

# The Relocation of Transcendence

## Using Schutz to Conceptualize the Nature Experiences of Secular People

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**Abstract:** Denmark, Estonia, and Sweden are, if measured by certain sociological criteria, considered to be three of the world's most secular countries. Nature—forests, pristine beaches, and the countryside—plays a specific role in the allegedly secular discourse of the mainstream populations of these nations. Not only is it almost without exception deemed as a positive asset worthy of protection, it is also thought of as holding certain existential qualities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, this article suggests that Alfred Schutz's conceptualization of transcendence—further developed by Thomas Luckmann—can be used to describe the existential experiences in nature of contemporary secular people. The article results in a suggestion for an operational definition of transcendence.

**Keywords:** Estonia, nature, nature experience, Scandinavia, Alfred Schutz, secularization, transcendence



"My experience has been that if you have a forest, you don't actually need a church. The church then becomes completely irrelevant."  
(Estonian interviewee)

"My hypothesis has always been that we Swedes are different somehow. We find our refuge in nature. It absorbs us."  
(Swedish interviewee)

"For me, eternity is when I watch the horizon. The sea induces hope, a sense of new possibilities."  
(Danish interviewee)

## Introduction

In one of his notebooks, the Austrian sociologist and philosopher Alfred Schutz (1899–1959) presented a phenomenologically grounded conceptualization of transcendence as a multileveled mode of human experience. Thomas Luckmann, a student of Schutz, who compiled Schutz's notes into a book (Schutz and Luckmann 1983), later developed the





idea of multiple levels of transcendence. When discussing secularization, he argued that religion is not disappearing from the modern world but that the span of transcendence is shrinking from the great to the intermediate and small levels. In this article, which is based upon empirical findings from three of the world's most secular countries, we question Luckmann's (1990) conclusion and suggest an alternative application of Schutz's terminology to the secularization process.

Our empirical point of departure is a number of interviews with self-proclaimed secular people<sup>1</sup> who visit recreational natural areas in Denmark, Estonia, and Sweden. Based upon sociological data, these three countries are often described as belonging to the group of "least religious" countries in the world. This makes it intuitive to think of the populations of these countries as being less inclined to look for experiences of transcendence in their lives. However, our interview material, collected as a part of a joint research project in 2017 and 2018, suggests otherwise: our interlocutors, while distancing themselves from organized Christianity in different ways, still frequently speak of what we recognize as experiences of transcendence. When we ask about experiences in "nature," defined in the methodological design as recreational forests and beaches, answers concerning undramatic everyday experiences related to rest, health, aesthetics, and social interaction are most common, but they also speak of a sense of a greater connection—a sense of being absorbed in another world, a sense of losing themselves. This—alongside the prevalence of similar expressions in public discourse about nature—indicates that there is an existential, spiritual, or religion-like dimension to the nature-oriented practices of our interlocutors, a dimension that, we will argue, can be discussed in connection to Schutz and Luckmann's ideas about transcendence.

We will suggest that there is an interconnectedness between our interlocutors' experiences in nature and that of previous generations' experiences in church. We also suggest that some of the previous generations' experiences of the nation-state may also belong to this type of experience, as may their experiences of romantic love, music, dancing, or art. The interconnectedness hence reflects a development that can be described as a *relocation of transcendence* between the different societal locations like those of church, nation, and nature. In contemporary Scandinavia and the Baltic states, the public discourse suggests that nature is a prominent setting in which to look for transcendence. As we shall see, nature is also in numerous ways interconnected with both national identities and the Christian church. Historically, institutionalized Christianity, with its array of settings and rituals pointing to



otherworldly realities, has been the foremost setting for experiences of transcendence in Sweden and Denmark. This is true also for Estonia, but in the case of this country the role of Christianity has dwindled more dramatically during the last century. Here, it is the nation, and the institutions that celebrate and uphold it, that have constituted the more important locations for transcendence, often, as we shall see, in close conjunction with nature. Denmark, Sweden, and Estonia hence offer comparative ground for the intertwinement of nature, nation, and church.

While our main focus is transcendence located in and prompted in “nature,” that is, in recreative areas, locally apprehended as examples of “real” or “pristine” nature, we will recursively include also “church” and “nation” in our discussion, not only in order to contextualize what we understand to be a surge of affection for nature, but also to suggest that a phenomenologically inspired notion of transcendence may pave the way for an understanding of experiences of transcendence as transversal. Phrased differently, we will show how experiences of transcendence are not confined to settings that we generally recognize as religious. Instead, settings that our interlocutors recognize as secular are permeated by transcendence in a way that we *and* our interlocutors easily recognize as like religion.

We will begin by presenting our main concept, that is, transcendence, in a way that is inspired by Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann’s treatment of this notion. Having done this, we will present some cases of how the relocation of transcendence takes place in the recent history of the three countries in question. This will lead to a presentation of our findings, an operational definition of secular transcendence in “nature,” and a conceptualization of the relocation of transcendences for further research.

## The Notion of Transcendence

The notion of transcendence has been at the center of both philosophical and theological discussions, with a historically marked tendency to define the “transcendent” as a metaphysical “other” in realistic or symbolic ways. The focus of our discussion, however, is the individual experience and the discourse that surrounds it. We base our discussion on Alfred Schutz’s exposition of the structures of the life-world. Schutz’s phenomenological understanding of everyday experience and his conceptualization of transcendence offers, in our opinion, an overlooked



potential for getting a grasp on the diversification of transcendences across secular and religious domains. Let us start by briefly introducing his conceptualization of transcendence.

Schutz's point of reference is the everyday experience of knowing that the world is bigger than the present "here and now" and that much of it is out of reach: "Everyone knows that he lives in a world that must have existed before him, and no one doubts seriously that it will continue to exist after him" (Schutz and Luckmann 1983: 99–100). On the basis of this awareness of the boundaries of one's life, Schutz conceptualizes three levels of transcendence. *Small transcendences* are "characterized by a person's encountering spatial and temporal boundaries of his experience and his action that are in principle crossable in further experiences and later actions" (ibid.: 106). For instance, Schutz explains, if I have forgotten a book in another room, it transcends me because it is not within my actual reach. It is, however, within my potential reach, and the boundary is crossable when I am reminded of it. Here, I have "run into a little transcendence" and I will cross it if I go and collect the book (ibid.: 109).

Schutz outlines two more types of transcendence—the *intermediate* and the *great*—that are particularly helpful for understanding the interactions within the world that we consider in this article. Whereas small transcendences are characterized by the fact that they can be experienced directly, intermediate transcendences concern other human beings, whose inner worlds we cannot know in the way we know our own. However, in everyday life we constantly cross the borders to others: "In our understanding and communication bridges are thrown across to the Other person's alienness" (ibid.: 131). As Luckmann explains, societies deal with the intermediate transcendences in various expressive forms, with more or less systematized social norms (Luckmann 1990: 130). Great transcendences, finally, refer to experiences beyond the everyday, such as those of theoretical thinking, art, religiosity, myth, and dreams. Here, you withdraw from daily life into different states of consciousness—for example, when half-awake, day-dreaming, or in ecstasy—in a more or less self-guided or institutionalized turning away from the everyday. Most interestingly, Schutz's palette of social locations for great transcendences spans from union with God after ascetic discipline, dancing dervishes, and drugs and rock and roll to the "exhilaration (with or without pantheistic interpretation) when mountain-climbing" (1983: 125), and he argues that we constantly cross over from our direct experiences of the everyday world into a swarm of subuniverses (ibid.: 266).



In the analysis published in 1990, Luckmann develops Schutz's framework in order to show how different societies organize and communicate transcendence differently. Luckmann's main argument is that—contrary to the claims of mainstream secularization theory—experiences of transcendence are persistent and thus “religion” does not disappear. However, he states that the span of transcendence is shrinking in “the modern world” in general, leaving out the great transcendences in favor of the intermediate (manifested in the social order of politics) and small levels. In Luckmann's analysis, this leads to the bestowal of an almost sacred status to the individual's search for self-realization (Luckmann 1990: 134–137).

In our analysis, we follow Luckmann's suggestion that experiences of transcendence move back and forth between different societal locations. This, we argue, happens on many levels. Sometimes, the location—whether it be nature, nation, church, or other realms such as art, family, or consumption—may offer techniques and idioms for experiencing and expressing small transcendences (in particular, cultivations of time and space), while at other times they may harbor intermediate transcendences (i.e., play a crucial role in community- and identity making on local, national, and global scales), and they may also be the location for great transcendences (in experiences beyond the everyday). The nation, for example, offers small transcendences if it functions as an administrative entity that circumvents everyday life; intermediate transcendences if it functions as the social community that defines one's identity; and great transcendences if it is construed as granting an extraordinary connection to the eternal, the sacred, or the ultimate. Importantly, though, we depart from Luckmann with regard to his social analysis. Luckmann claims that small transcendences connect to modern “egoism” and “hedonism,” but in our understanding, modern experiences of small and intermediate transcendences may also provide the starting point for leaps into greater transcendences. In contemporary society, Luckmann only sees the possibility for great transcendences in the “ecological components in the ‘New Age’” (ibid.: 138) where they mix into small and intermediate transcendences. We will argue that great transcendences also show up in the contemporary self-proclaimed secular settings of nature love.

We make this claim based upon ethnographic fieldwork and interviews carried out with self-proclaimed secular people in Denmark, Estonia, and Sweden. In order to contextualize both our interlocutors and our analysis of them, we will in the following present some major societal processes pertaining to nature, religion, and secularization that



have taken place in the recent history of these countries. Secularization has, as we shall see, unfolded differently depending upon the varying settings that these societies provide.

## **Nature and Religion in Sweden, Denmark, and Estonia**

The search for landscape experiences around the Baltic has roots that extend back to the romantic tradition beginning in the late eighteenth century, where “the landscape takes on the task of opening your soul and the palette of your mind” (Löfgren 2000: 17). The search for the picturesque, the awesome, or the pristine is known from all over Europe and the United States, where mountains, forests, beaches, waterfalls, and deserts have been praised by tourists, campers, and hikers for providing food for thought, setting the mind free, and opening the senses (ibid.). Also around the Baltic, landscapes were sought out for encounters with “the sublime,” a sensation described by Edmund Burke as a mix of awe (of breathtaking beauty and the wildly powerful) and the delight of “not perishing in the vast and mighty forces of nature” (Wamberg 2017: 22).

Northern European nature romanticism and its recurrent intertwining with nationalistic sentiments comes in many versions, and it is also found in the less dramatic evocations of the pastoral recreational landscapes closer to the cities. Throughout the twentieth century, people’s nature-oriented practices have been deeply impacted by societal changes. For the majority of people around the Baltic, spending time in the forest has gone from being part of family subsistence to a popular leisure time activity. According to a survey carried out by the World Wildlife Fund in 2013, 60 percent of Swedes reported that they had visited a forest during the last week and 40 percent had spent more than 10 hours there during the past month. A survey carried out in Denmark by Friluftsrådet in 2014 found that the forest and the beach were the two most frequently visited natural environments all year round, with 27 percent of the respondents replying that they go there on a daily basis, 45 percent on a weekly basis, and 6 percent less often than one time per month ([www.friluftsradaet.dk](http://www.friluftsradaet.dk)). The survey shows that 53 percent of those who answered “use nature” (forests, beaches, the sea, lakes, heaths, etc.) to go for a walk, 31 percent do so to experience the place itself, 22 percent to walk their dog, 17 percent to ride a bike, 15 percent for taking a run, 15 percent to take photographs, 12 percent to watch animals, 11 percent to watch birds, and 10 percent for picking



berries (Friluftstrådet 2014). There are no detailed statistics available for Estonia, but according to the Estonian National Forest Management Center people used the facilities 2.7 million times in 2018 only. Given the fact that the total population of the country amounts to 1.3 million, this number is strikingly high (RMK 2019).

Discourse concerning outdoor activities has also changed over time. Klas Sandell and Sverker Sörlin (2008: 258–259) have divided the history of outdoor activities (*friluftsliv*) in Sweden into four main phases. The first began around the turn of the nineteenth century and was characterized by ideals of individual achievement, scientific expeditions, and the romantic critique of modern civilization. In this period, such activities mostly involved the upper strata of society. In the second phase, which took place during the interwar period, opportunities to participate in outdoor activities became more evenly distributed through the regulation of labor and leisure time. The romantic appreciation of nature for its beauty and sublimity became less articulated and emphasis was instead put on its social functions. The third period started in the 1960s, with a massively expanded consumption culture, of which outdoor activities became a part (Ahlström 2008: 168–182)—while, at the same time, a growing awareness of ecology and environmental problems also made organized outdoor activities an arena for teaching both children and adults about ecology (Klöfver 2008: 156–166). Finally, by the turn of the millennium, when the focus turned toward individual experiences, in tandem with increased mobility, consumption of such experiences is becoming less dependent upon the local environment (Sandell and Sörlin 2008: 206–207).

What, then, has the role of Christianity been in this development? Here, the Scandinavian countries differ from the Baltic countries and need to be discussed separately. Over the last couple of centuries, both Sweden and Denmark have had national churches with which a vast majority of their populations have been affiliated. The Lutheran theological orientation of these churches, as well as their close connection to the formation of the Scandinavian nation-states, have secured a place for them in the patriotic imagination of these countries. The epithet “folk church,” which is used for both the Danish Church and the Swedish Church, reflects this ethos. This means that nationalism rooted in romantic ideas about nature is essential to the profile of the state churches in Scandinavian Christianity. The church towering over the trees and rooftops in the middle of the village is an inborn part of the nationalist and romantic pastoral imagination, and most of the popular hymns share traits of the romantic celebration of nature.





Lately, increased ecological awareness in society has also been followed by such an orientation within the church. For instance, the Church of Sweden hosted an Interfaith Climate Summit in 2008, declaring the work for sustainable development to be on the top of its agenda. Nature-oriented spiritual practices such as pilgrimage walks and forest meditations have also increased as a part of the church's ritual practice. At the same time, there have been many challenges. The nineteenth century's romantic search for the sublime in untamed nature, the twentieth century's growth of non-Christian spirituality, and the twenty-first century's growth of radical ecology have all posed challenges to a traditional Christianity that is no longer able to uphold its unquestioned position as a central authority in all things religious.

Compared to the Swedish case, Danish Lutheranism, due to a general tendency to maintain an existentialistic human-centered theology, only shows a marginal group of people incorporating nature and ecological awareness into their theological engagement and into local ecclesiastical affairs (Grøn Kirke 2018; Ishøj 2009; Jensen 2011). Moreover, the Danish Church has been less pronounced with its ecumenical orientation than its Swedish counterpart, and its connection to nationalistic sentiments has been both stronger and more persistent.

In Estonia, the relationship between Christianity, the nation, and the romantic celebration of nature is even feebler. There exists a strongly pronounced discourse about a special connection between Estonians and Estonian nature that can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and the Baltic-German romantic enlightenment project, which idealized ancient Estonians and Latvians as "noble savages" who lived in harmony with their surroundings. The role of Christianity in this story is ambivalent—Estonian history is seen as being divided by the Nordic Crusades of the thirteenth century, when the country was conquered under the banner of Christianization. The time before is presented as a "golden age," whereas the time after is described as being corrupt. The Estonian national narrative became characterized by the same ideas and motifs: a violent Christianization by "fire and sword," and a subsequent "700-year night of slavery" (Tamm 2008: 505–506). These ideas made sure that no connection between Estonian nationalism and Christianity could be established. On the contrary, "the survival of ancient animistic beliefs" was presented as proof of popular resistance against Christianity (Jonuks 2013).

The idea of an Estonian connection to nature has hence been difficult for the church to build upon. With the exception of certain Orthodox Christian folk practices in the Setu region, nature-oriented





spirituality or romanticism has not found any expression in—either Lutheran or Orthodox—Estonian Christianity. As an institution, the Estonian Lutheran Church is still largely uninterested in ecological concerns, although there are some pastors whose recent interest in such matters may indicate a change of stance here (Salu 2018). Lately, Christianity has become more outdoor-oriented due to the popularity of pilgrimage practices on a grassroots level.

Despite its cultural marginalization, however, Christian terminology is sometimes used to signal intimacy and solemnity in connection with nature and nationality—as can be seen in expressions like “the forest is the church of the Estonians” (Pilvre 2017) or “for Estonians, walking in the forest and owning a country house are religious practices; the forest is the substitute for religion” (Mikita 2015: 48).

The idea of a special connection existing between the Estonian people and nature has been put forth in a semireligious way by the neopagan movement Maausk (Earth belief). Conceptualized as an animistic, indigenous nature religion developed “together with Estonians’ ancestors,” this movement presents itself as the defender of natural sacred sites (Västriik 2015) and it has brought about a consolidation of the nationalistic “forest nation” identity. Sociological data show that 63 percent of ethnic Estonians believe in “souls of trees” (LFRL 2015), a belief that is generally interpreted as the continuation of ancient animism, while 61 percent believe that Maausk is the “true religion” of the Estonians. This figure, however, must be construed as an expression of cultural affinity rather than as an expression of religious beliefs, since only 4 percent of the respondents considered themselves to be followers of Maausk (RTE 2014).

## The Ambiguous Processes of Secularization

The intertwined processes of change within the spheres of Christianity, the romantic celebration of nature, and nationalism are also connected to another prominent process in these countries, that of secularization. Today, alongside China and the Czech Republic, Estonia, Sweden, and Denmark top the list of the world’s least religious countries, and the secularization of these countries is apparent and measurable in many ways. According to polls, only 16–19 percent of Estonian, Swedish, and Danish respondents agree that “religion is important” in their daily lives (Crabtree 2010).



This is not the place to present the vast body of research that has delved into the driving forces behind this societal development. Suffice it to say that secularization may not be fully as dominant as people's statements about themselves indicate. In terms of church membership, for instance, the rates are still high in the Scandinavian countries (Denmark: 79 percent; Sweden: 70 percent), and although these figures may indicate different things depending upon what is meant by being a church member, they show a continued loyalty to institutionalized Christianity. In Sweden and Denmark, Lutheran state churches still hold a strong position as providers of rites of passage, and they continue to have a strong connection with national identity. This situation has been described as "cultural religion" (Kasselstrand 2015) or "vicarious religion" (Davie 2007). Nonetheless, participation in church services has fallen more rapidly than the membership figures in the last couple of decades; this implies that even those who stay members are less active in the church's traditional rites (Bromander and Jonsson 2017; Nielsen and Iversen 2014). In Estonia, the Soviet antireligious policy was successful in breaking the continuity of church traditions (Rommel 2017), and today only a minority (29 percent) regard some religion "their own" (Estonian Census 2011).

If construed from the point of view of classical secularization theory, these figures may be seen as indicating that religion is about to die out soon in these countries and that people will "succumb" to religious indifference (Bruce 2002). Yet, secularization is a multidimensional phenomenon (Dobbelaere 2002). Most surveys can be criticized for being Christo-centric, since the questions are formulated with the Christian religion as the implicit prototype. The figures can therefore also be interpreted as pointing to the growing irrelevance of organized Christianity rather than of religion as such or, to put it differently, as indications of the postinstitutionalization and individualization of religion. There are other survey questions that would speak in favor of such an analysis. For instance, according to Eurobarometer (2010), 50 percent of Estonians, 47 percent of Danes, and 45 percent of Swedes agree with the statement that "there is some sort of spirit or life-force," indicating a wide spectrum of potentially (semi)religious experiences, beliefs, and practices. These figures point to the fact that "secular" and "religious" are neither clear-cut entities nor are they unavoidably opposed to each other.

Indeed, the dichotomy between "religious" and "secular" has been challenged more and more in the study of religion. In order to tackle the consequences of this insight, one frequently employed strategy has



been to use *religion-related* concepts that overlap both areas. Examples include “holistic alternative spirituality” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), the “secular sacred” (Knott 2013), “horizontal transcendence” (Streib and Hood 2016), “post-Christian” (Thurfjell 2015), and “spirituality as a cultural construct” (Huss 2014). Abby Day’s (2006) notions of a “secular supernatural” and “anthropocentric belief systems” may serve as further examples, as may the recent conceptualizations of “nonreligion” (Lee 2015; Quack 2014). Another strategy has been to use universal *areligious* concepts such as “consumption” (Roof 1999; Stark and Bainbridge 1985), “self-development” (Heelas 1996), “existential health” (Demarinis 2008), “existential cultures” (Lee 2015), “worldviews,” or “ways of life” (Taves and Asprem 2018).

Nevertheless, when our interlocutors try to articulate how and why their experiences of the natural world are important to them, they do so in a society where the position—not only of organized religion but also of religious language in general—is contested, and connected to a highly ambiguous situation.

## The Forest and the Beach: Experiences of Transcendence

Now, given this historical background, let us turn to our interlocutors and their experiences of nature. In this section we will suggest a line of interpretation of their experiences and illustrate it with findings from our interviews. By using random sampling and snowballing methods, we identified nature lovers in the secular context of nature trails and beaches (anonymized in the quotes below). In all cases, we sought out popular locations acclaimed to be “real or pristine nature” in or close to major cities, in order to approach urban people with a secular outlook.

All in all, we refer to 131 interviews conducted in Estonia (32), Denmark (46), and Sweden (53) between February 2017 and November 2018. Of these, 69 were impromptu interviews with a duration of 5–25 minutes in the forest in southern Estonia, in forests close to Stockholm in Sweden, and at a beach in northern Zealand, one hour from Copenhagen. Eight interviews were prearranged with a duration from 30 minutes to one hour, and 54 were prearranged and lasted between one hour and three hours. In the short interviews we asked the opening questions with some context-dependent variations: “What brings you here?,” “What is the forest/beach to you?,” and “What does the forest/beach do to you?” The in-depth interviews were guided by questions around the interlocutors’ nature practices in forests and close



to beaches in a biographical perspective. In five cases the interviews were followed up several times and combined with walks along the beach and in the forest. Among the prearranged in-depth interviews, 10 of the interlocutors belonged to the category of expert, that is, people who, through their profession, possess special knowledge; most of these were biologists, nature guides, and national reserve workers. Half the interlocutors were men and half were women, between 17 and 93 years of age, with the majority in their forties and fifties. In most of the short interviews no information was collected about the educational background; the in-depth interviews were almost all with urban middle-class people with middle range training or university degrees. The prearranged interviews took place in the interlocutors' homes or elsewhere in public spaces. Let us now present some representative and significant examples of the type of material our interviews make up, country by country.

### ***Denmark: The Horizon and the Beachscape***

As a thoroughly farmed country with only small patches of forest, the beaches of Denmark are generally considered to be the country's most pristine natural settings and a privileged space for spending leisure time. The season for swimming and sunbathing is, for most people, limited to a period lasting from June to August, so for nine months of the year the beach is less populated, but even so there is a constant flow of often solitary walkers. They traverse the sand dunes and walk for an hour or two, close to the water's edge. Our findings, which stem mainly from the colder times of the year, clearly indicate that the beach offers a transformative potential. Our interlocutors make statements like, "It's almost magical," "It's almost holy," or "It's regenerating," or they use terms such as "invigorating" and "life-giving."

On the northern coast of Zealand, a one-hour drive from Copenhagen, we meet Svend, a middle-aged academic, who is on a one-day writing retreat in his family's summerhouse. As always when he is in the summerhouse, this morning he takes a walk of roughly five kilometers through a small forest and along the beach. He says: "It's like a rite of passage . . . I get a kick when I depart from the forest and get the first glimpse of the beach and the sea and feel the wind." He prefers the beach to the forest, saying that "the beach is more 'itself,'" also in the way it changes all the time; "the beach is untouched and open, and you see the horizon," he declares. For him, the large open seascape and the sky induce a sense of "hope"; he gets a feeling that there is



always “a way out” and is reminded that you could “potentially travel anywhere.” Lisa, a woman in her thirties, walks along the same beach as Svend every day, she says, all year round, declaring it to be “a good way to begin a day.” As a “nature lover,” she says that it gives her both “energy” and “peace” as well as a “privileged feeling of freedom.” During stressful periods and times of sickness, Lisa tells us, it is crucial for her to come to the beach and to the forest, where “there is plenty of room” both for difficult feelings and for coping with her broken body, which is aching from many years of horseback riding. Often in the nearby forest, she literally loses her way and lets herself be totally absorbed by her thoughts and the landscape. She says that it is a “little sacred” and calls it “dazzlingly beautiful.”

These two examples indicate how the beach is felt to have a transformative potential for the solitary walkers. From our larger set of interviews with regular beach walkers, we gather that they share a remarkably similar experience on the beach (and for some, also in the forest) that conveys the message that in this setting, you can escape society—and your social self—and become one with another world. Almost unanimously, our interlocutors highlight the wind and the sensation of being “blown through” (in Danish, *blæst igennem*) as an energizing and cleansing feeling (so different from being indoors). Supported by the soundscape—the rhythms of the wind and the waves—the ever-changing colors of sea and sand, and the rhythm of walking, the beachscape is felt to transform both one’s mood and one’s sense of time and space into a liberating experience of freedom, awe, and respect, which induces sensations of greatness and infinity. Thus, in our interpretation, what Schutz called the small transcendences of time and space may offer a leap into great transcendences. Here, the beachgoers explicitly refer to the horizon as “an opening,” signaling “new possibilities,” “the ultimate,” or “the universe,” or “the origin of everything.” At the beach, we are told that “you can feel how little you are,” as if you were recalibrated to a truer size than what “society” expects from you or what you expect from yourself. The flickering light that meets your eyes and the wind and the sand felt everywhere make up—in the best moments—a vibrant, exhilarating, enchanting world beyond the everyday.

### ***Estonia: Forests to Help You See Yourself***

Considering the fact that about 50 percent of the Estonian landscape is covered by forest, it is no wonder that forests have become the foremost representation of “Estonian nature.” Forests are highly valued for



their recreational purposes, as providers of fresh air, silence, and rest, or as a means for getting away from everyday troubles. Yet forests, for our Estonian interlocutors, also seem to evoke some deeper existential meaning. Many express the idea that the forest is something that “just needs to exist” or is something that “has always been there.” The forest is often conceptualized as something that is important for survival, both on a personal and a societal level, as a hiding place from existential or physical troubles and—this is a point in regard to which the Estonian interlocutors stand out—as a guarantee for the survival of Estonian culture. Cutting down trees is therefore often frowned upon and spoken of as an attack on Estonian culture, an act that undermines its sustainability.

Kadakas is a journalist for whom the forest has always been important. As a child, she traveled a lot in Estonia with her father, and on these “cultural trips,” as she calls them, they also frequently visited forests. Even today, hiking in the forest is still an important part of Kadakas’s life, and she often organizes nature walks for her friends or other groups of people. She identifies herself as “religious in some way,” and she regards her attitude toward nature as “semireligious.” She perceives this attitude as somewhat animistic and inherently Estonian, passed on from one generation to another. The idea of a special connection between the forest and Estonian-ness is a very common implicit assumption for our Estonian interlocutors. An illustration of this from the interview situation is that it is taken for granted that all Estonians share this and that one Estonian would not need to explain to another what this relationship is about. For Kadakas, the forest is a place for recreation, walking, and picking berries or mushrooms, but—as is also the case with the rest of our Estonian interlocutors—it also carries the meaning of connectedness with the past. Kadakas describes it as follows:

I think I have an emotional connection with the forest. It gives me some kind of experience, it gives me rest, it gives me a possibility to leave my work behind, it gives me . . . a feeling of something . . . I don’t know . . . some Estonian-ness, or my Estonian roots or something . . . It’s like you go into history when you enter the forest. . . . The stories I have been told, some of them are already from the nineteenth century, and in the forest that time seems to be much closer. For some reason, I get this feeling only in the forest.

Just like the beaches in Denmark, the forests of Estonia are spoken of as having a transformative potential between this realm and otherworldly ones. They are often referred to as being “magical” or “sacred,” or simply “different” places outside of everyday life that evoke experiences and feelings—frequently of connectedness with “something” that



is hard to put into words but that is referred to as being “bigger.” “In the forest, I can completely forget where I work or what I do. It’s like I’m in a completely different world,” says Kadakas. Sometimes poetical expressions like “the tree of life” are used to name this different world. For Tõnu, a writer in his twenties, the forest is mainly a source of peace and happiness:

You can find peace also at the beach or in a park, but solitude in the forest is more concentrated, more intense. It is the place where you can change the state of your mind, either intentionally or unintentionally. I see the forest as a unique and irreplaceable place for connecting with the juices of the tree of life. . . . It is the feeling that the world exists in one piece. It is the reconciliation of the apparent opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, like a joyful feeling of unity in the middle of a loud buzzing sound or falling snow.

Luule, a poet in her fifties who regards herself as a follower of Maausk, something which she describes as a “normal state of being Finno-Ugric,” recounts her experiences of the forest in more explicitly religious terms, and compares it to a church:

My most intensive religious experience has been in an old pine forest, in July or August, when the sun starts to go down, and all these pine trunks are golden, and the air is full of buzzing, and then I feel that the Creator is near. I don’t feel that in church: there’s a roof above, and none of that stuff works at all. But it has absolutely been the most sacral experience ever, with all those bees buzzing and this light . . . Then I cry a bit, but it’s not bad. It’s liberating and very, very happy.

Our material thus indicates that the forest is not only ripe with the small transcendences its sheer size and its perceived references to the past indicate, but that it also resonates in a powerful way with the processes that shape social and cultural identity and is hence connected to the level of intermediate transcendences. Finally, when it spills over onto the level of great transcendences it is felt to induce a border-crossing feeling of unity and joy beyond the everyday. The interlocutors’ comparisons with churches and frequent mentions of the forest as a place for connectedness attests to this, whether a connection is established to “the Creator,” “the tree of life,” or as just an unarticulated “other,” be it “secular” or “religious.”

### ***Sweden: The Nature of a Special Connection***

Much of what the Estonian interlocutors say is also true for the Swedes whom we interviewed. For them too, the forest is a place where all





the demands and responsibilities of everyday life are left behind. It is a place where the ego is felt to become irrelevant in a way that conjures up a feeling of deep rest and relief. Just like in Denmark and Estonia, nature is consistently described as invoking a sense of connection with something greater than oneself. Most of our Swedish interviews took place in the recreational forests that can be found on the outskirts of Stockholm. These forests have been made reachable and more usable with clearly marked hiking routes, parking lots, and wheelchair-accessible trails. The Swedish Right of Public Access—which makes hiking and camping legal even in privately owned forests—has ensured that a large number of people can visit them on a regular basis. This occurs mostly on weekends. According to statistics collected by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, women, older people, individuals without children, and ethnic Swedes are those who most often visit the forest (Fredman and Hedblom 2014: 27). Our interlocutors fit this categorization well. We approached many of them while they were walking their dogs or were having a cup of coffee by themselves in the cafés that are commonly found near the trails. Many of our interlocutors seem to have the feeling of being connected to something bigger, which is often difficult for secular Swedes—who are reluctant to use religious terminology—to articulate.

Margareta is retired after having had a long career as a newspaper correspondent and political advisor. Since retiring, walks in nature have become an important part of her life, and she sometimes organizes such excursions for groups. She feels a need for contemplation and existential reflection, and she wants her walks to be something more than just physical recreation. Although she defines herself as nonreligious, she uses religious or semireligious terms when trying to put the experiences she has of walking in nature into words:

It's not just a walk with your legs. It's a walk inside yourself at the same time, where you get the time to reflect upon things, different things. And then nature has a, it also has . . . not a message, but a context together with me as a human being. Nature isn't just there as a backdrop. It's something that is alive. There is also a, a kind of . . . religion or spirituality in nature.

Later in the same interview, she relates a particular experience from a visit that had a strong impact on her:

There is a . . . well, I'm not sure exactly what happened, but there was something there that . . . made me feel that . . . there was something that . . . I don't know what it was. But it was the kind of feeling of harmony and . . . closeness to something, to nature, to what is created around me, which is not



created by humans, which is nature. There were little pigs running around, and there were little sheep and there was . . . something, something peculiar that was there.

Per is another interlocutor. He has reflected extensively about the impact his experiences in nature have had on his life and worldview. He is also more articulate than most people when he talks about these things. Per, who is in his midforties, is a teacher and a part-time tour leader in one of Sweden's national parks. In one interview, he describes what he usually does when he visits the forest on his own: "I go out there and just lay down for a nap on the moss somewhere," he says, "and when I wake up, I usually feel utterly clear-minded and filled with calmness." Per explains that he is particularly intrigued by the biodiversity of the forest:

The trees! Just the fact that there are creatures like that, that are so tall that you can look upward at them. And then, if you look down in the moss, everywhere you will see the abundance of life in a thousand nuances, a complexity that encloses and embraces you. That makes me feel a deep, deep calmness.

Per explains that he feels that the trees and the rocks of the forest are present in a special way and that he experiences a connection with them. He continues:

It is a mystery that all these things exist and actually are there in their full expressiveness. Everything is an expression of the universe. It manifests itself in differing qualities that resonate with each other and also with me. . . . Take a rock [for example]. I could say that it has a soul in the sense that it exists, that it is there in its own unique quality, and I can feel a resonance with this quality within myself. There is something in it that I recognize also in myself. I am not completely alien to what the rock is. There is a rock-ness also within me somehow. It is difficult to explain this.

The quotes from Margareta and Per exemplify a type of experience that many of the Swedish interlocutors—with varying degrees of eloquence—express. As is also the case with the Estonian interlocutors, the most common idea that they express, often using this particular word in English, is "connection." In the forest, they feel a sense of connection to the world around them, an experience of greater transcendence as a transformative moment of connectedness that points to an order beyond language or logic. Whether it is a connection to a particular tree, to the forest as a whole, or to the universe itself, it is a feeling that they take seriously, appreciate, and sometimes actively seek out.



## An Operational Definition of Transcendence

We have thus exemplified how our predominantly secular Danish, Estonian, and Swedish interlocutors talk about their experiences in nature and have suggested that by approaching these experiences through Schutz's transcendence categories we may open ways to construe them in a way that does justice to the interlocutors' own understandings and that avoids having to position them on the problematic scale between the religious and the secular.

We are not suggesting an essentialist understanding of transcendence as something that, so to speak, exists *sui generis*. Our material instead points to a type of human experience that lies in between and is affected by physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of experience. As we have approached our interview material, we have identified these experiences of transcendence through the discourse that surrounds them. As shown in the examples above, descriptions of experiences of a greater connection that is deemed to be out of the ordinary is what we have chosen to construe as experiences of great transcendences in a Schutzian sense.

In the interlocutors' descriptions of such experiences, they come across as being complex and multidimensional. Their experiences of great transcendences are *physical* in the sense that the interlocutors feel their bodies in these experiences. They speak about their sore or tingling limbs, about breathing heavily, about the way the wind feels on their faces. They are also *emotional* since they include feelings of serenity and calmness, or of being moved. The experiences are also *cognitive* since they involve elements of reflection and reality interpretation as indicated, for instance, in the statement that the universe "exists in one piece." Moreover, they are *aesthetic* in the appreciation of nature's beauty. The experiences of transcendence thus constitute a category of experience that combines several dimensions of being.

As our examples in the previous section show, it is difficult for the interlocutors to articulate their existential experiences in words other than those borrowed from Christian tradition. At the same time, they are not entirely comfortable with this terminology, and thus use expressions such as "almost holy," "religion-like," or "a little sacred," or metaphors like "the forest is my church," when talking about their overwhelming experiences of nature. Diminishing conjunctions such as "like," "almost," and "-ish" are significant here, since they are used to express that the interlocutors are not entirely satisfied with the word



that they—despite their hesitation—choose to use. These expressions indicate that the interviewees understand their experiences in nature to be similar to what they think of as religious experiences but that they are uncomfortable labeling them as religious or sacred in a conventional sense. Instead of using explicitly Christian or religious terminology when speaking about their experiences, this group speaks of connection to the material, living reality within this world. They feel that they connect to nature, to other living beings, to the ecological system of which they are a part, or to this universe.

Thus, based on our interview material, we suggest the following operational definition of great transcendence. Our definition is based on Schutz, but makes his ideas more specific, operational, and analytically helpful by (1) anchoring it in ethnographic material and (2) connecting it to a list of identifiable features. It reads thus:

Great transcendence is a mode of experience that reaches beyond the boundaries of the everyday in a way that is referred to as special. It is an emotional, aesthetic, sensuous, and embodied experience that places people at, or across, the border of the world they usually inhabit and makes them conscious of a larger cosmos.

Transcendent experiences, as we define them, share a cluster of features. They are:

- described as momentary;
- spoken of as transformative, life-affirming, cleansing, or liberating;
- spoken of as related to existential questions and ultimate meaning;
- spoken of as giving a sense of connectedness, trust, or confidentiality;
- expressed through metaphors or symbolic speech;
- felt to be beyond the reach of language or definition;
- prompted, sought after, or celebrated by people in semiritualized ways.

Despite its imprecise character, this definition enables one to look for great transcendences in different locations. Instead of focusing on specific words that connect to an established vocabulary for the extraordinary—such as Christian theological terminology or words such as “spiritual,” “sacred,” or “mystery”—one can look for utterances about emotional, aesthetic, and sensuous border experiences in general. If an interlocutor speaks of a feeling of “losing herself,” of “connectedness,”



of “transformation,” or of being at “the edge of the world,” for example, this will be sufficient for us to think of the particular experience in terms of great transcendences. This disconnectedness from a traditional religious language is also the reason why we have chosen the term “transcendence” rather than concepts such as “spirituality” or “the sacred.” Such words, we reckon, lead connotations in a traditionally religious direction, whereas transcendence, at least in its Schutzian sense, allows for describing a category of experience and discourse that may or may not be connected to traditionally religious settings or metaphysical ideas. It also follows that transcendence can then be directed toward, or framed within, differing settings. If transcendence is about losing yourself in something, then that something may be any of the settings or situations that induce a sense of border crossing, dissolution, and absorption: love, music, dancing, art, or intense ideological engagement may all induce experiences of transcendence in this sense.

## Conclusions

The point we want to make in this article is that although the distinction between the secular and the religious might be helpful in some situations, it is not suitable to describe the intense experiences in nature found in our ethnographic material. With our Schutz-inspired notion of transcendence, we have suggested another way of conceptualizing the experiences in nature that self-proclaimed secular people have. Arguing against Luckmann, we suggest that transcendence is *not shrinking but moving*. The fact that fewer seek and express great transcendences through the practices and language of organized Christianity does not mean that this mode of human experience is disappearing. Rather, our material suggests that it relocates outside of the church to, among other areas, nature. It is only if we see transcendence as connected to a certain theological position (for instance, that of theistic realism) that we can say that it is shrinking. But, since it seems as if people in this secular environment have experiences in nature that resemble those that others have in church, nature, to some extent, has come to have a similar function to that of organized Christianity in society: it provides the sense of security inherent in something that “always is there” and “is bigger than you”—and just like church buildings, it works as an arena for private thoughts, a backdrop for existential considerations, a place for rest and separation from the stress of everyday life, and a bridge to



experiences of self-dissolution and a greater connection. This relocation of transcendence is what our interlocutors allude to when they, through various formulations, tell us that “the forest is their church.”

The border-crossing experience that we refer to as great transcendence has thus here been relocated to the silent domain of nature. It is here, in the forest or at the beach, that our secular Northern European interlocutors experience those transient, transformative, existential moments of connectedness that point to an order beyond language or logic. They do so on their own, and they do not seek to formalize their experiences in dogmatic superstructures or to connect them to any form of social organization. Such things—worldviews and a social life—they pursue at other times in their lives, separate from their moments of transcendence. These moments are thus individualized, nondogmatic, and as otherworldly as they can be. Secularization does not, as Luckmann once argued, entail the shrinking of transcendence. It does, however, relocate great transcendences to an arena that is different from “religion proper.” In countries that historically have been dominated by Christianity, this relocation may be mistaken for disappearance, but the fact that transcendence is severed from ontological, legal, and organizational or societal dimensions of organized religion does not mean that it cannot endure among self-proclaimed secular people in what are claimed to be some of the world’s least religious countries.



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## Note

1. By "self-proclaimed secular people," we refer to individuals who refer to themselves as nonreligious. This has been the central characteristic of the target group of this study. We recognize, however, that the identification as nonreligious may carry different meanings for different people. Our targeted informants are not necessarily averse to all forms of spirituality or religious tradition. Defining oneself as nonreligious in the cultural context around the Baltic Sea often implies a reluctance to adhere to specific dogma associated with organized Christianity.

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