Dr. George Vaillant defined spirituality as “the amalgam of the positive emotions that bind us to other human beings—and to our experience of “God” as we may understand Her/Him” (5). Dr. Vaillant doesn't claim to be an atheist or claim any religion in his book, yet he is a very spiritual person and writes eloquently for humanity’s need for seven positive emotions that are strongly tied to religions. The positive emotions that he argues for are love, hope, joy, forgiveness, compassion, faith, awe, and gratitude. The only one of Vaillant’s emotions that this thesis argues as important for spiritual well-being is awe. The rest of the positive emotions are not discussed in this thesis because no secular authors described these emotions in their descriptions of secular spirituality and these emotions are more concerned with social or mental well-being. Strangely, Vaillant writes that secular humanists desecrate the positive emotion of awe but then does not explain why or how (165).

Elevation, coined by psychologist Jonathon Haidt, is when someone feels warmth and love for humanity. He argues that awe and transcendence are other avenues to feeling

elevation. For Haidt, the idea of elevation came about when looking at how he personally approaches spirituality. He argues that elevation is an emotion that gives people a sense of uplift for something greater than the reality of the world. This thesis would disagree with Haidt and argue that elevation and awe are different emotions entirely. For Haidt, elevation is an emotion about connection. The emotion arises when feeling connected to other people and the feelings of awe and wonder are usually directed towards nature or science. Elevation would contribute more to social growth than it would to the spiritual. Additionally, the feelings of awe are almost never described as feelings of warmth or love, its more commonly described as feeling small, humble, and alone.

One view that geneticist Dean Hamer has on hallucinogenic drugs is quite different from Neuroscientist Sam Harris' take on drugs. Hamer argues that "a drug trip, no matter how profound its effects, is not the same as a mystical experience. It's an artificial substitute—a spiritual saccharin" (89). However, the study that Hamer describes in his book shows how even after twenty-five years, a person's drug trip had a profound effect on them. To say that these experiences are not valid spiritual ones would negate the changes in these people's perceptions and any changes in their spirituality. Whether an experience is spontaneous or planned with drugs, the brain chemistry is the same and therefore both are equally real especially from the perspective of the person experiencing it. In the future, if there were a legal and safe way to take these drugs, then perhaps someday people who are born genetically low in the spiritual traits can use them to enhance their spiritual experiences and gain a new perspective on their concept of consciousness.

In Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman's book *Born to Believe*, they discuss secular enchantment. They bring up the idea of flow, which can be described as being so fully absorbed in something that the sense of self is lost. Whether it be in playing the piano, some type of meticulous physical work, or listening to music, this feeling of being fully present and at peace can arise. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who researched and coined the term flow, believed that the flow state brought about the experience of transcendence by allowing a person to lose oneself in an action (Newberg and Waldman 246). Although there is no doubt that secular people experience this feeling of flow and may lose the sense of self, they do not claim those feelings as spiritual often. This is evident in the lack of any secular author discussed in this thesis claiming that being absorbed in activity caused him to feel spiritual emotions or spiritual growth. The studies done by Robert Cloninger on spirituality show that self-forgetfulness is indeed its own psychological trait separate from other personality traits and does correlate with transpersonal identification and mysticism. However, the results of this thesis suggest that this flow state is not necessary for spiritual growth.

Some of the philosopher atheists like Alain de Botton and Andre Comte-Sponville tend towards a broad definition of secular spirituality and suggest experiencing art museums, hikes through nature, and even old churches to find spiritual emotions. This is where the idea of spirituality can get a little ambiguous as feelings of loss of self can be found in a multitude of different ways that are sometimes very dependent and unique to the individual. Additionally, the non-religious should be wary and skeptical of New Age teachings that are pretending to be scientific. Science and nature on its own can create the

spiritual emotions people are searching for. As discussed, many secular philosophers and scientists have figured out the importance of breaking free of the illusion of the self and feeling awe and wonder for their spiritual growth and overall well-being.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The Future of Secular Spirituality

Even though science suggests that the universe is purposeless, people have to decide how to create meaning in their lives. Whether it be the universe, God, other people or science, they need to have a belief that there is meaning behind what they do and some kind of purpose to their life. Spiritual emotions are universal like all emotions no matter what your religious belief. As much as some secular people may want to ignore them, unlocking the emotions associated with spirituality will increase spiritual well-being and overall happiness in one's life. Whether it be through gaining a mastery of one's thoughts or by creating perspective in a feeling of awe at the enormity and complexity of the world, these spiritual emotions will assist someone through their life and help fill the gap that many fill with religion.

Secular Humanism and Unitarian Universalist churches attempt to recreate religion but end up pushing away many of the non-religious with their similarities to religion. However these organizations are better suited to support the social growth that some secular people may be missing by not attending church. Perhaps by teaching children the importance of spiritual growth through an open minded perspective it will allow them to experience and try many different secular and religious methods to figure out what works best for them. Including secular spirituality in those options will help show them that people can be happy and fulfilled without religion.

Church sermons can deal with difficult topics and assist people through moral dilemmas and difficult life situations. There are no other dedicated groups like religion that one can go to weekly to learn how to be a better person. Unfortunately, learning about secular spiritual emotions through sermons or books won't actually increase spiritual growth but being aware of it is the first step towards action. Books and videos can teach one how to do mindfulness meditation and secular mindfulness retreats are becoming more popular. TED Talks showcase new inspiring ideas and teach complex topics that could possibly create some wonder or awe. But secular teachers of spirituality have a long way to go before they might have the type of influence over culture that religion holds.

There are a few interesting new atheist movements, one of which is called The Sunday Assembly. With an ambitious motto of "live better, help often, wonder more," the group wants to inspire community service and create a social support network for those without religion. The secular gathering uses modern Christian church services as a model for conducting their Assembly. Many comparisons can be made to a protestant church with group singing, dancing, collection of money, and time for socializing. This could appeal for those who have chosen to give up their religious beliefs but miss the inspiration and social support found in church service. But journalist Ruth Garner of Premier Christianity is unsure whether the Assembly can provide the support needed during truly difficult life experiences or for those suffering from addiction. Although their intentions are good, there is no central theme around which to organize and the faith missing from this may lead to future problems. Garner believes the Sunday Assembly is

full of optimism but missing a sense of hope that traditional churches provide through faith in God.

In Professor of Philosophy Philip Kitcher's, "Challenges of Secularism" he admits that religions have been able to refine the techniques to create spiritual experiences and increase their frequency. Religions are often an easier route to spiritual growth for a lot of people. In that sense, secular spirituality should look at finding ways to help sustain and prolong their own spiritual experiences to assist in making this spirituality easier to access for newcomers. Kitcher hopes to renew the quest for a "common faith" to help increase the psychological states of well-being necessary without religion.

If secularization continues on its current path, perhaps religions will eventually turn into a common spirituality that all humans experience through their own unique paths. Spirituality, as defined naturally, is more compatible with science than religion is. As scientists are ever searching for the truth and understanding the mysteries and complexities of the world, they might be uniquely qualified to organize and lead this new spiritual secularism as they are constantly on the forefront of what produces awe and wonder in humanity. Imagine a spirituality founded on scientific evidence that helps people discover and learn what spiritual experiences are best for their growth and unique psychological well-being. This could in turn increase compassion and understanding amongst all humans towards a better world.

Suggested Future Research

There is evidence to support that similar to other types of emotions, the ability to experience spiritual emotions is on a spectrum and some people feel these emotions with more frequency and intensity than others. Philosopher Matthew Alper in his book, *The "God" Part of the Brain* discussed a number of different research articles in which evidence was found for a "Spiritual Gene" (161). Dean Hamer also discusses this spiritual gene in his book, *The God Gene*. These people with the gene may be more predisposed to being religious and drawn towards spiritual experiences. There is a possibility that many atheists are on the other end of the spectrum in being able to experience these types of emotions; it's likely they don't feel awe and wonder as strongly as the religious do and this keeps them from having sudden religious conversions.

Further study on Robert Cloninger's spiritual traits could be examined and correlated with different religiously associated groups to discover where atheists and non-religious fall on the spectrum compared to the more religious. An interesting study would be to look at the health and longevity and see if those who score higher on spiritual traits are healthier or live longer than those who score low. Another study can introduce spiritual practices such as daily walks through nature or daily meditations for a specific amount of time and see if these practices could increase a person's score on their spiritual personality traits.

In general, the group of people who claim to be spiritual but not religious should be studied in more depth. As shown in this thesis, the classification of the different groups and belief systems within the non-religious is complex and ambiguous. As beliefs

are an ever evolving and fluid topic there may never be a perfect way to categorize everyone. But the more research is done on the secular people in society the more clarity can be found in secular spiritual experiences and spiritual emotions. Due to the complexity of the topic, survey based research is inadequate as terms such as spiritual become misconstrued amongst non-religious participants. To grasp a full understanding, interview based studies have been able to capture a greater picture in studying spirituality. More research should be done similar to Ecklund and Long's article "Scientists and Spirituality," but with different non-religious groups like atheists and secular humanists. It would also be interesting to see if other occupational groups like the medical field or academic field would find similar results of spiritual atheism as found with scientists.

Even though some psychologists and philosophers have done good research regarding spirituality in the non-religious, the idea of spirituality as separate from religion is only recently gaining traction with psychological and medical research. With the increase of outspoken scientists, philosophers, and atheists claiming to have a materialistic spiritual side, more people will become aware of a spiritual option without the strings attached to religion. If more people learn of the benefits of feeling transcendence, awe and wonder, the future of spirituality without religion and a new focus on spiritual growth will be promising.

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