

**The Spirituality of Atheists,
Non-Theists and
Deconverts**

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Introductory Remarks

- Surprisingly (or not): there are non-theists and atheists who self-identify as “spiritual” or “more spiritual than religious.”
- Conceptually based strategy for assessment of non-theism - which
- avoids one-sided substantivist or functional approaches: attending to structural aspects
- Conceptual key categories: act of **transcending** (transcendence, Luckmann) / ascribing **ultimacy** (ultimate concern, Tillich)
- Include in conceptual aspect of transcendence a distinction between
 - **vertical** (e.g. God in heaven; the Divine above) and
 - **horizontal** transcendence (e.g. Mother Earth; self)
- This opens a perspective on giving the “spiritual non-theist” a place in the religious field.
- Moving beyond a static, synchronic perspective: We need to attend to disaffiliates / deconverts who turn away from vertical transcendence!
- For psychology of religion research, the most interesting research questions regard: **motivations**, **predictors** such as personality or cognitive or religious style; **outcomes** such as well-being, coping, health etc.

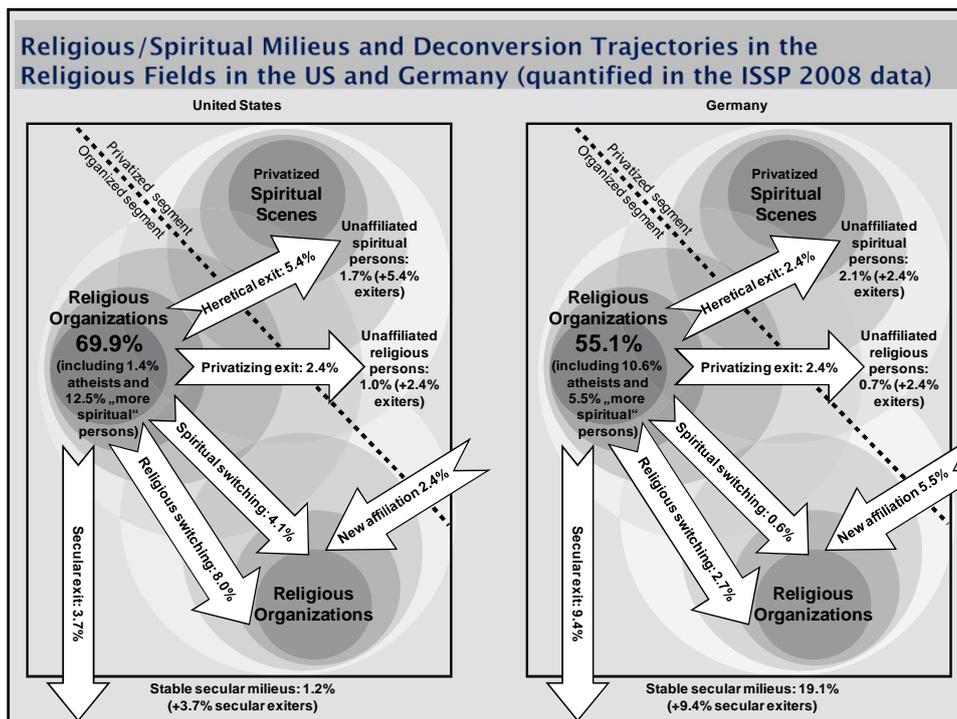
In press ...

Some details of this presentation will be published in:

Streib/Klein Chapter on „Atheists, Agnostics and Apostates“ in the *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion and Spirituality* (Pargament, Exline, & Jones, eds. 2012)

Streib Chapter on „Deconversion“ in the *Oxford Handbook on Religious Conversion* (Rambo/Farhadian, eds., 2012)

Identifying ‚Spiritual Non-theists‘ in the Religious Field on the Basis of the ISSP 2008, Religion III Data



The “Nones”: Nonaffiliates and Disaffiliates from Pre-Adolescent Religious Affiliation (ISSP 2008, Religion III)

	U.S.A. (N=1,311)	Germany (N=1,669)
Religious affiliation without difference to pre-adolescence	63.5%	61.1%
Switching between Protestant denominations	8.0%	
Change of religious affiliation (U.S.A.: other than switching)	8.3%	3.4%
New religious affiliation, while none in pre-adolescence	3.8%	1.6%
Termination of pre-adolescent religious affiliation	11.6%	14.0%
No religious affiliation, neither currently, nor in pre-adolescence	4.7%	19.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

(Source: ISSP 2008)

Change of Belief in God

	ISSP 2008 U.S.A. (N=1,323)	ISSP 2008 Germany (N=1,482)
Which best describes your beliefs about God:		
I don't believe in God and never have.	4.2%	28.3%
I don't believe in God now, but I used to.	5.4%	15.2%
I believe in God now, but I didn't used to.	7.3%	8.5%
I believe in God now and I always have.	83.1%	47.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

(Source: ISSP 2008)

Spiritual/Religious Self-Identification and Religious Affiliation in Germany and USA

	ISSP 2008 U.S.A. (N=1,323)	ISSP 2008 Germany (N=1,482)
What best describes you:		
I follow a religion and consider myself to be a spiritual person interested in the sacred or the supernatural.	40.7%	9.8%
I follow a religion, but don't consider myself to be a spiritual person interested in the sacred or the supernatural.	23.4%	30.9%
I don't follow a religion, but consider myself to be a spiritual person interested in the sacred or the supernatural.	24.0%	11.5%
I don't follow a religion and don't consider myself to be a spiritual person interested in the sacred or the supernatural.	11.9%	47.9%
Total	100.0 %	100.0%

Source: ISSP 2008

Spiritual/Religious Self-Identification and Theistic/Non-Theistic Belief in Germany and USA Source: ISSP 2008, Religion III			Spiritual/Religious Self-Identification (Q32)				Total	
			I follow a religion, I am a spiritual person	I follow a religion, I am not a spiritual person	I don't follow a religion, I am a spiritual person	I don't follow a religion, I am not a spiritual person		
Germany	What best describes beliefs about God (Q17)	I don't believe in God now and I never have	Count	1	4	32	364	401
		% of Total	.1%	.3%	2.5%	28.1%	30.9%	
	I don't believe in God now, but I used to	Count	5	22	38	143	208	
		% of Total	.4%	1.7%	2.9%	11.0%	16.0%	
	I believe in God now, but I didn't use to	Count	17	40	16	31	104	
		% of Total	1.3%	3.1%	1.2%	2.4%	8.0%	
	I believe in God now and I always have	Count	114	340	51	79	584	
% of Total		8.8%	26.2%	3.9%	6.1%	45.0%		
Total		Count	137	406	137	617	1297	
		% of Total	10.6%	31.3%	10.6%	47.6%	100.0%	
United States	What best describes beliefs about God (Q17)	I don't believe in God now and I never have	Count	0	1	14	39	54
		% of Total	.0%	.1%	1.1%	3.1%	4.3%	
	I don't believe in God now, but I used to	Count	3	8	23	37	71	
		% of Total	.2%	.6%	1.8%	2.9%	5.6%	
	I believe in God now, but I didn't use to	Count	40	20	29	6	95	
		% of Total	3.2%	1.6%	2.3%	.5%	7.5%	
	I believe in God now and I always have	Count	483	273	230	62	1048	
% of Total		38.1%	21.5%	18.1%	4.9%	82.6%		
Total		Count	526	302	296	144	1268	
		% of Total	41.5%	23.8%	23.3%	11.4%	100.0%	

Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study on Deconversion

**Re-Analysis from the
Deconversion Project Data Set:**

with special attention to
the „Spirituality“ of Non-theists and
Deconverts

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Method & Sample in the Bielefeld–Based Study on Deconversion

- ▣ Methods
 - Narrative Interviews
 - Faith Development Interviews
 - Questionnaire including
 - Questions for spiritual/religious self-identification
 - Big Five
 - Psychological Well-Being & Growth Scale
 - Religious Fundamentalism
 - Right-Wing Authoritarianism
 - Items for religious schemata / Religious Schema Scale (part of sample)
- ▣ Sample
 - Narrative Interviews: 99 deconverts (50% in Germany and the U.S.)
 - 278 Faith development (all deconverts; rest: in-tradition members)
 - 1,197 questionnaire data

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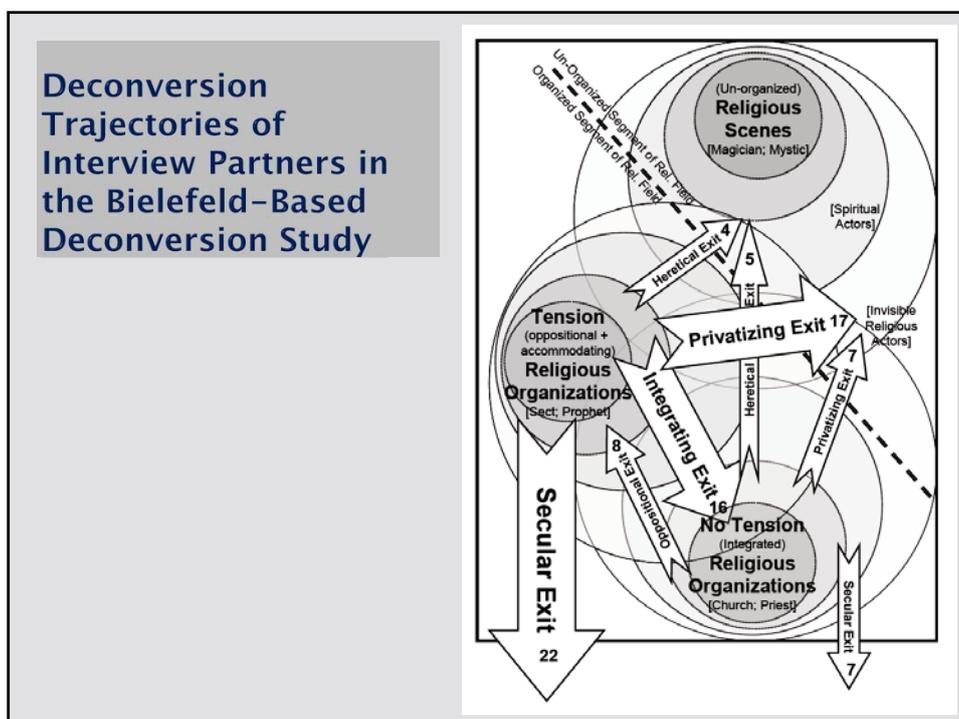
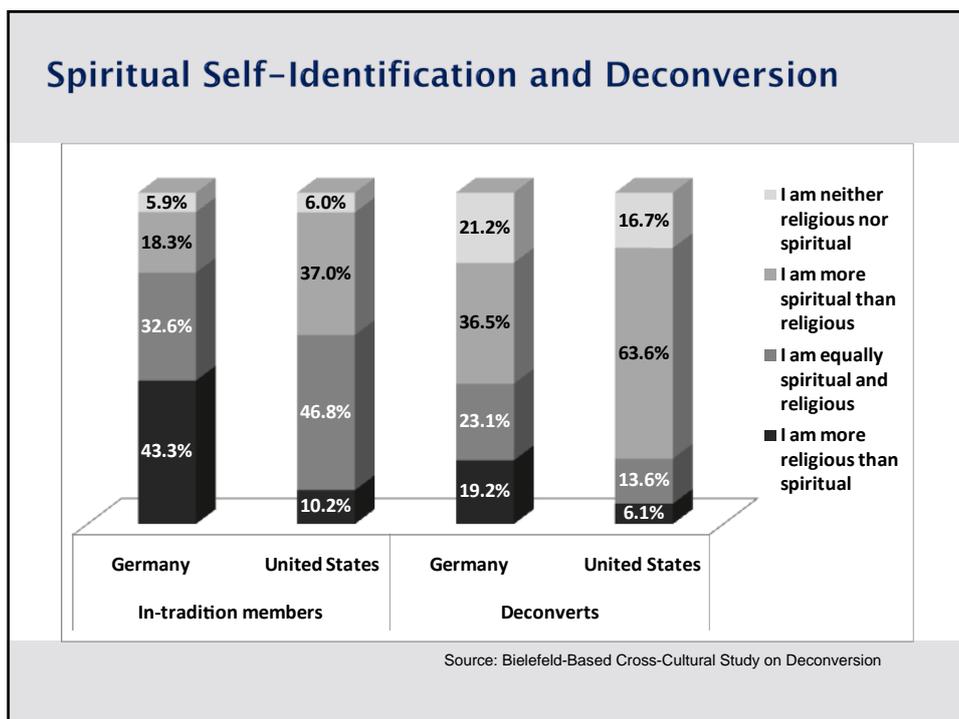
Some Key Results of the Bielefeld–Based Cross-cultural Study on Deconversion

- Qualitative Results:
- Typology of **deconversion trajectories** in the religious field
- Typology of **deconversion narratives** based on interpretation of narrative interviews
- **Faith Development** Interview Scores: considerable more **Stage 4** in deconversion groups
- Quantitative Results for deconverts:
- Big Five: *openness to experience* **higher**
- Psychological Well-Being: Sense of **personal growth higher**
 - (for Germans only: **lower** *environmental mastery* and *positive relations with others* can indicate a (mild) crisis for German deconverts)
- Religious **Fundamentalism: lower**
- Scores on the **Religious Schema Scale:**
 - *truth of texts and teachings*: deconverts are **lower**
 - *xenosophia/inter-religious dialog*: deconverts are **higher**
- „More **spiritual** than religious“: deconverts **double**

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Spiritual Self-Identification and Deconversion Trajectories

More spiritual or religious? * Deconversion Trajectories Crosstabulation

Count		Deconversion Trajectories						Total
		Secularizing Exit	Oppositional Exit	Religious Switching	Integrating Exit	Privatizing Exit	Heretical Exit	
More spiritual or religious?	more religious than spiritual	3	1	1	5	2	0	12
	more spiritual than religious	8	3	5	9	15	5	45
	equally religious and spiritual	2	2	3	1	3	1	12
	neither religious nor spiritual	14	0	1	1	1	2	19
Total		27	6	10	16	21	8	88

Spiritual Self-Identification and Non-Theism

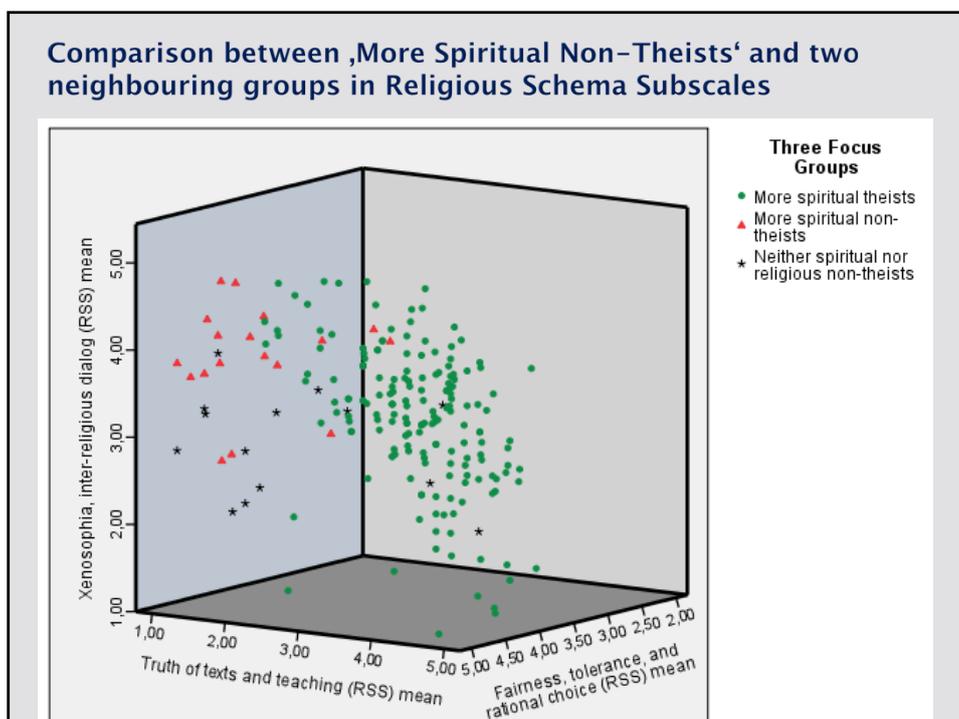
More spiritual or religious? * Vertical Transcendence Groups Crosstabulation

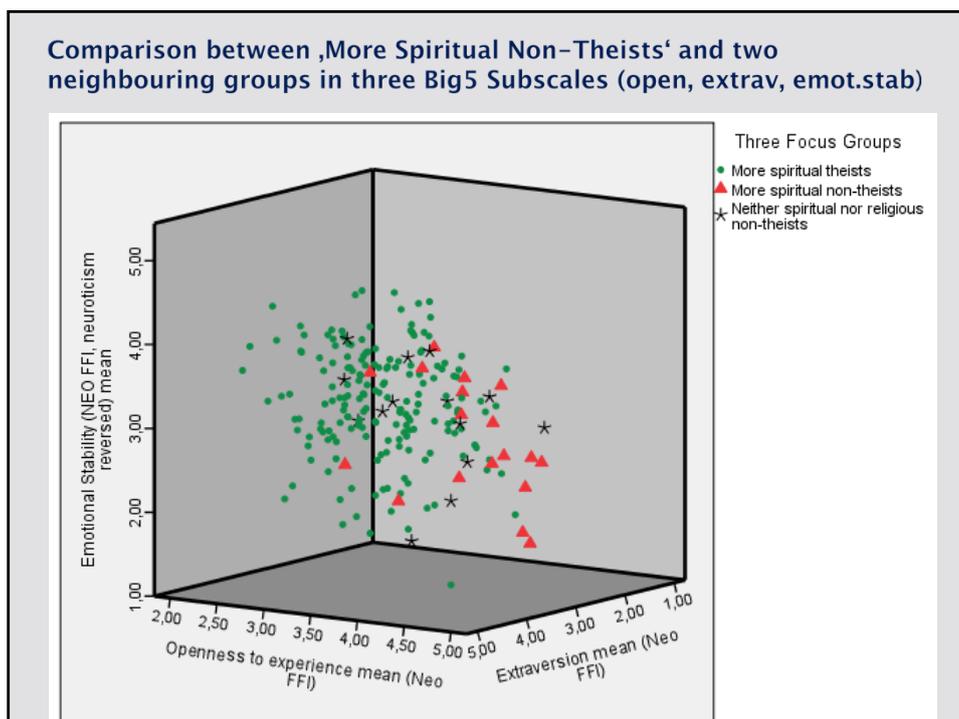
Count		Vertical Transcendence Groups					Total
		strong disagreement with vertical transcendence	Disagreement with vertical transcendence	neutral	agreement with vertical transcendence	strong agreement with vertical transcendence	
More spiritual or religious?	more religious than spiritual	0	2	30	66	51	149
	more spiritual than religious	3	15	64	91	91	264
	equally religious and spiritual	2	4	49	141	138	334
	neither religious nor spiritual	9	5	21	12	13	60
Total		14	26	164	310	293	807
% of Total		1.7%	3.2%	20.3%	38.4%	36.3%	100.0%

More spiritual non-theists

More spiritual theists

Neither spiritual nor religious non-theists





Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study on Deconversion

(First) Results Spirituality Project Data:

The „spirituality“ of non-theists
and its relation to religious schemata
and personality

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Method & Sample in the Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study on the Semantics of Spirituality

- ▣ **Methods**
 - Experiment: IAT on the semantics of „spirituality“
 - Faith Development Interviews
 - Questionnaire including
 - Questions for spiritual/religious self-identification
 - Semantic differentials
 - Religious Schema Scale
 - Big Five
 - Psychological Well-Being & Growth Scale
- ▣ **Sample** (Oct 2011)
 - 1,887 questionnaire data (female: 56.8% GER; 63.0% U.S.; mean age US: 34.4, GER: 43.2)
 - In progress: ca. 120 Faith development Interviews plus IAT measures (ca. 50% in Germany and 50% in the U.S.)

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Universal Semantic Differential for the English Language with E-P-A Facotr Structure in English (according to Osgood, 1962)

HIGHEST LOADING SCALES ON FACTORS I-III; SCALE-ON-SCALE ANALYSIS, PRINCIPAL AXIS METHOD

Evaluation		Potency		Activity	
Factor I (49% CFV)*		Factor II (15% CFV)		Factor III (9% CFV)	
nice—awful	.92	big—little	.86	burning—freezing	.81
fine—coarse	.92	powerful—powerless	.81	hot—cold	.76
heavenly—hellish	.91	strong—weak	.77	fast—slow	.66
smooth—rough	.91	long—short	.75	sharp—dull	.53
mild—harsh	.88	full—empty	.67	light—dark	.50
clean—dirty	.87	many—few	.65	young—old	.49

Osgood, C. E. (1962). Studies on the Generality of Affective Meaning Systems. *American Anthropologist*, 17, 10-28.

Focusgroup Construction

Focusgroup Construction was based on two dimensions:

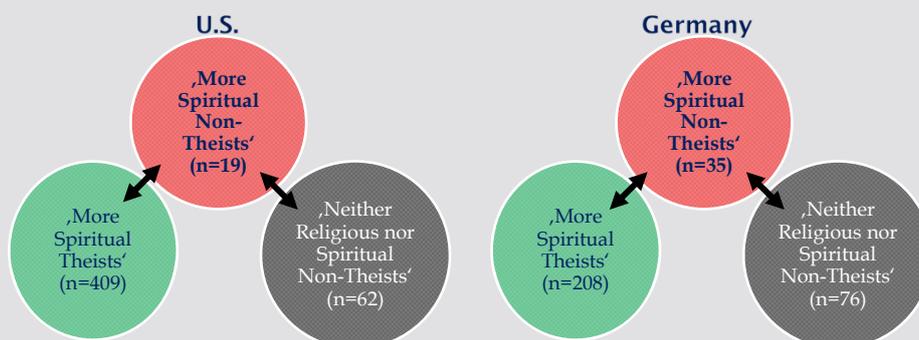
- a. Self-identification on two self-rating scales for „spiritual“ and for „religious“
- b. Self-identification as „atheist“ or „non-theist“ plus one item which indicates vertical transcendence.

This way five focusgroups have been identified:

	More religious than spiritual	Equally religious and spiritual	More spiritual than religious	Neither religious nor spiritual
Vertical Transcendence = Agreement with theism (atgs_5 >= 6)	More religious than spiritual theists USA: n=79 (7.1%) BRD: n=56 (7.2%)	Religious and spiritual theists USA: n=267 (24.0%) BRD: n=84 (10.9%)	More spiritual than religious theists USA: n=409 (36.7%) BRD: n=208 (26.9%)	x
Horizontal Transcendence or Denial of Transcendence (Self-Identification as „atheists“ or „non-theist“)	x	x	More spiritual than religious atheists and non-theists USA: n=19 (1.7%) BRD: n=35 (4.5%)	Atheists and non-theists without interest in religion or spirituality USA: n=62 (5.6%) BRD: n=76 (9.8%)

„More Spiritual Non-Theists‘ Compared

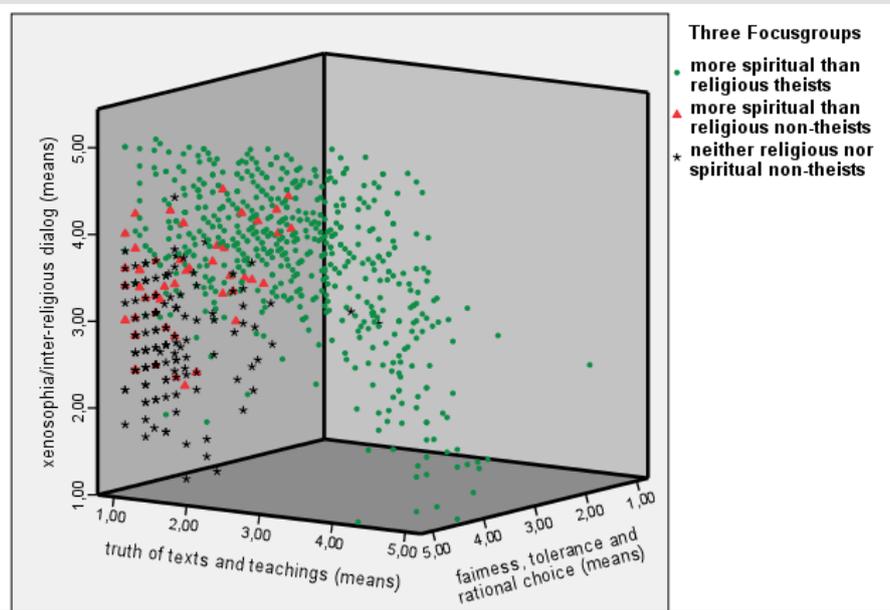
to two neighbouring groups: a. ‚More Spiritual Theists‘ and b. ‚Neither Religious nor Spiritual Non-Theists‘



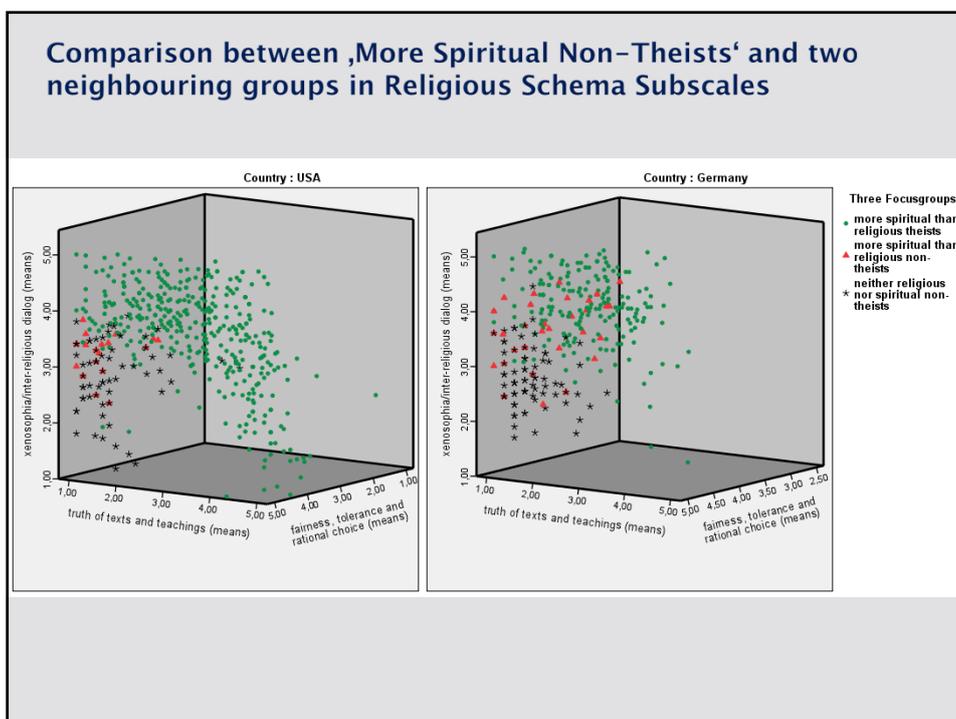
attending to ...

1. Religious Schema Subscales
2. Big Five Personality Subscales
3. Sematic Differentials

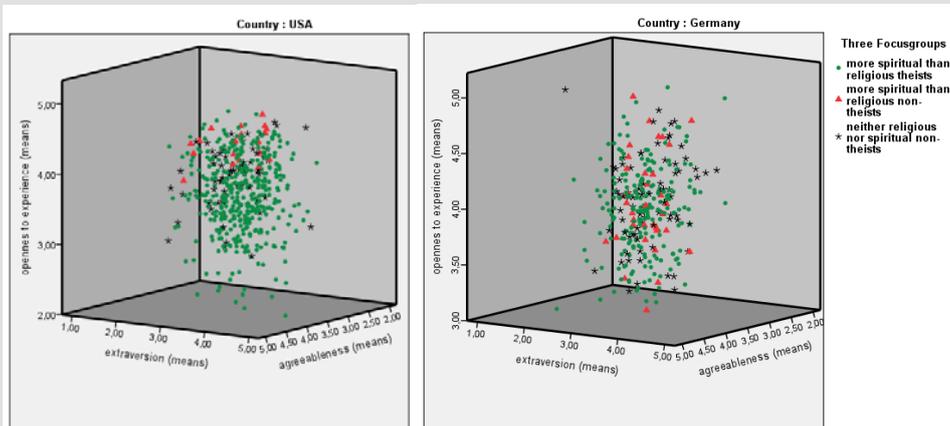
Comparison between 'More Spiritual Non-Theists' and two neighbouring groups in Religious Schema Subscales



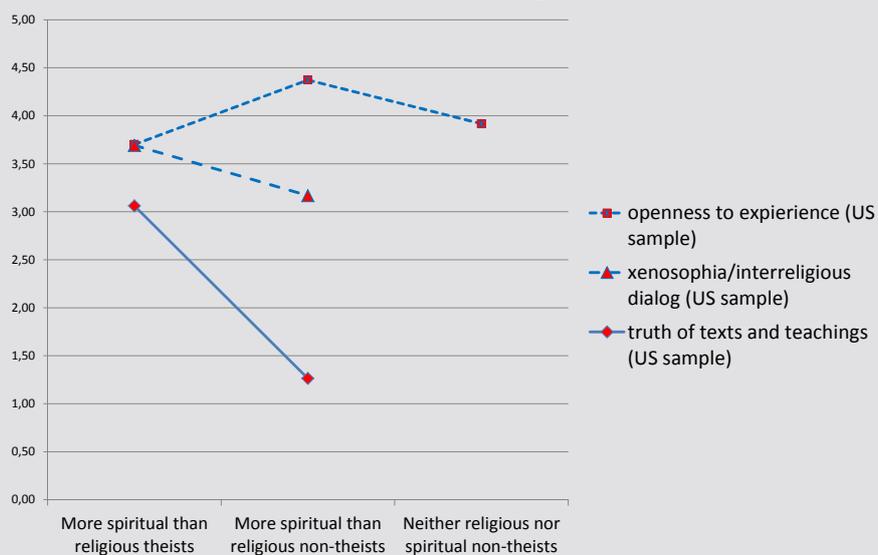
Comparison between 'More Spiritual Non-Theists' and two neighbouring groups in Religious Schema Subscales



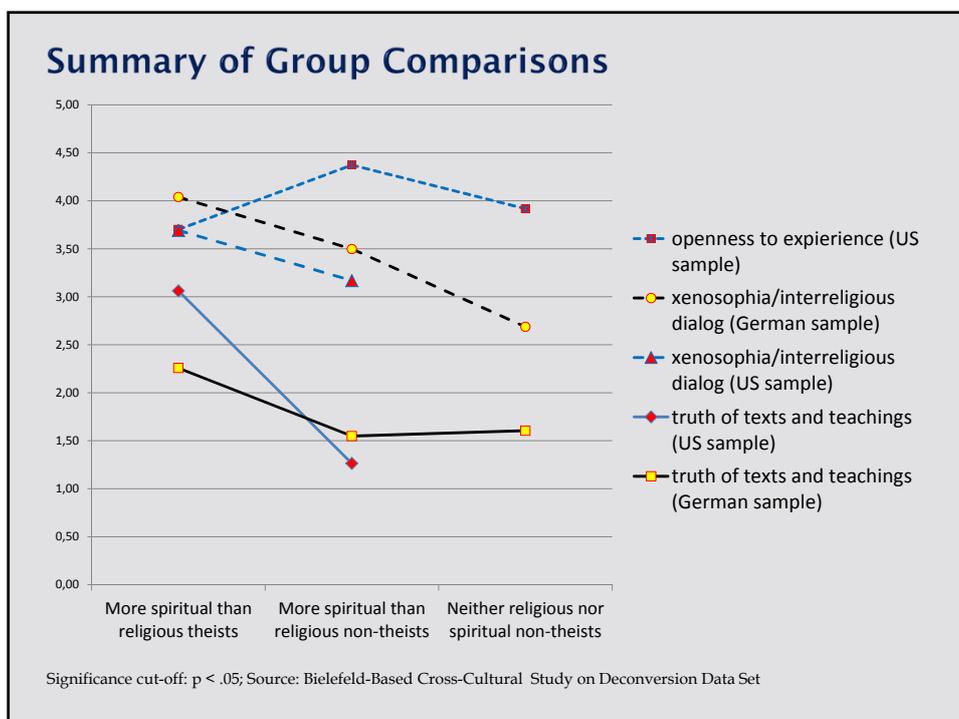
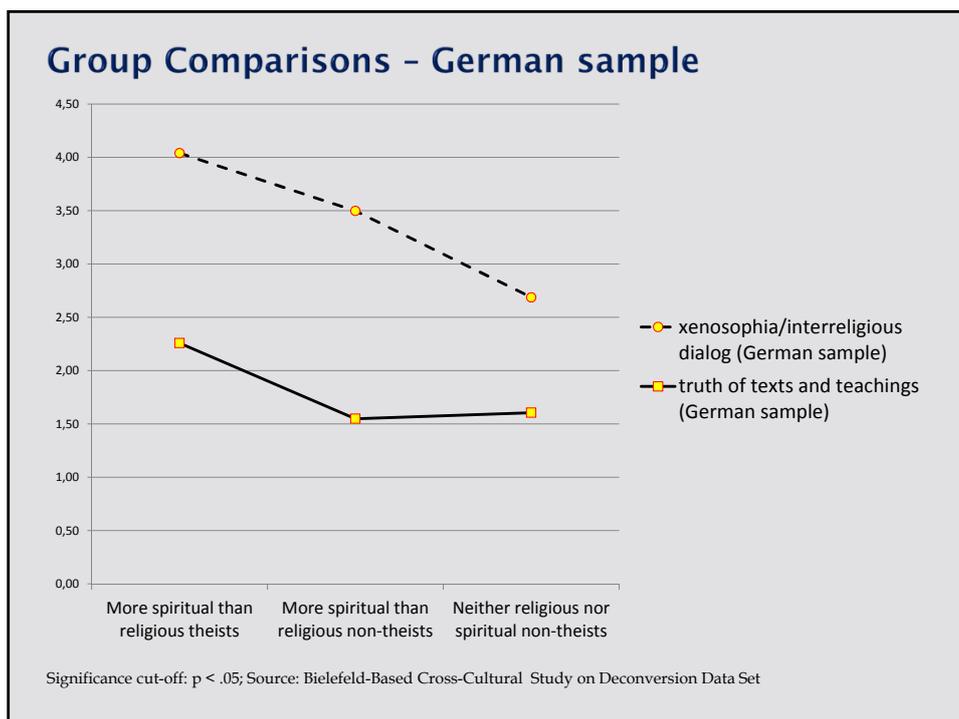
Comparison between 'More Spiritual Non-Theists' and two neighbouring groups in three Big5 Subscales (open, extrav, agree)



Group Comparisons - U.S. sample -



Significance cut-off: $p < .05$; Source: Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study on Deconversion Data Set



Conclusion from Group Comparison

„More Spiritual Non-Theists“ ...

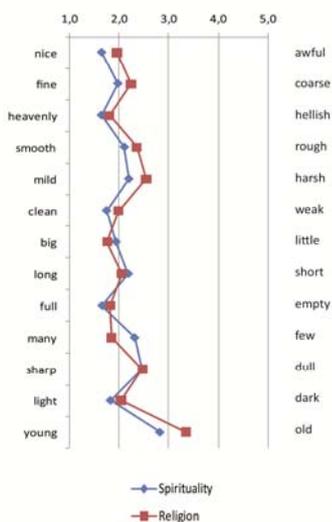
1. ... contrast to „More Spiritual Theists“ in
 - a. **lower** scores on *truth of texts and teachings* (RSS) – large mean difference in both countries
 - b. **lower** scores on *xenosophia/inter-religious dialog* (RSS) – considerable mean difference in both countries
 - c. **higher** scores on *openness to experience* (Big Five) – significant only for the U.S.

2. ... contrast with „Neither Religious nor Spiritual Non-Theists“ in
 - a. **higher** scores on *xenosophia/inter-religious dialog* (RSS) – significant only for Germany
 - b. **slightly lower** scores on *truth of texts and teachings* (RSS) – significant only for Germany
 - c. **higher** scores on *openness to experience* (Big Five) – significant only for the U.S.

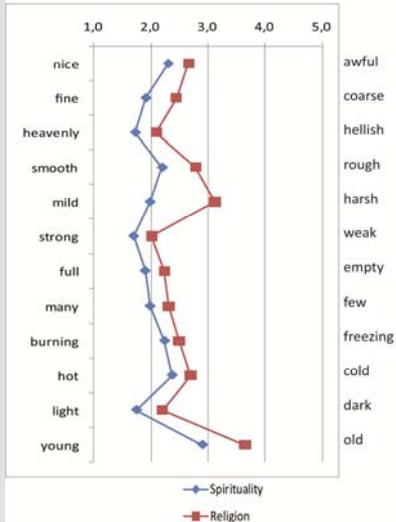
Comparison on the Semantic Differential

“Equally religious and spiritual” theists in Osgood Semantic Differential

Equally spiritual and religious theists (USA)

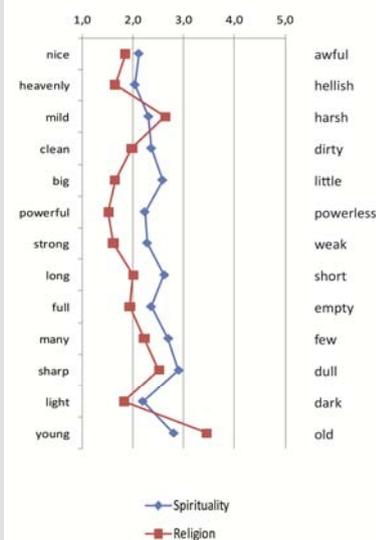


Equally spiritual and religious theists (Germany)

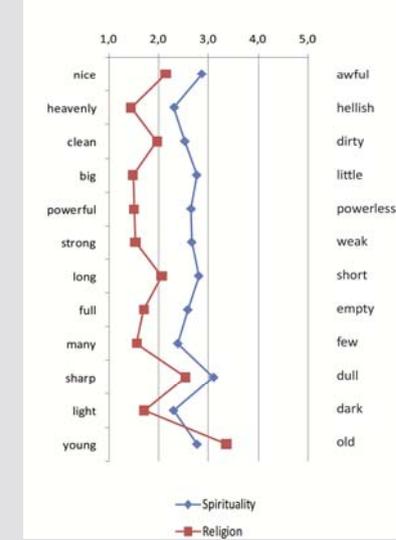


“More religious than spiritual” theists in Osgood Semantic Differential

More religious than spiritual theists (USA)

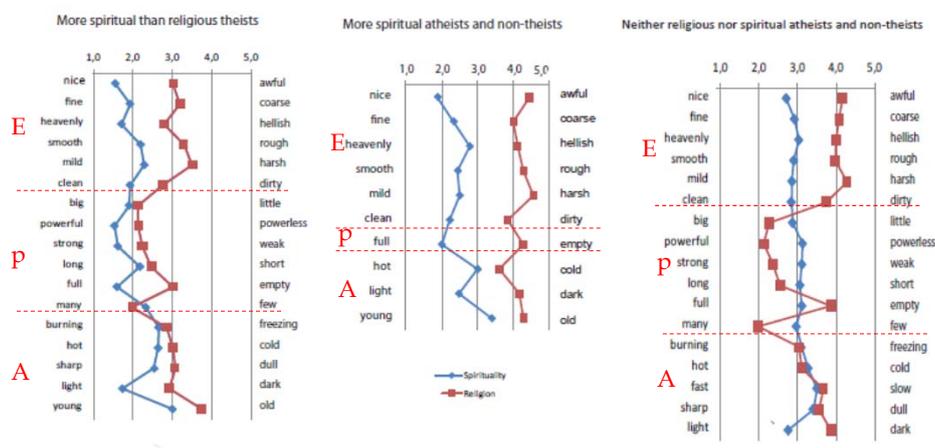


More religious than spiritual theists (Germany)



Comparison between 'More Spiritual Non-Theists' and two neighboring groups in Osgood Universal Semantic Differential: US sample

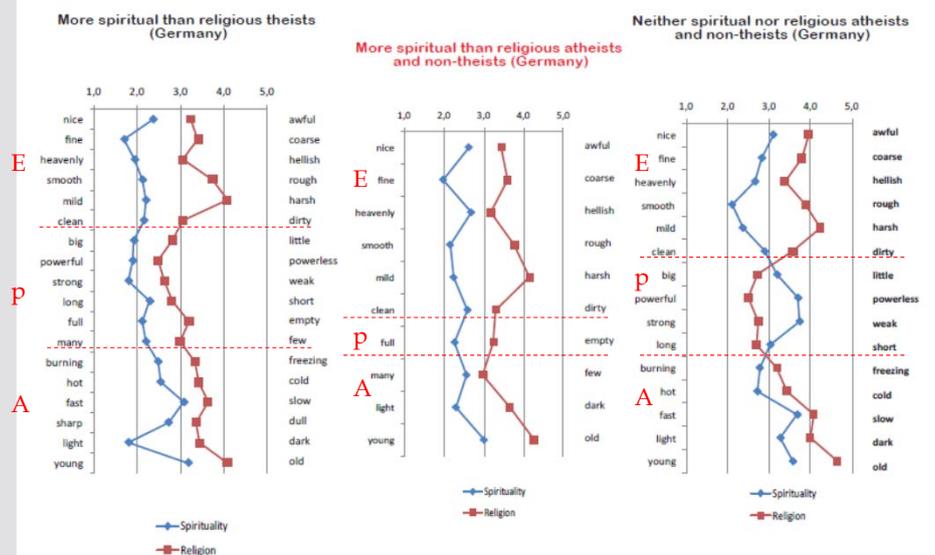
Semantics of „Spirituality“ and „Religion“ for Three Selected Focusgroups in the U.S. Sample



E = Evaluation; P = Potency; A = Activity

Comparison between 'More Spiritual Non-Theists' and two neighbouring groups in Osgood Semantic Differential: German sample

Semantics of „Spirituality“ and „Religion“ for Three Selected Focusgroups in the German Sample



Bielefeld-Based Cross-Cultural Study on Deconversion

Conclusion

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General Conclusion

1. A new and interesting perspective results from paying special attention to the “spiritual” self-identification of atheists and non-theists. In the ISSP data and in our own studies, we find a small, but rather interesting group of atheists and non-theists who self-identify as “spiritual, but not religious.”
2. As characteristics of this group, we could identify the following:
 - a) significantly lower scores on the subscale *truth of texts and teachings* of the Religious Schema Scale – compared to the more spiritual theists,
 - b) but also lower scores on the RSS subscale *xenosophia / inter-religious dialog*.
 - c) More spiritual non-theists are also characterized by relatively higher *openness to experience* compared to both neighbouring groups (significant for the US). This perhaps indicates that biographical turns to non-theism and atheism – at least for this special group of more spiritual non-theists – may be related to personality, especially to openness.

General Conclusion

- d) More spiritual non-theists are characterized furthermore through a specific semantic profile of "religion" and "spirituality:" From our current project on the semantics of "spirituality," we documented the large semantic distance (the largest of all focus groups) between "religion" and "spirituality" – which regards especially the adjectives that C. Osgood associates with evaluation. "Religion" is evaluated strongly negatively, whereas "spirituality" is evaluated strongly positively – and this is unique for this group.
3. We see here that atheists and non-theists may devalue "religion" – sometimes even aggressively – but this devaluation is not necessarily directed, at the same time, toward "spirituality:" our group of more spiritual non-theists has a high evaluative appreciation for "spirituality."
4. The adoption of a "more spiritual non-theist" identity may be associated with disaffiliation from a religious organization (deconversion).
5. We may conclude from this that "spirituality" may offer for the atheist/non-theist a language to express their special way of being religious – which is explicitly and clearly *not* theistic; it does not feature vertical transcendence. But if there is transcendence and ultimacy at all in the group of atheists and non-theists, then we may have a clear case of horizontal transcendence.

*THANK YOU FOR YOUR
ATTENTION!*

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