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# Atheists on the Santiago Way: Examining Motivations to Go On Pilgrimage

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*In the past 30 years, the camino to Santiago de Compostela has been recreated as an eclectic pilgrimage, open to both religious and atheist travelers. Following previous work on motivational orientations and religion, we conducted a study examining atheist versus religious pilgrims' motivations to walk the Santiago way. We assessed pilgrims (N = 360) at various parts of the northern Spanish camino using a questionnaire that measured motivations to go on pilgrimage. In addition, we measured levels of positive and negative affect, physical exertion, and emotional problems. Atheists scored significantly lower on community and religious types of motivations. However, in several measures no differences were found between groups. We suggest that both atheist and religious pilgrims are exploring forms of horizontal and vertical transcendence characterized by a desire to connect to nature and one's deeper self.*

*Key words:* atheism; pilgrimage; religion; horizontal transcendence; motivation.

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Writing on the state of religion in contemporary Western Europe, Radcliffe (2005) observed that the urge to go on pilgrimage is rooted in our human nature, echoing Chaucer's insight from an earlier era that when "nature pricks them and their heart engages/Then people long to go on pilgrimages" (1951: 19). In Radcliffe's view, understanding the motivations for going on pilgrimage help us to explore and make sense of the transformations and tensions inherent in contemporary religiosity. For a youthful generation of "spiritual seekers" (Roof 1999), pilgrimages provide a flexible form of religious engagement, which Radcliffe (2005:10) suggests may be "expressive of deep conviction, but also gives space for the unsure." Many modern pilgrims set out with a vague but determined hope that they will "find something on the way or at the end" (*ibid.*).

A pilgrimage that attracts a significant number of people, who are "unsure," along with those in our current sample who are more certain of their lack of belief in God, is the one to Santiago de Compostela. This Medieval Christian pilgrimage route has been revived and recreated in the last 30 years, partly due to the success of best-selling books such as Paulo Coelho's "The Pilgrimage" (1992), and it now hosts travelers from many religious persuasions, as well as people who claim no religious affiliation (Graham and Muray 1997; Santos 2002). The number of completion certificates issued to pilgrims upon arrival at Compostela has increased from 2,491 in 1987 to more than 270,000 in 2010 (Chemin 2011). The most popular route of the camino, as it is typically referred to by the pilgrims themselves, stretches for approximately 760 km from the French Pyrenees through northern Spain. To traverse the entire distance takes an average of 30 days, with a typical day's walk covering some 25 km.

What motivates people to make this journey and how the experience affects them has been a central question in the academic study of pilgrimage. Modern anthropologists have reported an eclectic mix of motivations, including devotional, communal, existential, and touristic (Coleman and Eade 2004; Coleman and Elsner 2003; Turner and Turner 1978). But the reasons may change across time and place. In Medieval Europe, to go on a pilgrimage was to engage in a timeless ritual, or to ask for divine intercession or healing for oneself or another, reasons still evoked at some modern Catholic sanctuaries (Nolan and Nolan 1989; Ousterhout 1990). On the other hand, in Classical Greece and Rome, other types of motivations were common: These included initiation into a particular mystery cult or consultation with an oracle to learn about the future (Dillon 1997; Elsner and Rutherford 2005). The combination of the travel—the physical exertion and the changing landscape—with expectations about the sacredness and ritual significance of the destination, probably led the individual into states of mind susceptible both to unusual ideas and to the experience of intense affect (Belayche 1987; Markus 1994).

A large-scale survey undertaken from 2007 to 2010 by the Centre for the Study and Investigation of Tourism at the University of Santiago de Compostela yields three main motivations expressly given to walk the camino: spiritual (24%), religious (18%), and to be close to nature (17%) (CETUR 2007–2010).

Unfortunately, there are significant methodological shortcomings with this survey. First, it only allows for a one-dimensional characterization of pilgrims' motivations, without giving a detailed picture of what type of pilgrim more strongly endorses a particular motivation. Second, it measures motivation with a single item instead of a reliable scale. And third, it relies on a restricted range of possible motivations: qualitative research reported in other studies has unearthed additional motives, including devotional expression, taking time off to re-think one's life, or simply enjoying the scenery (Frey 1998).

In our study, we used a social psychological-based approach to study pilgrims' motivations and emotional states. Our aim was twofold: first, we sought to extend previous work differentiating motivations in religious and atheist individuals (Farias and Lalljee 2008) by comparing the motivations of these groups to go on pilgrimage; and second, we sought to examine the impact of the pilgrimage experience on participants' emotional states (positive and negative affect). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study addressing "atheist pilgrims" and one of the very few comparing groups who hold different religious beliefs on the same pilgrimage (for an exception, see Younger 1992). Thus, this study contributes both to the psychological literature on the motivational aspects of religiosity and to the emerging literature on atheism.

## EXPLORING ATHEISM

In Western countries, up to 24% of the world's population identifies as "atheist" (Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013). Socialization and cultural influences appear to contribute most strongly to the development of atheism (Lanman and Buhrmester 2017). However, atheists are overwhelmingly male, young, and well-educated (Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013). Compared to the religious, there is evidence that atheists are more open to experience, less dogmatic, favor analytic thinking styles over intuitions, demonstrate lower social conformity, and have specific interests in the sciences (Bainbridge 2005; Caldwell-Harris 2012; Farias 2013). Moreover, atheists are more likely to report that meaning in life is purely self-constructed, and they do not appear to suffer any existential penalties for this such as nihilistic or fatalistic outlooks (Speed et al. 2018) nor do they report more "crises of meaning" (Schnell and Keenan 2011). Far from being the paragons of cold logic and rationality, however, qualitative studies have suggested atheists experience deeply moving moments of profundity and transcendence. Common themes can be identified in these experiences, pertaining to the universe, nature, and science (Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011; Coleman et al. 2013; Delaney 2016). That atheists can have such powerful experiences is further supported by quantitative studies of self-reported mystical experiences (e.g., Klein et al. 2016), although they do commonly report fewer than religious or spiritual individuals.

Another area of overlap between atheists and the religious can be found in their shared sense of appreciation for ritual. In their work with American secularist

groups, sociologists [Cimino and Smith \(2015\)](#) recount how various ritual aspects are incorporated into communal gatherings, yet culled apart from their traditionally theological baggage. Taking a psychological perspective, [Silver et al. \(2014\)](#) outline the profile of a “ritual atheist-agnostic” who, all-the-while maintaining their atheistic stance, recognize the inherent value in rituals, and engage in various practices themselves. With atheism as a “to-be-expected” individual difference variable ([Caldwell-Harris 2012](#)), it seems reasonable that both atheists and the religious would overlap in some shared experiences of transcendence as well as appreciation for ritual, such as a pilgrimage.

## HORIZONTAL VERSUS VERTICAL TRANSCENDENCE

The sociology and psychology of atheism have focused on the group dynamics of organized atheists or their individual personality characteristics (e.g., [LeDrew 2013](#)). Much less attention, however, has been given to their motivations for and experiences of transcendence ([Coleman et al. 2013](#)). This can be explained by both popular [see [Kluger's \(2013\)](#) article in *Time* Magazine or the recent debacle with Oprah ([Shermer 2014](#))] and scholarly audiences (e.g., [Luckmann 1974](#); [Pleins 2013](#); [Streib and Hood 2013](#)), who tend to portray such experiences as being off-limits to the awe-deprived rationality of an atheistic worldview. Against this view, the distinction between horizontal and vertical transcendence is a theoretical tool which accounts for the idea that both atheists and the religious can and do partake in phenomenologically similar experiences while framing their underlying ontology differently ([Coleman and Arrowood 2015](#)). Horizontal forms of transcendence are purely naturalistic in their orientations as opposed to vertical forms, which take the supernatural as their key dimension. The current study explores motivations for a possible source of transcendence between religious individuals and atheists.

### *Pilgrims' Motivations and Affect*

Despite the large body of anthropological work on pilgrimage, there are very few quantitative studies on pilgrims' motivations and affect. [Post et al. \(1998\)](#) used a 42-item questionnaire that assessed seven types of motivations in pilgrims traveling to Lourdes, including Help and Assistance, Deepening of Faith, Healing Tradition, Recreation, Peace and Quiet, Curiosity and Guidance. They found that older pilgrims (>35 years) chiefly valued motives of Help and Assistance and Deepening of Faith, while the younger group was more attracted to the motives of Recreation and Guidance. In other words, the older group emphasized factors related to religious devotion, while the younger pilgrims stressed the excitement of being in a different and beautiful setting, and interacting with the other pilgrims. The researchers also included a Dutch version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory ([Spielberger 1983](#)) and documented a decrease in anxiety levels over the course of the pilgrimage (before vs. after). However, they only reported the

results for the whole sample, so it is unclear whether this decrease was found for one or both age groups, and whether it was related to differences in motivations.

A more recent study compared motivations and levels of affect between pilgrims at Christian (Lourdes and Fátima) and Pagan-Spiritual sites (Stonehenge and Glastonbury) (Farias et al. 2010). Pilgrims to Pagan-Spiritual places had higher scores for Sensation Seeking and Closeness to Nature, while pilgrims to Christian sites scored higher for community and religious growth motivations. In addition, Christian pilgrims scored significantly higher on positive affect, while Pagan-Spiritual pilgrims showed higher scores for negative affect. These differences may be driven by the high-arousal ritual activities at the Pagan sites, which include dancing, playing drums, and intense emotional disclosure, while pilgrims at Christian sites followed lower-arousal activities, such as processions and communal prayer. This explanatory hypothesis finds some support in anthropological work reporting an association between high-arousal religiosity and intense—and at times distressing—emotional experiences (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014).

There are similarities between these results and those from other work on motivations and religiosity. Using Schwartz's (1992) survey on motivational types of values, various studies have found religiosity to be negatively correlated with hedonism, self-direction, and stimulation, and positively associated with tradition, conformity and benevolence (Schwartz and Huismans 1995). Tradition and benevolence motivations, which include items like “devout,” “helpful,” “humble,” and “honest,” mirror religious growth and community motivations in the current pilgrimage questionnaire. A comparison between religious and New Age individuals revealed that while the religious group scored higher on tradition and benevolence, the New Age group attributed greater importance to hedonism, self-direction, and stimulation (Farias and Lalljee 2008). Of particular relevance to the present study is that the results for the atheist group were almost indistinguishable from those of New Age individuals; atheists also scored higher than religious participants on hedonism, self-direction, and stimulation. However, rather than atheists being New-Agers in disguise, these similarities may stem from the shared absence of an ultimate authority structure or dogma, which would normally suppress these motivations in an explicitly religious context (Bruce 2006).

One way of extending this research is to consider that atheists walking the Santiago way might be primarily driven by sensation seeking motivations to enjoy the trekking experience. But they may also share with New Age individuals other motivations. Being close to nature, for example, may be a way for atheists to feel connected to something larger than themselves, without an explicit allegiance to a supernatural ontology (e.g., horizontal transcendence). Other aspects of the camino may also attract pilgrims regardless of their beliefs, such as its usefulness for existential or spiritual “seeking.” Many reported being driven by a need to find a new direction in life or to know themselves better (Chemin 2011). Thus, in our study, in addition to the four motivation types—religious growth, sensation seeking, closeness to nature, and community—used by Farias et al. (2010), we have added items to measure the search for a life direction and spiritual seeking.

We explicitly sought to incorporate Schwartz's (1992) sensation seeking dimension into the current study by including various items from his survey: "enjoying myself" (from hedonism), "doing something different" (from stimulation), and "curiosity" from (self-direction) (table 1).

## THE PRESENT STUDY

Our main aim was to compare the types of motivations to go on pilgrimage to Santiago in atheists and religious people. We also sought to explore whether the pilgrimage induced differentiated levels of affect in these groups. We expected atheists to score higher on sensation seeking and closeness to nature, while religious pilgrims were expected to value more religious growth and community motivations. In addition, we hypothesized that atheists would score higher on the search for a life direction and lower on spiritual seeking than the religious group. Although both of these motivations pertain to self-exploration, search for a life direction has a more pragmatic, goal-oriented nature, which seems characteristic of modern atheists (Caldwell-Harris 2012), while spiritual seeking includes elements of a contemplative way of life.

TABLE 1. Types of Motivations to Go on Pilgrimage

<i>Sensation seeking</i> (omega = .84, 95% CI = [.82, .87])	<i>Closeness to nature</i> (omega = .67, 95% CI = [.60, .72])	<i>Community</i> (omega = .71, 95% CI = [.67, .77])
1. Enjoying myself	1. Being in nature	1. Being with my community
2. Search of adventure	2. Seeking unity with the universe	2. Doing something on behalf of someone
3. Doing something different	3. Being close to nature	3. Helping sick people
4. See interesting sights		
5. Getting to know people		
6. Curiosity		
<i>Search for life direction</i> (omega = .81, 95% CI = [.78, .84])	<i>Religious growth</i> (omega = .91, 95% CI = [.89, .92])	<i>Spiritual seeking</i> (omega = .80, 95% CI = [.76, .83])
1. Seek guidance for the future	1. Be closer to God	1. Find my deeper self
2. To look for a sign or direction in my life	2. Grow in faith	2. Find peace
3. Coming to terms with a decision	3. Strengthen my reli- gious beliefs	3. Searching for meaning in life
4. Trying to know the future	4. Find out more about my religion	4. Yearning for a simple life
	5. Purifying my spirit	5. Find myself
	6. Having more time for prayer	



Finally, concerning affect, we had no specific predictions: although higher sensation seeking motivations have been linked to negative affect (Farias et al. 2010), this association was potentially mediated by the high-arousal activities of the Pagan rituals recorded in that study. For the camino, however, all pilgrims experience the physical exertion of the walk and may take part, regardless of their beliefs, in the activities promoted by the religious hostels in which they stay overnight.

## Method

*Participants.* We assessed pilgrims at various parts of the Santiago way, either at their lunch or dinner break. The original English questionnaire was translated into French, Spanish, German, and Portuguese (these were back-translated into English and checked for discrepancies). From a total sample of 436, we retained 385 (48% female) who reported their religious affiliation as either Christian ( $n = 313$ ) or atheist ( $n = 73$ ).<sup>1</sup> The final sample ( $N = 360$ ) consisted of 290 Christians and 70 atheists after dealing with missing data, with the full procedure outlined below. We followed a methodologically conservative criterion to have two relatively homogenous belief groups and only included Christians in the “religious” group (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran). The excluded participants reported affiliations to Hinduism, spirituality, Buddhism, and other non-Christian options.

For the total retained sample, ages ranged from 16 to 74, with a mean of 38.23 (standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 14.49). There was a significant age difference between groups [ $t(120.47) = 5.35, p < .001$ , mean difference = 9.00 years]. Welch’s  $t$ -test is reported as it offers greater control over type one errors when the assumption of equality of variances is violated (Delacre et al. 2017). Christian participants ( $M = 39.98, SD = 14.51$ ) were older than atheists ( $M = 30.97, SD = 12.04$ ). There was no significant gender difference between the Christian (female = 48.25%) and atheist (female = 42.03%) groups [ $\chi^2(1, N = 355) = 0.63, p = .427$ ]. The sample consisted of individuals from 29 countries, including Spain (30.5%), Germany (18.9%), the USA (6.5%), France (5.7%), and Brazil (5.4%). Regarding occupation, 32.3% were students, 15.3% teachers and university lecturers, 7.9% health professionals, 6.0% retired, 4.7% unemployed; the rest were employed across a broad range of professions, such as management, legal services, accountancy, and civil service.

*Measures.* Survey materials consisted of measures of motivations to go on pilgrimage, positive and negative affect, and traditional religiosity. We also controlled for the days spent walking at the time of the questionnaire and the expected total number of days, and the prevalence of emotional problems. At the end of the survey, we included two open-ended questions in which we asked participants to describe their expectations and experiences of walking the camino. This last

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<sup>1</sup>Although the option “atheist” was listed under the category of “religious affiliation,” we recognize this is not an affiliation in the same way an individual identifies, for example, as a Roman Catholic.



part of the survey is not reported in the results section but will be used to provide illustrations of the pilgrims' accounts in the discussion.

*Motivations to go on pilgrimage.* We adapted a motivational measure originally developed with pilgrims from Lourdes, Fátima, Stonehenge, and Glastonbury (Farias et al. 2010). The 27-item scale assessed six types of motivations to go on pilgrimage: (1) sensation seeking; (2) closeness to nature; (3) community; (4) search for life direction; (5) religious growth, and (6) spiritual seeking (table 1). The instructions were adapted from Schwartz's (1992) values scale ("You are to ask yourself 'What reasons are really important for ME to do the camino?' 'What reasons are less important for me?')", and participants rated their responses on a 6-point scale (from "not at all important" to "very important"). Scale items and internal consistency estimates are presented in table 1. Coefficient omega and its 95% confidence interval (CI) are reported instead of the commonly used Cronbach's alpha (calculated using 10,000 simulations using the R package MBESS; Kelley 2017; R Core Team 2017). This is due to omega relying on fewer statistical assumptions, and it is less likely to over or underestimate internal consistency (Dunn et al. 2014).

*Positive and Negative Affect (PANAS).* The PANAS scales (Watson et al. 1988) were developed to measure positive and negative affect. They consist of a list of 20 adjectives describing positive or negative feelings and emotions (e.g., attentive, distressed) along with a rating scale (1—"very slightly or not at all" to 5—"extremely"). The instructions asked participants to rate to what extent they had felt each emotion during the last 24 hours. Within our sample, coefficient omega for positive affect was .72, 95% CI = [.66, .76] and for negative affect .68, 95% CI = [.62, .73].

*Control items: Traditional religiosity, physical and emotional factors.* Because the breakdown of the sample into religious and atheist groups was solely based on their reported religious affiliation, we used a three-item scale of traditional religiosity to check that the groups differed on their level of engagement with religion. This short measure asked about the frequency of religious practices (attending religious services, praying, and reading one's religion's sacred scriptures); scores ranged from never (1) to several times a day (7). Coefficient omega for this scale was .84, 95% CI = [.80, .87].

The northern Spanish camino takes about 30 days to complete, though many individuals choose to spend less time walking and start their pilgrimage closer to Compostela. We included three items with the purpose of controlling for physical exertion and emotional factors that could influence participants' motivations and affect. These included the number of days the individual had walked at the time of filling in the survey, the expected number of days from beginning to end, and the existence of emotional problems that the individual sought to explore during the pilgrimage.

## RESULTS

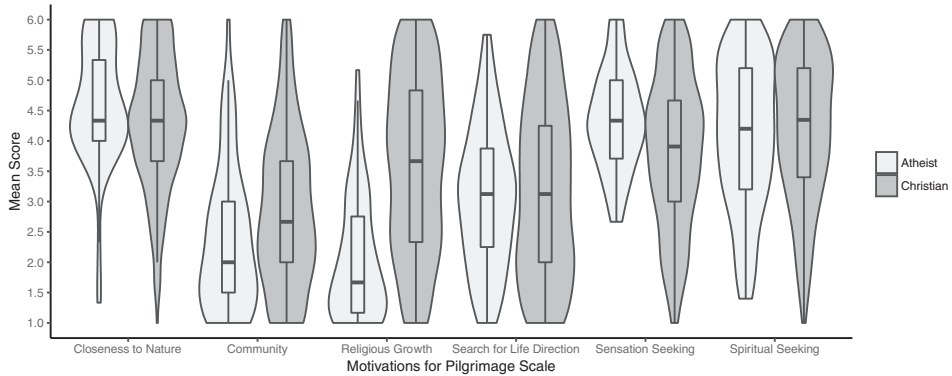
### *Demographic Information*

Of the 385 participants, there was 2.48% of the data missing due to incomplete responses. Twenty-five participants were excluded for having full data for only four or fewer of the six motivations for pilgrimage subscales that are used in the main analyses. In the remaining 360 participants, 291 had full data, and 69 had missing data in only one subscale. To retain the remainder of their data, missing values were imputed in the original scale items using the mean of their respective group (i.e., the mean of Christians or atheists on that particular item). Controlling for age, the groups differed on their level of engagement with traditional religiosity [ $F(1, 351) = 80.93, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } d = -1.23$ ], with the religious group ( $M = 3.09, SD = 1.43$ ) showing an average of religious practice on a monthly basis, while atheists very rarely engaged with religious activities ( $M = 1.34, SD = 0.63$ ). The average number of days walked at the time of assessment was 11.62 ( $SD = 12.03$ ), and the average total estimated time to walk from the beginning to the end was 27.46 days ( $SD = 24.87$ ). There were no significant differences between groups on either average number of days walked [ $t(109.36) = -0.76, p = .447, \text{mean difference} = 1.17$ ] or estimated time from beginning to end [ $t(168.59) = -0.26, p = .793, \text{mean difference} = 0.66$ ]. Regarding the last control item, 37.96% of Christians and 48.48% of atheists reported having an emotional problem they were seeking to explore during the pilgrimage. A chi-square analysis revealed no significant difference between groups [ $\chi^2(1, N = 340) = 2.04, p = .154$ ]. Overall, groups were matched on physical exertion and emotional factors and, as expected, they differed on the level of religious practice.

### *Pilgrims' Motivations*

We conducted a between-subjects MANCOVA, with age as a covariate, for the six types of values (figure 1). As six tests were performed, a Bonferroni-Holm correction was performed (Holm 1979). To aid interpretability, corrected  $p$  values are reported. The MANCOVA revealed a significant difference between groups [ $F(6, 352) = 16.82, p < .001, \text{Pillai's trace} = .22$ ]. There were no significant differences between groups for spiritual seeking [ $F(1, 357) = 1.29, p = .256, \text{Cohen's } d = -.16$ ], closeness to nature [ $F(1, 357) = 3.77, p = .204, \text{Cohen's } d = .27$ ], or sensation seeking motivations [ $F(1, 357) = 2.70, p = .204, \text{Cohen's } d = .21$ ]. On the other hand, religious participants scored higher on religious growth [ $F(1, 357) = 65.87, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } d = -1.12$ ] and community types of motivation [ $F(1, 357) = 6.92, p = .045, \text{Cohen's } d = -.36$ ] than atheists. Finally, there was no significant difference between the groups in the search for life direction [ $F(1, 357) = 3.82, p = .204, \text{Cohen's } d = -.26$ ]. We dealt with the small amount of missing data (2.48%) using the mean score imputation method which can be criticized for producing a biased estimate of the regression coefficients (Eekhout et al.

FIGURE 1. Violin plot of the mean scores for types of motivations in Christians and Atheists. The horizontal line shows the median, the boxes cover the 25% and 75% quartiles, and the whiskers extend to extreme data points within 1.5 times the interquartile range. The grey curves around the boxes indicate the distribution of scores.



2014). Although [Eekhout et al. \(2014\)](#) only showed that this method increased the bias above their threshold when more than 10% of the data were imputed, we checked the stability of our results by running the same MANCOVA model on participants who had full data ( $N = 287$ ). This suggested the results were stable as none of the decision making changed for both the MANCOVA model and individual univariate tests. Overall, both groups emphasized sensation seeking, closeness to nature, and spiritual seeking as the most important motivations to go on pilgrimage.

### Positive and Negative Affect

Both groups showed higher scores for positive than negative affect. A between subjects MANCOVA, with age as a covariate, showed that there were no significant differences between atheists ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) and Christians ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) for positive affect, nor between atheists ( $M = 1.80$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ) and Christians ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ) for negative affect [ $F(2, 351) = 0.85$ ,  $p = .918$ , Pillai's trace  $< .001$ ]. The mean values were very similar to those reported with a student population ([Watson et al. 1988](#)).

### Exploratory Analyses

An additional question that could be asked is whether motivations for pilgrimage or positive and negative affect change across the duration of the journey. While our data are only cross-sectional, measuring the responses at a single point in the Pilgrims' journey, we explored whether the number of days they had walked at time of measurement and the total planned duration affected the outcome variables (each subscale of the motivations for pilgrimage questionnaire and positive and negative affect). For each outcome variable, hierarchical regression was performed with days walked so far and total expected days entered into the model after religious group and age to explore whether it explained any residual

variance. They did not produce a significant change in explained variance after the first block of religious group and age, suggesting that motivations for pilgrimage and affect did not change substantially for participants at different points of their journey.

## DISCUSSION

The camino to Santiago has been for most of its history a penitential path, as well as an intercessory medium for religious vows and promises. This has changed profoundly in the last three decades, and today it has become an inclusive pilgrimage that also attracts atheists. What motivates individuals who lack belief in the supernatural agency to go on a pilgrimage? Our study found that atheists were particularly motivated by a search for new experiences and sensations, existential exploration and being close to nature. They only differed from religious people in their lower scores for community and religious growth. In other words, no statistically significant differences were found between the groups for motivations related to spiritual seeking, the search for life direction, closeness to nature, and sensation seeking. There were also no differences between groups for positive and negative affect, which is potentially explained by the fact that most activities along the camino are shared by all pilgrims.

Were the atheists and Christians in our current study sensation seeking pilgrims or just avid tourists? While the questionnaire was focused on our variables of interest (e.g., religious, sensation, and existential motivations), the possible reasons for any particular journey are numerous. Tourism was a possible motivation of relevance for the pilgrimage not explicitly considered in the current study. Perhaps the camino serves as a “cheap holiday” for some. We were unable to identify any significant differences between groups on sensation seeking motivations, which contains items related to tourism (e.g., adventure, curiosity). However, the distinction between pilgrimage and mere tourism is often blurred (e.g., [Jindra 1994](#); [Norman and Cusack 2012](#)). There is no a priori reason why pilgrims are not also tourists or vice versa, and regardless of religious (non)affiliation, research suggests tourists often engage with religious practices and share similar motivations ([Bremer 2004](#); [Norman 2011](#); [Swatos 2006](#)). Nevertheless, rather than being avid tourists, sensation seeking motivations may equally entice subsets of believers and nonbelievers who are searching for and open to new experiences of self-discovery.

Atheists scoring much lower on religious growth motivations than religious individuals require little discussion—atheists by definition are not religious in any vertically transcendent sense ([Coleman and Arrowood 2015](#)). However, that they also scored lower on community motivations is more substantive. In fact, one of the atheists interviewed said they chose the camino over other destinations because they “like being alone,” but not “being totally alone.” Seen in this light, the camino allows for anyone who might be socially timid to pick and choose their level of social interaction as they enjoy stretches of relative

solitude interwoven with fellow pilgrims and small towns along the way. This finding complements previous sociological research by [Bainbridge \(2005\)](#) who found atheists have slightly lower preferences for a range of communal and social activities when compared to nonreligious individuals. Given the strong emphasis placed on community by religious systems, this gap would surely increase, had religious individuals been included in his analysis.

Within the context of a growing literature on the psychology and sociology of atheism ([Coleman et al. 2015](#); [Delaney 2016](#); [Farias 2013](#); [LeDrew 2013](#)), which has generally ignored existential and transcendent experiences and motivations, these results are illuminating. In the first place, atheists were as motivated as Christian pilgrims by a “spiritual search.” Although this motivation is generally an existential one, and does not imply an endorsement of the existence of a supernatural agency, it also contains elements potentially associated with self-transcendence, including a search for meaning, a yearning for peace and living a simpler life. Rather than being a surprise, this finding adds to the small but growing literature documenting how atheists produce and discover meaning ([Coleman and Arrowood 2015](#); [Coleman et al. 2016](#)).

The absence of a statistically significant difference between atheists and Christians on closeness to nature motivations was surprising. Prior qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research has identified that experiences centered on nature or the universe are common themes when atheists are asked to recount deeply moving, profound, meaningful experiences that are not accurately described in religious terms ([Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011](#); [Coleman et al. 2013](#); [Preston and Shin 2017](#)) or when they are asked to recount what they do believe in, if they do not believe in God ([Jong et al. 2016](#)). We suggest that while atheists in general might find nature experiences more existentially satisfying or intriguing than the religious, given that being close to nature is an immediate and undeniable, to-be-expected aspect of walking the camino, the prospect of these experiences may be equally attractive to both groups. To put it differently, irrespective of an individual’s (non)belief you are unlikely to find people who spend an entire month or more walking the camino that dislike being close to nature. In fact, our participant interviews revealed both groups recounted nature motivations as important reasons for undertaking the journey; however, they differed in their ontological framing. To put it differently, atheists framed the experiences in a horizontally transcendent mode whereas religious individuals framed things in the vertically transcendent mode. Their experiences overlapped, but their framing differed.

The accounts of the pilgrims’ expectations and experiences confirm the subtle but clear presence of a self-transcendent element in atheists’ motivations to walk the Santiago way. For one atheist pilgrim, the camino itself was anthropomorphised into a teacher: “Initially, it was the physical activity and adventure [that attracted me], but going on I let the camino teach me to see what was around me.” For another, despite stating to “have lost religious faith a long time ago” she reported feeling “spiritually quieter and with more clarity about my future and my life.” A number of atheist pilgrims wrote that their main expectation was “only

to find myself.” There was also the pilgrim who went on the pilgrimage with the intent of exploring his atheistic beliefs who enthusiastically said: “Over the last few years I’ve become a committed atheist, so I’m investigating this belief in nothing. That’s what I’m investigating—how much there is to this nothingness.” He went on to express that the nothingness was oddly liberating and that he did not “feel an emptiness from not believing in a god.”

The way to Santiago is no longer exclusive to Catholic pilgrims, and religious authorities have acknowledged this fact symbolically by providing two types of certificates—a religious one, written in Latin, and a secular one written in Spanish—from which a pilgrim may choose when arriving at Santiago de Compostela (Chemin 2011). This change is a subtle reminder of the wider secularization of the West (Bruce 2006, 2011, 2014; Oviedo 2012). Perhaps most tellingly, the religious-devotional elements of the pilgrimage were not the most salient, even for the religious group in our study. For example, one Christian participant was asked if she felt the camino was a good opportunity for religious growth to which she hesitantly replied: “I mean, I . . . I didn’t come here because of that.” Nevertheless, a strong desire to be close to nature, enjoy, and further discover oneself can be interpreted along both vertical and horizontal forms of transcendence. That is, an emphasis on closeness to nature and spiritual seeking can be interpreted as a general existential yearning for a more embodied and simple form of existence shared by both atheists and religious individuals in our study.

It is often assumed that stark differences should be found between believers and atheists. While clearly there is no agreement on the ontological status of supernatural agents between the two groups, the inability to come to consensus over a single aspect of human life doesn’t have to lead to profound psychological and sociological outcomes. Prior research exploring differences between atheists and religious have occurred either in laboratory settings or via online surveys. Our study was unique in that it utilized a more natural setting with a high degree of ecological validity where all participants underwent similar experiences. We encourage further quantitative, and especially qualitative research exploring the differences and commonalities between atheist and religious individuals when they undertake shared experiences. Moreover, atheists comprise only a subset of possible nonreligious identifications (e.g., humanist, skeptic: Lee 2014; Sevinç et al. 2017), and future research could examine motivational differences between these various groups.

There is little psychological work on modern pilgrimage, and there is a long road ahead in terms of uncovering what draws people to this ancient ritual, as well as its implications. This study sought to contribute to our state of knowledge on the motivations of pilgrims, and by focusing on those who go on pilgrimage despite their lack of religious beliefs. There seems to be an emergent interest in journeys by foot (Macfarlane 2012), which may offer atheists a privileged way to explore themselves—to be closer to their sensations, to connect to nature, or simply to try to understand the “nothingness” that remains when the gods have disappeared.



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