

Christians and the Sky

by Kevin Marley

Ingold argues that our view of the world is altered by living most of our life indoors, and that we lack contact with the 'outside'. Additionally, Nicholas Campion points out that the sky has always held a sense of awe and wonder for humanity. Thus do contemporary humans still seek a connection to the sky and the outside? The religious factor is a perspective that is not touched upon by Ingold or Campion. Therefore, this project examines if young members of a Christian church do in fact have a sense of awe when looking at the sky. Questionnaires and interviews were used to determine the feelings and thoughts about the sky of a group of church-going Christians. This paper shows that this sense of 'awe' and wonder is brought on by incorporating their beliefs into their image of the sky. Without this perspective taken into account, we cannot say that *all* of humanity shares the same sense of awe.

Introduction

Modern society finds itself indoors more often than being in the outside world. Tim Ingold argues that our view of the world is altered by living most of our life indoors and that we lack contact with the 'outside'.¹ Additionally, Nicholas Campion points out that the sky has always held a sense of awe and wonder for humanity.² Thus, do contemporary humans still seek a connection to the sky and the outside? The first religious belief systems of people were deeply entwined with the sky, as shown by Campion when he tells of a 'tradition of solar religion'.³ With a lot of modern scientific inquiry directed at the sky, one would think there would still be much interest in looking at the sky. However, as A. A. Sappington describes, there appears to be a 'tension [between] science and religion' with just one historical example being the controversy surrounding Galileo's correct heliocentric notion of the solar

¹ Tim Ingold, 'Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather' in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007) 19-38: [hereafter Ingold, Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather] p. 29.

² Campion, Nicholas. *A History of Western Astrology: Vol. 1*. New York: Continuum, 2008: [hereafter Campion, A History of Western Astrology] p. 5

³ Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 5

³ Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 5

system.⁴ Based on this historical tension between science and religion a question that could be asked is; are people who attend a Christian Church regularly less likely to want to engage with the sky? If so, do they bring their religious beliefs into their ideas of the sky? By examining if young members of a Christian church do in fact have a sense of 'awe' when looking at the sky one could reaffirm or deny Campion's general statement about the wonderment of mankind. Furthermore, if this sense of awe is found, an exploration of where this belief comes from can further explore the idea that a relationship to the sky is a fundamental human trait that is independent of religious beliefs. The answer could shed light on where this fascination comes from for the subjects' interviewed, whether they incorporate their beliefs into their image of the sky or somehow reconcile science and religion. Additionally, the modern religious factor is a perspective that is not touched upon by Ingold or Campion. Campion and Ingold did not focus on religious beliefs in their arguments concerning the human relationship to the sky, however this research project places religious belief as central and explores wonderment of the sky through that lens.

After reviewing the literature, I conducted interviews and administered surveys to members of a local Christian community. I conclude that members of this Christian community who are between the ages of 20 and 30 do have a sense of awe with the sky. Also, rather than being challenged by their Christian beliefs this sense of awe appears to be enhanced.

Literature Review

The inspiration of the sky is found throughout history: many ancient cultures developed entire belief and agricultural systems based on the sky.⁵ Campion mentions ancient cultures as having a belief system that included the sky.⁶ However, people of the modern world may not share that same wonder with the sky. The question concerning people of the modern world and their continued amazement at the sky comes into question with Ingold's paper, 'Earth Wind Fire Water'. Ingold believes that, due to modern society's

⁴ Sappington, A. A., 'The Religion/Science Conflict' in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, N°1 (March, 1991): [hereafter Sappington, The Religion/Science Conflict] p. 114

⁵ Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 5

⁶ Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 5

preference to be indoors, we are losing touch with the outside world.⁷ He fears that a lack of outdoor experiences makes our minds work in a different way: rather than acknowledging the whole world, we only acknowledge things indoors in our confined spaces.⁸ Champion describes a different story. He believes the sense of 'awe' that ancient civilizations held with the sky has extended to modern day.⁹ If Champion is correct then this inherent trait, to be fascinated with the sky, prevents us from truly thinking in indoor terms. Also, the increased interest in astronomy by the scientific community suggests modern society still feels a sense of awe with the sky. In talking about the contributions of different scientific fields, William Stoeger exclaims, 'cosmology and astronomy play this role more forcefully and less ambiguously than many of the other sciences'.¹⁰ Therefore, modern man still has some sense of wonder, at least related to astronomy, about the sky. This would confirm that '[n]obody, it is said, can gaze at a magnificent sky without being moved by it', as stated by Champion.¹¹

The extant literature tends to depict a separation from religion and science. Thus, due to a perceived tension between science and religion Christians might not share a sense of wonder. Walter Clark says, '[Religion] and science deal with different parts of the universe and have entirely different attitudes towards the universe'.¹² This depicts two differing cosmologies that have a hard time overlapping, as Jamil Ragep explains, 'because it was one of the 'ancient sciences', astronomy was sometimes tarred with the same brush that besmirched any knowledge that fell out-side [sic] the domain of the religious sciences'.¹³ This could suggest Christians would not find a sense of 'awe' in the sky since inquiry into the sky is now such a large part of the scientific community, and religion and science appear to be two separate cosmologies.

⁷ Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, p. 32

⁸ Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, p. 32

⁹ Champion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 5

¹⁰ William R Stoeger, 'Astronomy's Integrating Impact on Culture: A Ladièrean Hypothesis.' *Leonardo* 29, N°2 (1996) 151-154: [hereafter Stoeger, *Astronomy's Integrating Impact on Culture: A Ladièrean Hypothesis*] p.153

¹¹ Champion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p.5

¹² Clark, Walter E. 'Religion and Science' in, *The Harvard Theological Review* 31, N°2 (April 1938) 93-112 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000022240>: [hereafter Clark, *Religion and Science*] p. 107

¹³ Ragep, Jamil, and Ali al-Qushji. 'Freeing Astronomy from Philosophy: An Aspect of Islamic Influence on Science' in *Osiris* 16 (2001) 49-71: [hereafter Ragep] p. 53

Rather, religious believers may find awe in their religious beliefs and religious imagery. Thus, the increasing scientific interest in astronomy combined with the historic divide between science and religion may be off-putting for people with religious beliefs.¹⁴ This could potentially put an end to any sense of ‘awe’ they might have held with the sky.

One particular group for which it is not clear if a sense of ‘awe’ in the sky exists is for those belonging to a western religion such as Christianity.¹⁵ With a potential tension between science and religion, it would seem that people with religious beliefs may not be aware of the advancements in the field of science.¹⁶ Furthermore, Stoeger describes how cosmology and astronomy push the boundaries of reality, which explains how one might find awe in the night sky.¹⁷

Methodology

Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey explain that since the notion in question deals with examining ‘personal experience from people about a specific issue or topic’, interviews could illuminate information a questionnaire could not, such as personal stories that the interview subject may have in regards to the topic.¹⁸ Alan Bryman also argues, ‘when quantitative and qualitative research are jointly pursued, much more complete accounts of social reality can ensue’.¹⁹ Therefore, I felt the best method to explore the question of Christians’ relationship with the sky was through using mixed methods of interviews and questionnaires.

I conducted my research in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada in early 2014. The target group consisted of 12, 20-30 year old people who attend Christian church regularly. This target group was easily accessed as they are very prevalent in my community. I know some of them personally as friends and some of them I met for the first time.

¹⁴ Ragep, p. 49

¹⁵ Jodi, F., ‘Religion and Modern Science’ in *The Monist* 3, N°3 (April 1893) 329-351 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/monist18933310>: [hereafter Jodi] p.331

¹⁶ Sappington, *The Religion/Science Conflict*, p. 114

¹⁷ Stoeger, *Astronomy’s Integrating Impact on Culture: A Ladrrièrean Hypothesis*, p. 152

¹⁸ Hennink, Monique, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2011. [hereafter Hennink] p.109

¹⁹ Bryman, Alan, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*. London: Routledge, 2001: [hereafter Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*] p. 125

I engaged five willing participants for interviews from my target group and I chose to conduct the interviews in the home of two of the interviewees. This would hopefully put the interviewees at ease in a familiar location. I recruited the interview subjects through a friend who engages with the interviewees at a local church. They are all very active members of the church. For this topic, Alan Bryman describes how engaging participants in a semi-structured interview is best as this allows some freedom for the participant to elaborate on their answers, but also keeps the interview on important topics 'crucial to the study'.²⁰ The method of interviews ended up being group discussion due to time constraints. However, the ultimate reason for this was I found out that these interviewees engage in group discussions twice a week. Being familiar with this type of discussion process allowed them to feel more at ease than they would feel in one-on-one interviews. Furthermore, within a group discussion interviewees were able to build upon each other's answers. At times, some of the interviewees felt they did not have the correct word to express their feelings and through group discussion they were able to overcome this problem.²¹

Seven other subjects received questionnaires. Through constructing the questionnaire, I became aware of 'what [my] questions might mean to different respondents', an idea put forth by Judith Bell.²² Bell also lists different types of questionnaires. For a study of personal experience, a list type of questionnaire allows for the selection of more than one choice, which will show overlap of some key ideas in the study. Combined with standard multiple choice questions, a more well-rounded survey can be produced.²³ I devised the questions after reviewing the various studies of T.L Brink, Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, and of Yael Naze and Sebastien Fontaine. I wished to follow Walter and Waterhouse's style of interviews, which gives a level of insight that could not be found using questionnaires such as in Brink's and Naze's papers. Naze and Fontaine's study was a 'dedicated astronomical survey' that informed my selection of questions, despite their study being narrower in that they

²⁰Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, p.163-165

²¹ Hennink, p.111

²² Bell, Judith, Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project*. England and New York: Open University Press, 2010: [hereafter Bell, *Doing Your Research Project*] p.142

²³ Bell, *Doing Your Research Project*, p. 142

merely 'show[ed] that an interest for astronomy exists'.²⁴ I tested the first questionnaire on a few friends of mine who do not belong to any religion. Through the pilot test, I found some questions that worked and changed some questions to allow for more diversity. I used two digital recorders in case one malfunctioned. I also used the Survey Monkey website to administer my questionnaire via email and social media.²⁵

I made sure to be courteous to the interviewees since they held very strong beliefs so I made sure not to ask about certain controversial topics such as questioning the reality of God. It was quite difficult to set up interviews individually, so by inviting everyone to one place so we could conduct a group discussion. Furthermore, due to time constraints and constant reschedules, I had to limit the number of participants to those who could meet on the day scheduled. I found that through using a mixed method I was able to reach a larger group of people and a more random sample size. However, I was unable to get as many completed surveys as I would have liked so in the future I think that handing surveys out in person will get a better return rate. Also, I ended up using a group semi-structured interview. Despite going well, there were a few moments where people would build on each other and not answer the question for themselves. Although, through building off of each other's answers I got a deeper look into certain ideas for which I could not have asked the appropriate question. I would have also liked to have had one-on-one interviews as well to make sure that I was able to capture the individual's answer and then later engage in a group discussion. Furthermore, there were a small number of participants and I would have preferred a larger number of both interviewees and survey responses.

Reflexive Considerations

My assumptions at the beginning of the project were that almost none of my participants would feel anything towards the sky. I assumed this based on my interaction with Christians in day-to-day life and prejudicially find them out of touch with scientific topics. However, comparing my pilot test to the actual results, I found my results to the contrary. My target group exceeded my expectations for their awareness of the sky and how they feel about it. I tried to

²⁴ Naze, Yael, and Sebastien Fontaine. 'An astronomical survey conducted in Belgium' in *Physic Education* 49 (2014), p. 2

²⁵ Survey Monkey <https://www.surveymonkey.com/> [last accessed 18.3.2016]

limit my biases and reworded my questions until I had what I perceived as a neutral question and was aware of the reflexive nature of the question. However, I found myself engaging with the interview subjects who looked to me for reassurance. Through these minor bits of dialogue, I may have unknowingly influenced or changed future answers.

I was an outsider with this particular group, despite being an insider in terms of age and location. I had an etic, or outsider, perspective when it came to quotations from the Bible that needed to be fully stated and explained for my benefit.²⁶ However, with my limited knowledge of the Christian faith, I was able to come closer to an emic, or insider, perspective as the questions turned to explore the participants' understanding of the sky.

Ethical considerations

At the time of arranging the interviews, each interviewee was informed of the nature of the research project and that their interview, with their permission, was going to be recorded and transcribed to allow for extensive quotations to be used in this essay. In this regard they were informed that they could at any time either withdraw or request anonymity. Of the five interviews, nobody chose to withdraw their interview. All of the interviewees signed release forms. I used pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees.

Findings/Discussion

Ingold makes solid points regarding the amount of time that people spend indoors.²⁷ This was a good place to start, as I wanted to determine if the target group also fell into the norm of being indoors the majority of the time. All of the interviewees claimed to enjoy being outside: two subjects in particular, Greg and Darren, find themselves outside quite often. The results of the survey, however, found only one person who is frequently outdoors, while the rest still enjoyed being outside but found themselves indoors for most of the day. The reasons for being outside ranged widely, from going for a walk and playing sports to going site seeing both natural and man-made.

²⁶ Pike, Kenneth L. *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behaviour*. 2nd ed. Paris: Mouton & Co., 1967, p. 18 and 27

²⁷ Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, p. 28

Chart 1: What do you like to do outside?

Answer Choices	Responses
Walk/run	100.00% (6)
Bike ride	50.00% (3)
Play sports	66.67% (4)
Nature watch (animals)	83.33% (5)
Sightsee man-made structures	66.67% (4)
Sightsee natural wonders (e.g. Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls)	100.00% (6)

While being inside the activities were quite consistent, mostly reading or being on the computer. However, Susan did make note that even though she is still technically inside, she is not always in her house as she is going to school or going out with friends. Furthermore, while inside, the entire interview group felt natural light was very important. This is in contrast to Ingold, who maintains that spending too much time indoors will cause us to miss out on the outside world.²⁸ With all the enjoyment of the outdoors, my next step was to find if perhaps the divide between indoors and outdoors was not as important as Ingold claims. Ingold postulates that spending so much time indoors has caused us to think about the world differently.²⁹ Three of the interviewees said they felt safe when being indoors while one did express feeling cut off as Ingold suggests.

²⁸ Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, p. 28

²⁹ Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, p.28

Chart 2
How do you feel when indoors?

Answer Choices	Responses
Safe	33.33% (2)
Sheltered	83.33% (5)
Cut off	33.33% (2)
Caged	33.33% (2)

The surveys had somewhat mixed responses, but sheltered was the most commonly selected feeling. Inside seems to be a different place in this depiction, which is in line with Ingold’s view. For example, the interviewees said they felt a difference when being indoors versus outdoors, which is what Ingold believed would happen. Ingold states, ‘[it is one thing] to think about land and weather; [it is] quite another to think in them’.³⁰

I tried to discover the level of interest in astronomy and outer space topics amongst the subjects. The interviews revealed that only one interviewee was intently interested in astronomy. When asked if they cared about recent scientific discoveries in astronomy, Greg responded:

Astronomy, yeah. And also something more intense like particle physics. I love to think about the Higgs-Boson and everything that deals with that. I, work in the science centre in the astronomy section so I’ve had formal training in a couple areas.

The other interviewees were interested but to a lesser degree. They would be inquisitive if information was presented to them but only Emma, who was a teaching assistant in a first year astronomy class, would actively find information on new discoveries. She explained that ‘[she is] always getting updates on discoveries’. The survey responses showed that a majority do have an interest in astronomy, as more than 70 percent said they think of sky often. These answers suggest some interest in the sky which adds support to Champion’s idea that everyone finds ‘awe’ with regard to the sky.³¹

³⁰ Ingold, *Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather*, p. 28

³¹ Champion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 5

I then directed the discussion to any potential disconnect between religion and science, as presented by Walter Clark.³² When asked about their initial thoughts when first looking at the stars, I got very unique responses. No two were the same. I asked the interviewees to take me through their train of thought when looking up at the stars. Darren explains:

It would be at first a sense of ‘oh, that’s so beautiful’ I’m glad I’m out of the city so I can finally look at the stars. And it’s a sense of awe and it makes me feel like I’m falling off the earth a bit. It feels a little overwhelming. It’s also the sense of feeling small and inconsequential, and I think reaffirming for my faith as a Christian, to think of something that’s so vast and complicated and seemingly designed or something. That God could create that. Or maybe it was the Big Bang. Or I don’t know. I don’t know how God could have created it, maybe He created it through the Big Bang or something. I feel like you can actually connect to God through that, and I don’t think you even need to be a Christian to experience that.

Also, Lindsay explained her excitement:

I always feel overwhelmed when I look up at the stars and then I feel really small and that God has created the world so beautifully, like when I look up at the stars and they’re so intricately placed and there are so many of them and why are there so many of them and why... I just feel really happy and I just automatically think about God because I just believe He created the stars so I just associate that with Him, and the feeling of joy and all those things. So yeah, it’s very awe-inspiring. It’s amazing that God would create that.

Greg turned to religion in his statement:

When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of him, and the being that you care for him?³³

Susan followed up with a combination of Greg and Lindsay’s sentiments with her feelings of the sky:

Yeah, I think I draw from each of your examples. It’s very awe-inspiring. It’s a sense of smallness and a sense of... I don’t know, you’re forced to understand your place in the world and the greatness that surrounds you. It’s just so complicated, and that part is mind-boggling

³² Clark, *Religion and Science*, p. 101

³³ Psalm 8:3-4 NIV

to me, just the purpose of the two. Why is it this way? Why is it not a green sky? It makes me curious about the 'why' of things. Yeah. A very small feeling. I can get that feeling where you lay back and feel dizzy. For some reason I think there's a very spiritual aspect of the sky that many people can connect with.

Emma struggled to put her feelings into words:

It's like so awe-inspiring that you just sit there and don't say anything because there's not any words that can capture the beauty and the sense of awe and purpose and smallness, that freedom that you feel.

All these emotions and thoughts, ranging from a Bible verse quoted by Greg to a sense a beauty felt by Darren and a feeling of 'being overwhelmed' as stated by Lindsay, may be incompatible with scientific theories regarding the universe. I followed up with asking if this feeling was ever conflicted with other feelings or thoughts or things they have been told. The majority of questionnaire responses expressed some sense of disconnect between feelings upon seeing the night sky and what has been told or taught. This could show the tension between religion and science, as identified by Clark when he says, 'in all religious institutions we find constantly recurring conflicts of ancient tradition and later knowledge'.³⁴ However, the interviewees did not express the same level of conflict. In discussion they were able to reconcile the two perspectives of science and religion without the need to abandon one.

I followed up by asking the interviewees if they would ever actively schedule looking at the night sky. I had strong preconceived ideas about the willingness to participate in stargazing activities. However, this was not supported in my field work. All of my interviewees had gone stargazing in the past. This was not simply due to interest in astronomy; rather, this was clearly about being intrigued by the mystery of the sky in the manner that Campion eludes too.³⁵

I concluded the interviews with questions about the cultural impact of the sky as outlined in Stoeger's exposition that 'cosmology and astronomy push the boundaries of reality'.³⁶ Only Greg, after spending some time to think, was able to guess that ancient cultures built structures in accordance with astronomical alignments. However, the majority of survey responses claimed to know about

³⁴ Clark, *Religion and Science*, p.101

³⁵ Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 5

³⁶ Stoeger, *Astronomy's Integrating Impact on Culture: A Ladrìerean Hypothesis*, p. 152

the practice of astronomy by ancient cultures. Yet, when asked about modern examples of astronomy shaping society, Darren presented an interesting example:

Last year I did a placement in a community development branch and the whole King Street strip in Hamilton is designed for maximum sun to shine on the street. So there are no buildings that, when the sun comes up past a certain degree over the escarpment, the sun will clear the top of the building. All of the high rise buildings are placed where they will cast the shadow over non-feature parts of the strip. All of the positions and shape of the buildings have been planned so that sunlight is optimised along King Street so that it's more enjoyable and walkable.

Greg followed up with his own thoughts,

I think that the sky has started to shape North America after the blackout in 2003, the really big one, because I've noticed almost immediately people have taken a vested interest in eliminating light pollution because they finally noticed what the sky was like, and the city took out the street lights that shone up; they only have the ones that shine down to eliminate light pollution. Some cities make you turn your lights off after a certain time – like businesses that are supposed to turn their lights off at night if they're closed to decrease light pollution.

Lindsay presented her own experience:

When we go to Hawaii, there's a mountain – all of the lights in that city are types of dark bulbs so the glow is very different when you look over that city than when you look over Hamilton, and it doesn't affect your view of the sky at all because there are lots of observatories.

These statements show an awareness of the scientific advancements regarding city design and the push for less light pollution such as in those places belonging to the Dark Sky Association. Stoeger identifies the cultural impact of astronomy and astrology as 'forceful...by prodding us toward new values'.³⁷ Despite the ideas presented in Ragep and Clark's literature, the subject group embraced the questions pertaining to the mysteries of the sky, which they expand upon with their religious beliefs.

The sense of 'awe' identified by Campion would appear still prevalent from my small sample of young Christians. Also, demonstrated here is a unity of religion and science in the lives of the interviewees. It seems not only is there

³⁷ Stoeger, *Astronomy's Integrating Impact on Culture: A Ladrìerean Hypothesis*, p. 152

a sense of 'awe' present in these people when looking at the sky, but also a deeper understanding of how that mystery fits in with their beliefs as well as an awareness of the social impact of the sky on modern culture. Nothing appears lost by spending time indoors so therefore Ingold's findings are not supported.

Conclusion

Members of modern society spend a great deal of time indoors. Ingold questions if this modern lifestyle is causing humans to miss out on the majesty of the outdoors. Campion interjects with the idea that there is still a deeply rooted sense of awe that humans have for the sky. The notion of whether people still feel a sense of awe when looking at the sky was explored within a context of western religion. Sappington argues that due to the historical divide between science and religion, it is no longer clear if Christians still have a sense of wonder with the sky and he suggests that this is due to the advances of astronomy turning the mystery of the sky into more a scientific venture.³⁸ The extant literature tends to focus on the relationship between religious beliefs and the sky, which further suggests a divide between science and religion.³⁹ Building on this premise, I conducted interviews and handed out a questionnaire that would shed light on this topic. I found that members of my small group do still feel a sense of awe from the sky. Furthermore, their belief systems were found to play a major role in how they experience and express their amazement. This is important if scholars are to claim that all of humanity still feels a sense of awe in regards to the sky. My research found that for my group of young Christians their view of the world is not altered by living most of their life indoors and we do not necessarily lack contact with the 'outside'. Perhaps we, as a society, we merely do not observe the sky as much as we used to.

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³⁸ Sappington, *The Religion/Science Conflict*, p. 114

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