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# Can the Secular Be the Object of Belief and Belonging? The Sunday Assembly

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**Abstract** In public discourse and much sociological research individuals are considered secular if they do not hold religious beliefs or belong to any religious group. But can the secular itself become an object of both belief and belonging? Can secular people develop self-understanding and existential purpose in communal contexts that engage a religious model? To explore these questions I investigated the Sunday Assembly, a new network of secular congregations. Based on two years of research including fieldwork at the London, San Diego, and Chicago Assemblies, in-depth interviews with 21 Assemblers, and analysis of video-recorded Assembly services, this study examines the interactional, meaning-making dynamics of what I term *communal secularity*. I explore the broader question of belief, morality, and belonging in an increasingly complex secular-religious landscape through an analysis of the congregational activity of this newest iteration of the growing secular community. Having distilled thematic categories from an inductive analysis of the talk, practice, and other elements of congregational culture at the Sunday Assembly, this study reveals the social interactions, functions, and symbolic practices that frame participants experiences and express secular values and belief systems. I argue the secular can become an object of a nonsupernaturalist sacred, and that congregants engage interactions and meaning structures, both explicitly and implicitly, that parallel, coalesce with, and in several ways depart from, traditional religious congregations. My research reveals how secular beliefs can both function and fulfill in ways typically credited to religion. As such, the secular should not refer exclusively to the lack of religiosity, but should acknowledge the diversity of contemporary secular forms, some of which embrace a religious character. Implications of communal secularity for the broader community are discussed, and I suggest additional vistas of research as part of the emerging scholarly literature in this area.

**Keywords** Secularity · Congregations · Emotion · Embodiment · Secularism · Qualitative methods

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The Sunday Assembly (henceforth SA or Assembly) is a new, growing network of nontheistic congregations with global aspirations. Congregations are usually associated with religion per se, which in sociological terms entails an orientation to the supernatural. Despite being explicitly secular, holding no doctrine affirming a deity, Assemblies constitute congregations both definitionally and substantively. Of course, compared to the ubiquity of religious congregations, the SA represents one of a tiny number of historical groups that self-consciously adopt a religious model, but with avowed secular beliefs and a secular worldview.

But beyond surface similarity, what does a secular congregation share with its religious counterpart, and what does this suggest more broadly about the nature and import of shared beliefs, collective expression, and the need for belonging? Does it simply exchange veneration of the sacred with that of the profane? In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim famously stated that, "the ancient gods grow old or die, and others are not yet born" (2001, 322). His suggestion was that although specific religious dogmas and other supernatural objects of belief evolve or depart, that something will always emerge in their place by virtue and dint of the dynamics of human group life itself. In one sense, this paper explores Durkheim's classical question in contemporary terms through analysis of the secular congregation.

The SA began its life in January of 2013 in London, the brainchild of two British comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. In this relatively short time the SA's growth has been impressive. As of this writing, there are 68 established, active congregations in eight countries across Europe, North America, and Oceania. Nearly half of Assemblies are in the United States, and most have between 50 and 250 congregants. Though "nontheist friendly" religious organizations such as Ethical Culture, and the Unitarian Universalist Church have existed for many years, the SA represents a significant development in the secular community, and is more overtly nontheistic than liberal religious congregations that do not require theistic beliefs, but whose membership usually includes many theists. Long established secular humanist organizations such as the American Humanist Association likewise have programs that address ceremonial practices surrounding important life events (e.g. baby welcoming ceremonies through the *Secular Seasons* program), but the SA actively works at secular symbolic expression, not in special one-off events, but in a more integrated, routine fashion.

Organized secularism and the freethought community has a long, intriguing history in the United States (Jacoby 2004), and has experienced a kind of populist re-emergence since the mid 2000s (Baker and Smith 2015). The proliferation of local groups, strengthening of national organizations, prominence of the new atheists, emergence of an atheist popular literature, and the new world of online secular activism has lead some researchers to characterize this phenomena as an "atheist awakening" (Cimino and Smith 2014). Paired with broader contemporary trends in religious (dis)affiliation patterns that include a significant increase in those claiming no religion (Sherkat 2014), the relevance of the SA becomes apparent.

What is the meaning of this organization for the contemporary (non)religious landscape? Why has it emerged, and what does it suggest about the status of what leaders in the secularist movement call the growth of unbelief (see Flynn 2016) and the meaning of its success? These broad questions will require future study and greater attention from scholars across disciplines; they cannot be adequately addressed here. My purpose is more focused. I examine the accounts and interactions of Assemblers in order to interpret their behaviors and explain the meaning and implications of the use of a congregational model by nontheistic individuals in a secular context. This analysis will provide some grounding for future assessment of the bigger

questions about the meaning of secular congregations for the wider culture. As there are virtually no sociological, qualitative analyses of the SA to date, my aim is to offer a beginning investigation that will aid future work on this and other groups that are involved in what I call *communal secularity*. I argue that Assemblers engage in communal behavior around nontheistic beliefs in a way that sacralizes the secular and offers many of the same communal benefits of congregational religion. In the pages that follow, I explore the functions, meaning, and interactional dynamics of this communal form of secularity and its relevance for sociological inquiry.

One goal of the SA is to extend to participants social benefits traditionally identified with religious organizations. This became clear as I sat ten rows from the front in a packed Assembly in the summer of 2015 in the United Kingdom. Sanderson Jones himself began the service at the London Assembly, held in the historical Conway Hall Ethical Society building. Full of impressive energy—he was already leading congregants in dancing to music before he made any statement—his first words were, "In case you're new here...it's pretty simple, we are a secular congregation devoted to celebrating life!" The congregation cheered, nearly matching his enthusiasm. Tall, with long hair and a beard, Sanderson used his comedic talent to connect with the crowd as he continued outlining the basic premise of the SA. As probably the only sociologist in the room, it did not take me long to notice the qualities of charismatic leadership in Sanderson's possession that Max Weber famously identified. This echoes Cimino and Smith's (2014, 118) observations at the New York Assembly. They described Sanderson as resembling Jesus, or, "at least an Old Testament prophet," and that he, "played the part of a Pentecostal preacher." They were introduced to the service with Sanderson proclaiming:

> We're reclaiming the soul, transcendence, ecstasy—all feelings that are inside of us. We start at zero and end at zero...Atheism is the diving board and life is the ocean. We're made up of atoms but we're having the best time that atoms can have in the universe.... It's an amazing gift not believing in God. You have to have an attitude of gratitude – be happy you're an atheist!

Life itself may be the ocean, and atheism its diving board, but it is the congregation that makes these abstractions relevant to individuals through providing a concretized interactional space in which this claim can be realized through ritual practice and meaningful narratives. Congregations represent a fundamental type of social organization. They express group emotions and values, embody particular ideologies, and are a critical component in the formation of the basic rational-institutionalizing processes of human belief and practice (Cnaan and Curtis 2013). Social actors in congregational contexts produce, and are produced by, the normative behaviors and corresponding beliefs that emerge, evolve, and sometimes dissolve, via the dynamics of congregational culture. My argument below will demonstrate that in the case of avowed secular individuals, SA congregations represent a public forum in which an internalized secular consciousness is expressed through symbolic performance as Assemblers implicitly engage secular meaning structures.

The word *congregation* seems straightforward. It simply refers to a collectivity, assembly, or gathering of people for some particular purpose. But in reality congregations are complex, multifaceted social entities that speak to issues far beyond the parameters of the congregation itself. They develop internal dynamics and express relationships with cultural processes and institutions outside of it. Congregations involve patterned cognitions, emotive expressions, and

social behaviors that feature particular cultural and subcultural logic(s). In addition to *content* such as collective rituals and shared beliefs, congregations are cultural *forms* that communicate values and collectively dramatize experience through unique interactions.

Before examining the empirical dimensions of the SA, and the interactive dynamics of its secular message, I first discuss some of the research literature on secularity broadly, as it will provide context for understanding more specifically its communal expression. I then address sociological conceptualizations of congregation, emotion, and embodiment as they both frame my analysis and represent salient dimensions of communal secularity. This is followed by an outline of the setting and methods used for this study. In the conclusion I briefly discuss some of the broader implications of the SA, including its embeddedness in cultural processes, and what it may suggest regarding the larger (non)religious landscape.

## Background on Secularity

The empirical study of *secularity* has grown significantly since the mid 2000s (Lee 2015). It is connected but distinct from related concepts, such as *nonreligion*, in much the same way as the variety of identity categories (e.g. agnostic, secular humanist), cognitive/philosophical positions (e.g. atheism, nontheism) and broader movements or socio-historical processes (e.g. secularism, secularization) are that inform them.[1] The vocabulary of secularity is relational and historically contingent (Lee 2015). It is intertwined with conceptions of religion and is always subject to both popular and scholarly definition. In the broadest sense, secularity refers to the "cultural meanings that under[lie] the differentiation between religion and non-religious spheres" (Wohlrab-Sahra and Burchardt 2012). Consistent with this view, but more narrowly, I mean to refer to the cultural meanings appropriated by and ascribed to those who explicitly *identify* with secular, nontheistic "cosmic belief systems" (Baker and Smith 2015). Secular values and the collective practices that emerge and recursively reinforce such belief systems reflect what Lee (2015, 160) identifies as "existential cultures," or those sets of "ideas about the origins of life and human consciousness and about how both are transformed or expire after death—what have been called 'ultimate questions' in the literature." Succinctly, I aim to explore the ways in which the SA instantiates just such a culture through its congregational practice.

Undergirding the expanding terminology and meanings related to secularity, there are, as Lee writes, "three core theories or assumptions about what secularity entails" (2015, 10). The first deals with the classical secularization theory familiar to sociologists, wherein the forces of modernity erode traditional religion. The second deals with secularity as an outlook, worldview, or ideology that stands in contradistinction to religious ones. The third involves the ways in which people actually reject religion intellectually and behaviorally. It is the latter two components identified by Lee that frame my meaning of secularity here. Especially of interest in this study are the ways in which Assemblers reject religious claims and embrace secular worldviews, while simultaneously adopting a religious model of congregational activity in doing so. Despite the growth of research interest in secularity, there are virtually no empirical studies of the workings of these secular-avowed congregations—a situation this study seeks to amend.

[1] See Lois Lee's excellent book, *Recognizing the Nonreligious* (2015) for a detailed discussion of the relationships and differences between these ideas, as well as the conceptual challenges of—and sometimes confusion with—related terminology.

The proportion of Americans who claim no religion is growing (Zuckerman 2014) and includes atheists, agnostics, secularists, and *nones*. Though members of this last group include religiously unaffiliated theists, the number of nonbelievers generally is on the rise. Recent studies put the proportion of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated *and* nontheists at around 10% (Baker and Smith 2015).[2] Although theism and religious affiliation remain decidedly the norm, secularists are also becoming an increasingly organized and influential segment of the American population (Zuckerman 2014). Correspondingly, researchers have taken greater interest, accumulating new information regarding the social characteristics and patterns of secularity. For instance, the "typical" atheist in the United States has been described as a young, educated, unmarried, white man (Baker and Smith 2015) with generally progressive political views (Williamson and Yancey 2013).

Beyond demographics, substantive issues have been examined including the role of social media and activism in the growing secular community (Cimino and Smith 2014), and the collective identity dynamics of atheist groups, which show how interpersonal relationships promote more vocal, activist-oriented members (Smith 2013). Guenther et al. (2013) examined the ways in which social boundaries are constructed within and between atheists, and other studies have investigated the formation and negotiation of secular and atheist identities (LeDrew 2013; Smith 2011). Survey-based studies underscore the social location(s) and political affiliations of nonbelievers (Baker and Smith 2015; Williamson and Yancey), demonstrating the close affinity in the United States between atheism, scientific discourse, and liberal politics. Other work explores secular worldviews and their cross-cultural variations and historical expressions (Bullivant and Ruse 2013). Scholars have also examined the social stigma of unbelief (see Hammer et al. 2012), finding that the American public is strongly distrustful of those who identify with atheism (Gervais et al. 2011), and suggesting that nonbelievers are an essential *other* in American society (Edgell et al. 2006).

All of this background on secularity and its recent study is important for understanding the dynamics of the SA. Though it is not the first historical instance of communal secularity, its popularity and significance is both product and reflection of broader trends in the contemporary secular-religious landscape and has to date not been given empirical treatment within sociology. But how does congregational secularity depart from other kinds of organized secularism, and what does it suggest about the growth of the nones and the broader trends noted above? Is it the outcome of greater focus on identity politics within the nonreligious community? Does it reflect greater confidence in asserting a positive secular ethics in public space, and if so, why is this the case? These abstract questions cannot be addressed until there is close empirical examination of the concrete interactions of Assemblers.

## Congregation, Emotion, Embodiment

That individuals benefit from collective practice and the sense of belonging it imparts is an embedded assumption in studies of social groups. Beliefs and behaviors of whatever kind mutually produce and express each other. When enveloped in the legitimizing forces of a collectivity, beliefs are experientially powerful, often motivating goal-oriented social action.

[2] This study included "nonaffiliated believers" and the "culturally religious" along with atheists and agnostics, putting the percentage of secular Americans at 28%. I have excluded the latter two categories for a more cautious interpretation of secular, and one that aligns with the view of Assemblers.

Religious congregations are important cultural spaces in which human aspirations, fears, and desires are narrativized, dramatized, and justified. They represent smaller cultural units embedded within larger social forces. Nancy Ammerman (1994, 294), writing about the dynamics of religious congregations states, "We see religion retaining an influence in the public arena. Sometimes it is through the sort of re-framing that takes place in religious enclaves and then carries over into community action. Sometimes it is through collective action organized through religious channels." She connects this to prosocial behavior, citing it as an outcome of congregational religious messages. Are there "secular enclaves" that do the same? How are secular congregations connected to broader social forces? Are they simply alternatives to religious congregations? To understand religious congregations, Ammerman (1994) advised we pay closer attention to the stories they tell. This is sound advice, and should be no less applied to secular congregations.

Congregations develop the biographical self and promote spiritual growth as congregants connect and work toward personal fulfillment through congregational practice. In Gallagher and Newton's (2009) study, they showed how Christian congregations were a core resource for moral identity construction and spiritual development, providing a collective moral framework in which religious identities are expressed. The singing, dancing, praying and other meaning-filled products of congregational activity provide a framework for self-understanding that traverses the services themselves. These rituals are localized instantiations of a broader ethos, a collective cultural expression that places the individual in a morally relevant, purpose-driven universe.

Another theme in the congregation literature centers on interaction (Tavory 2013), social exchange and networks (Seymour et al. 2014), and the social-symbolic boundaries and goods these produce. Here, members seek religious rewards through constructive, micro-level symbolic exchange, providing details regarding the use and meaning of collective rituals, worship, and other aspects of congregational activity. For instance, Seymour et al. (2014) examined how congregational trust is generated through social exchange, suggesting it is not religious beliefs per se that endow congregants with mutual trust, but the interactional processes themselves that facilitate trust building. Repeated, predictable positive exchange via collective ritual, structures interactions such that reciprocity develops, and solidarity deepens.

Social and symbolic boundaries are fundamental to the study of congregations and are both cause and effect with regard to beliefs and practices. Moral boundary work in particular from both religionists and secularists has been a focus. In the United States morality is itself a primary referent for both believers and nonbelievers, with many of the latter adopting nonreligious labels as a means of signifying their repudiation of the idea religion is necessary for a moral life. Studies of secularists outline the interactional basis of boundaries, demonstrating the importance of the constructed moral self (Smith 2011, 2013). Zuckerman (2012) discusses the interpersonal processes of the loss of religious identity, and other studies explore the in/out-group boundary dynamics of secular groups (Guenther et al. 2013; Smith 2013) and politically infused secular activism (Cimino and Smith 2014).

Research on *emotion* shows that emotions are mediated, constrained, and produced through cultural processes. They are shaped by feeling rules (Hochschild 2012), and they endow experience with meaning and lend plausibility to beliefs (Berger 1990). Not surprisingly, religion is fertile ground for the analysis of emotions. From evangelical Christians (Wilkins 2008), to Eastern religious traditions (McDaniel 2008), and new religious movements (Cowan 2008) emotions are central to congregational experience. Emotions function as a source of truth-confirmation for religious beliefs, from the quiet "burning in the bosom" Mormons seek,

to ecstatic expressions in Sufism, to being overwhelmed by the spirit via apoplectic bodily movement in charismatic Christianity. Conversion is wrapped in emotional experience to such a degree the two seem nearly inseparable. The issues of self-authenticity and true belief often hinge on particular emotions, and ritualized emotional expression is central to many religious collectives. There is no, "[identical] pattern of emotional experience, response, or performance" across all religious collectives, as Corrigan (2008, 3) observes, but the study of emotion is important in a universal sense in that the "religious phrasing of questions about meaning, contingency, ultimacy, and intention" are at the core of religions the world over. Emotions have been much less studied with relation to the secular, but their relevance to the SA will become clear.

The body and *embodiment* represent a wide range of research, from descriptions of emotional experience (Schilling 1997) to the control of bodies through institutional practices (Foucault 1995/1977). Embodiment is an abstraction challenging to navigate, as the body—to state the obvious—touches upon every aspect of human life. But the body is particularly useful for understanding congregations in that emotions, boundaries, and rituals are themselves part and parcel of congregational practice. The body is more than corporeal object composed of material reality; it is a vessel of meaning for both the person and society (Waskul and Vannini 2006). Rooted in phenomenological thought and given empirical relevance by the pragmatist philosophy of the early twentieth century, embodiment connects the role of the body to meaning, practice, and experience. In sociology, studies have focused on issues of race, gender, and their performance, with bodies as sites of negotiation and resistance to normative cultural messages (Atkinson 2002), the body and its experience with disability or illness (Smith and Sparks 2008), body modification, and other identity-based perspectives that deal with self-development, power and inequality, or other social outcomes. Boundaries and emotions are central this work, with some arguing that the intersection of cognitions and feelings—that is, emotion itself—is the very foundation of bodily experience (Paap 2008).

From a constructionist view, embodiment suggests the simultaneity of the body as both subject and object, referring to "the process by which the object-body is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and/or transformed as a subject-body" (Waskul and Vannini 2006, 3). In other words, embodiment provides a useful view of the self in society as it points to the active, dialectical relationship between the subjective "inner" experience of the individual, and the body as a *social* object, conceptually distinguishable (but ultimately not separable) from the embodied subject and the collective realities in which it is embedded. Analysis of secular congregations demonstrates the relevance of this framework and evinces the notion that Assemblers are engaged in embodied practices, via public performances, that express an internalized secular consciousness.

## Setting and Methods

Having studied secular groups prior to the existence of the SA, I learned of their beginnings from contacts and keeping abreast of developments in the wider secular community. This community is increasingly diverse and motivated by different (sometimes conflicting) goals oriented toward both the personal and political. As recent studies have documented (Baker and Smith 2015; Cimino and Smith 2014; LeDrew 2013) secular activists and the "new atheists," for instance, seek to influence the wider culture by defending church-state issues, promoting secular values, criticizing religious claims and the public role of religion, and otherwise

engaging in public discourse in hopes of creating a more secular society. Additionally, recent years have witnessed the proliferation of social and support-style secular groups for like-minded nontheists and the religiously unaffiliated (Manning 2015). These groups are not necessarily engaged in activism; their primary function is for social gathering, support, or even places of "recovery" for the formerly religious.[3]

The SA represents still another aspect of secular diversity as it engages a religious model of organizational behavior, and my earlier work provided rich context for studying this latest iteration of the broader secular movement. My fieldwork was conducted with three SA congregations, the San Diego and Chicago Assemblies in the United States, and the London Assembly in the United Kingdom. This sensitized me to the character of the SA across regional and cultural settings (although I leave deliberate comparisons of the SA across cultures to future study, as it is beyond the goals of my analysis). I contacted organizers prior to my participation in San Diego and Chicago to inform them of my researcher role and to get permission to disseminate a recruitment flyer for my study.[4] For the London Assembly, Sanderson Jones happened to contact me to connect me with London based researchers, having learned of my interest through mutual contacts.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Over 18 months I conducted interviews with 13 congregants from the San Diego Assembly, and eight from the Chicago Assembly (I attended, but did not interview congregants from the London Assembly due to travel/time constraints), participated in live Assemblies in each city (totaling about ten hours), and analyzed the content of approximately 18 hours of live video recorded Assemblies made available on the San Diego chapter's website. Watching recorded Assemblies supplemented my fieldwork, as it expanded my familiarity with their services and allowed me to see and confirm the patterns I observed in person. This was beneficial since U.S. Assemblies only occur once a month, which limited the frequency with which I could attend.[5]

Combined with the collection of relevant documents such as advertisements, programs, and website content, this constitutes the data on which my analysis is based. Each interviewee was also asked to complete a separate survey (see Appendix), which gathered demographic information, and offered additional questions about their involvement with the SA. Of the 21 participants, nine identified as male, ten as female, one as transgender, and one as gender queer. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 80. Eighteen respondents identified as white, two as Hispanic, and one as African American. The majority identified as middle class and were college educated. Most interviews were conducted by phone after my visit to each Assembly, as there was not always time during my travels for in-person interviews.

[3] Of course, the "secular community" does not refer only to secular people who organize. It can refer generically to all those who do not affiliate with any religion or self-identify with a secular labels (atheist, agnostic, secular humanist etc.). In fact, it is likely the majority of such individuals do not organize into social or activist secular groups.

[4] This was still early in the development of the SA in the United States. The media and interested parties beyond the Assemblers themselves were in attendance, so it was not unexpected to have such requests.

[5] Most religious congregations meet weekly, but given its newness, the fact it relies solely on volunteer organizers instead professional clergy, and lacks many of the preexisting organizational resources many traditional religious congregations enjoy, U.S. Assemblies have so far limited their services to once a month. Some Assemblies in the U.K., where the SA began, do hold services more than monthly, which could suggest the Assemblies in U.S. that can, will start meeting more often if interest and demand continue to grow.

Each interview lasted between one-half and two hours, with an average of one hour. At the time of interviews participants had attended an average of three Assemblies each (at that time only a handful of U.S. Assemblies had been offered). The San Diego Assembly, housed in a non-profit Women's Club, was one of the larger U.S. Assemblies at the time, and averaged approximately 150 congregants during the summer of 2014, according to the lead organizer (this was consistent with my own count while I was in attendance). The Chicago Assembly, though larger now, had only 40 participants during this same period. Organizers reported having more than this in the months previous to my participation, but they had just changed venues from an elementary auditorium to a cultural center, and had lost some attendance. My recruitment of 21 subjects is a function of both the relatively small pool of Assemblers available at these locations, and the fact that my coding and analysis of transcripts led to the thematic categories offered below in relatively short order, with no new major patterns emerging after approximately the first dozen interviews.

All participants identified with at least one secular label (see Appendix). Interviews were guided by a number of direct questions, but were otherwise open-ended, following the reasoning and interest of each participant. This allowed relevant themes to emerge rather than imposing them at the outset. I obtained consent and digitally recorded each interview. A research assistant transcribed them in full.

I took an inductive approach to the data, employing an emergent-thematic analytical framework. This unfolded first through initial coding followed by focused and cluster coding (Charmaz 2014) across transcripts, comparing sets of quotes and analyzing patterns with the use of constructed concepts. From this I created general categories and developed a conceptual logic to explain the interactional processes and experiences of Assemblers. I was mindful of contradistinctive examples vis-à-vis the thematic elements I identified, and have integrated them into the discussion where appropriate. This gives the analysis balance and helps resist presenting the experiences of participants as overly homogenous. Rather than suggesting objective knowledge, my argument rests on an interpretive validity rooted in the logic of interactionism and a close reading of the thoughts and actions of participants in a fluid, emerging social context. After all, "the social world is an interpreted world, not a literal world," (Altheide and Johnson 1994, 485) and the reality of the Sunday Assembly and its meaning for congregants is best approximated through this approach. Importantly, this study is not an attempt to characterize all Assemblies as being exactly the same, or to suggest I have uncovered some objective set of principles that guide the phenomenon of communal secularity generally. Rather, my analysis reveals an empirical, interactional *process* behind secular congregational work that will inform future study in this area of research.

What follows is a qualitative analysis that distills four major thematic categories revealed from my interpretive study of the SA. Beginning with the concept of congregational work, I first provide a basic framework for understanding the collective dynamics of Assembly practices, followed by a detailed discussion of the role of ritual and emotion in secular congregations. I then analyze the patterned narratives of Assemblers before exploring the notion of the authentic secular self and its relevance to the SA and communal secularity more broadly. Finally, I develop several of the most salient implications of my analysis for a wider discussion of secular congregations, while offering suggestions for future research in this area.

## "Deity-Free" Congregations: Secular Solemnity and Celebration at the Sunday Assembly

There is no officially codified doctrine at the SA, but there is a decisive principle that underlies its activity: it is secular and "deity-free." Beyond this essential distinction, much about the SA—intentionally and otherwise—"looks like" religion.

### "It's the Best Bits of Church, with no Religion": Nontheistic Congregational Work

This tag line from SA's website (sundayassembly.com) is offered with a wink to its reader, but is not just a quip attributable to the comedians who offered it. It conveys a sentiment at the heart of secular congregations and begs examination. Each Assembly service follows this basic order: song, welcome, opening message, song, featured talk/speaker, moment of reflection, announcements, collections, final song. Participants dance during each musical number (which in some cases are led by live bands) and most elements of the program center on some secular theme ranging from science, to diet and lifestyle, to financial advice.

That SA offers "religious" goods including a sense of moral community, social solidarity, and other dimensions of belonging, in secular terms, is made clear by Assemblers. Dan,[6] a musician and political activist in his early 60s, and a former Christian stated

> It's [the SA] about singing songs and sharing a little joy and drinking some coffee and talking to people. That's what churches do, but they mix in the message that it can't be done without religion—that religion and dogma and god and Jesus and Allah...it's completely superfluous to the need that human beings have to be a part of a community.

Beyond these social benefits, Dan went on to suggest substantive concerns about the relationship of religion and the SA:

> The thing is, churches have had a long, long, time to develop the power to help people gather for meaningful experience. Their meaningful experiences are developed around dogma or a person, they've got mythical stories, they sing songs, they educate and pray, they listen to a message from somebody. Those are all factors that play into the SA, but they just do it with those stories being about *real* things and people.

Dan's acknowledgment of SA's attempt to reproduce the "meaningful experience" religion provides was undoubtedly influenced by his 40 years of experience in different Christian congregations as a member and musician. Although he sympathized with religion and drew many associations between it and the SA, this sympathy had its limits. In discussing the media's portrayal of the SA as an, "atheist mega-church," Dan offered:

> The media started coming in saying we were an atheist mega church. Well, first of all "mega church" is an ugly term for an ugly model of what Christianity does. And the second thing is, a mega church is a church with a huge number of people...we have

[6] All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

> probably a core group of about 250. That's not a mega church. A mega church is a huge facility, well funded, with thousands of people that show up, and they're generally built around a particular pastor...or a particular doctrine. It really offends me to compare this [SA] to a mega church.

He then made a critical distinction between Christianity and the SA, suggesting, "The SA is in the business of promoting acceptance of nonbelief in religion. I don't think it's in any 'evangelizing' business. We're not going around trying to convert people to become atheists...we just say, 'you know, we're basically like church, but we don't have any dogma.'" Many echoed similar ideas regarding the purpose of the SA. For instance, Kevin, a man in his forties from the mid-west who strongly believed more secular alternatives to religion were needed for Americans, talked about how he planned to work Assemblies into his personal goals and future family. Unlike Dan, Kevin was not raised with any religion. As he put it, he had always been the "atheist-type." But like Dan, he sees utility in secular congregations. Hoping to "settle down" soon with his girlfriend, he commented:

> So I've been with my girlfriend for about two years, and we're thinking about marriage and having children. She looks back at her upbringing, and sees positive aspects of religion. She was in a Sunday school type organization that taught, you know, generic values of caring and participating. She enjoyed that sense of community and passing down values that she came to agree with. We would like something like that for our children. So another facet of the SA is that we'd get to participate in the community...and carry on those values, instead of doing it through a church.

Others indicated their desire for the moral structure churches often provide for families, but not every Assembler sees the SA as a straightforward secular alternative to religion. Mason, for instance, is a father of four, in his early 40s, and an officer in the Navy. Although he understands why some of his fellow Assemblers see this as church for atheists, he has a different view:

> I mean, to them [other Assemblers] it looks like church and I can understand that. A lot of them came from a religious background...They feel like they lost time basically… And I guess I'm included in that. Having said that, if someone were to come to SA they would quickly see it's nothing like [religion] at all. There's no *worship*, there's no *hierarchy*, there's no *dogma*...That's the great thing about SA, it really holds to humanism and the values of secularism...But there are people that want to cast it as, the "new church of atheism"...they want to label this thing as a religious movement, but there is nothing religious about it, except for the *appearance* of it.

Mason sees the Assembly as only superficially like religion. For him, what is relevant has less to do with specific behaviors than the substantive aims of those behaviors. Whereas Dan might give assent to the idea of, for instance, "atheist testimonials," Mason sees this as devoid of religious content. For him this would just be a way of connecting with fellow Assemblers. As studies of congregations argue (Seymour et al. 2014), assessing trust, validation, and other benefits of congregations, the *contents* and claims of religious worship can be secondary to its *practice*. In this view, it is the nature of the social exchange that matters, not the doctrine.

And yet, without an object of worship, the surrounding religious practices to which it is directed would be less coherent. In Tavory's (2013) study of a Jewish orthodox congregation, he argues that practices such as communal prayer are important precisely because they collectively instantiate the private meaning structures (e.g. religious beliefs) and personal experience of the worshiper. The collective action of prayer is only relevant because this interaction draws out what is important to the inner life of the congregant. What makes congregational worship compelling is how, "[the] codified exigencies and variations in the structure of public ritual interactionally highlight individual members' experiences and lives" (Tavory 2013, 125). In other words, the part of the cognitive world of the congregant that addresses existential concerns and ultimate questions about the cosmos and the meaning of his or her place in it are concretized and made "more real" through congregational practice. For Assemblers, secular cosmic answers are made compelling through their congregational practice. In this way, Assemblies clearly serve as one of the important "existential cultures" on offer for nonbelievers.

Congregational work is a salient kind of public performance that validates religious beliefs. But what about congregational work in a secular context where there is no supernatural object of veneration to which Assemblers direct their "worship"? In discussing legal decisions on church-state issues, Demerath (2010) offers a compelling case on the question of defining religion, arguing the challenges of interpreting the first amendment are rooted in an overly psychological view of religion; one that places unjustified import on specific beliefs (e.g. the "sincerely held beliefs" criteria) about the supernatural. Instead, Demerath (2010, 258) suggests, "[Religion is] any shared sense of sacred meaning that is ritually enacted and communally reinforced through a like-minded group or organization." He implies a criteria of "sacred" rather than "religious" in analyzing the ritual practices of "like-minded" groups.

This argument is offered in a legal context, but its functionalist framework sheds light on the SA. By *sacred* Demerath does not refer exclusively to propositions about the supernatural. Rather, it references shared meanings imbued with special import by way of transcending the mundane through the power of the collective. In many ways, this is the manifest goal of the SA. When Sanderson directed the congregation, during our scheduled "moment of reflection," to ponder the wonder and beauty within and all around us—from the exquisite design and functionality of the hand dryer he had used in the restroom just before making his entrance on the venue's dais, to the more obvious aesthetics of the cityscape of London, to our humanistic duty to show kindness to others—he was invoking a shared sense of meaning aimed at transcending the ordinary.

Obviously Sanderson was exercising some humor here, evinced by the fact that we spent several minutes on a focused meditation of the "incredibleness" of our feet: how they take us through so many journeys in life, without our giving them due credit. Yet, there was a real seriousness at play as well, and congregants seemed to "get it." The exercise was a collective expression of gratitude, finding happiness in small things, being hopeful and kind, and searching for wonder and inspiration in everything. It is in this temporal sense that Assemblies bear the signature of the sacred and structure interactions in ways that collectively draw out meaning for congregants. This congregational work and patterns of interaction codify and express shared values that develop trust and reinforce commitments that legitimize—and in some meaningful sense—sacralize a secular worldview. Regardless of whether congregants lean towards Dan or Mason's perspective about what the SA actually does, the essential outcome is that it suffuses the secular with trans-mundane meaning through congregational practice.

### "All those Things that Elevate Human Experience": Secular Ritual and Emotion

Ritualizing behavior in a secular context suggests the need for belonging and collective expression beyond—or apart from—the traditional association of ritual with religion. "Sacralizing the secular" (Demerath 2010) is one way of describing the behaviors and sentiments of Assemblers. Awe, transcendence, and related "religious ideas" both frequent conversation and exist subtextually within the SA. Kevin's thoughts separating ritual from religion are illustrative:

> Human beings are wired to seek patterns, and I think that rituals—concrete or step-by-step ways of doing things—certainly help. Just like if you're going on a trip and you have a packing list. The ritual is going step-by-step through the packing list so that you feel secure that you have everything you need, and it puts you in the right mind-set of going on the trip. That's ritual; and it serves its own purpose. I don't think that ritual in regards to the supernatural is needed. I think that whatever benefits those rituals provide can be just as easily provided without giving yourself up to the hocus pocus of a greater being...I have a sense of awe and wonder with the universe without needing to feel like it was created just for me, or that I'm in debt to someone that created it, or any of the usual things that go along that [religion].

Kevin has a utilitarian approach to ritual. His "trip" analogy is especially interesting. He divorces the functions of ritual from theistic beliefs and argues the "hocus pocus" of surrendering to a "greater being" is superfluous to the benefits of ritual practice. That he wishes to remove theistic associations from ritual is not surprising. The deeper suggestion here is that as "pattern seeking" beings, ritual, for Kevin, is located in the intrinsic need for meaning. His phrasing about "feeling secure" and "having everything you need" is telling as he connects concrete rituals to broader cosmological concerns—where his sense of "awe and wonder" can be cultivated in a secular congregation. Consider the thoughts of Christine, a psychotherapist and researcher in her late 50s from southern California. A convert to Judaism at age 41—"as an atheist," she takes care to point out—discusses the importance of community and the transcendent:

> [We] like to get together to hear a talk, to sing, to share food, to ponder...you know, all those things that elevate mundane human experience to something more transcendent, giving people a real sense of intimacy. SA offers all of those things. It's especially attractive to people who kind of grew up around certain faiths. It's a little more like Christianity I would say, where there's a service and a talk. Every religious service has a particular order and a certain...there are certain ways that it's meant to get you into the mood, into the flow... rituals [take] you from being out in the world into being with the community and maybe inside yourself a little more.

She went on, suggesting she was always looking for something like the SA because, like religion, it deliberately works at elevating experience without obliging the secular-minded parishioner to assent to propositions about the preternatural. As with Kevin, the language Christine uses conveys a certain sentiment about the purpose and function of ritual. Getting "into the mood and flow" implies secular congregations provide a context for transcending ordinary affairs to capture a sense extra-ordinary meaning. This meaning arises from the

relationship between individual and congregation; the subjective inner experience Christine seeks is "located" in the interactional process between the person as subject and social object. The last sentence of this quote is particularly illuminating as it neatly summarizes the social relationship necessary for the collective effervescence so often ascribed to religious practice. That ritual "takes you from being out in the world...into a community," while simultaneously, "inside yourself," illustrates the significance of ritual exchange in congregational settings beyond religious meanings. SA also demonstrates the relevance of public "worship," and why it makes the private experience of the individual compelling (Tavory 2013).

Irrespective of how interviewees viewed the explicit purpose of the SA (and whether or not they believed it was "like religion") each of their accounts suggests they embrace secular values that find implicit legitimation in the ritual practices of congregations. Other Assemblers openly discussed the transformative benefits of ritual. This is quite removed from the usual assumptions about atheists' avoidance or denigration of ritual. In their study of the American secular-atheist community at large, Cimino and Smith (2014) discuss why many atheists are averse to ritual, and they all converge on the fact it is most often associated with religion. But clearly Assemblers do value ritual, however defined. One explanation is that "where religion has historically understood ritual as a means for becoming part of a larger community and transcending 'the worldly,' secularists understand ritual as a means for celebrating oneself as human and dwelling in a contingent world" (Cimino and Smith 2014, 139).

This speaks to organized secularism, and highlights the "this-worldly" nature of their concerns. However, it does not fully capture the sentiment of Assembler's, many of who *do* seek connection with a larger community and the transcendent qualities of congregational practice. Randall Collins (2010, 4) simple, yet critical question, "What do people do when they do religion?" suggests a micro-sociological view illuminates the meaning of ritual with a precision inaccessible to structural accounts. In discussing prayer, song, baptism, and other rituals, he offers, "What makes religion distinctive from everything else is announced in its symbols, which affirm the existence of a sacred realm explicitly higher than mundane life." His focus is on religion per se, but—with the appropriate qualification—this illuminates the secular pro-ritual inclinations of Assemblers. Assemblers' work to elevate mundane life through practices that parallel religion, but the "explicit" in their case is their commitment to a secular-naturalist "realm." The transcendent, rather than being coupled with the supernatural, instead describes the *quality* of collective secular experience itself.

Emotions are central to this, and they vary from the reverential to the ecstatic. Congregational rituals act as a focusing technique, wherein attention is concentrated on a particular object, idea, or transition (Klassen 2008). In this light, emotions are the experiential payoff of the effective use of the body in ritual situations. Emotionally satisfying rituals render the ideas to which they are directed more concrete and meaningful. In discussing why he is an Assembler, Mason explained his secular approach to finding meaning beyond himself:

> [Theism] is a powerful meaning for many different reasons, but I think the good things that come from thinking this way can be accomplished in a secular way. Meaning that, you can know things about the universe; you can accept the facts as they are before you; that is just as incredible as the idea of a god. They are just as wonderful, just as mind blowing...I mean I know lots of atheists and humanists that *feel* that. I think about the vast scale in which the universe exists, right now, and the fact that it was able not only to spark life, but spark life in a way that replicates. Not only replicates, but changes; and to say that I was able to experience it, not only experience it, but understand it ...to be able

> to stand on the shoulders of those that made all the discoveries and say "Wow!" This is how it really is? That's really amazing and meaningful to me. Every day I get to learn something more. That's the transcendence of it!

For Mason, secular congregations can accomplish the same "powerful meaning" structure that religious congregations provide. He sees SA as a space in which his secular cosmology is acknowledged and celebrated. This is achieved through focusing emotion through ritual. It calls congregants to direct attention and emotional energy toward a solemnization of the secular. Mason's reasoning is consistent with my observations of every Assembly. As I watched congregants dance, sing, meditate, and respond to talks and testimonies on secular themes, the influence and functions of emotive, ritual practice came to the fore. Christine talked directly about the importance of emotional experience. In drawing an analogy from the theatre, she concisely synthesizes the process and purpose of ritual for Assemblers:

> It's like there are parts to a good play. You set it up and you have the different moments and you try and bring everybody to the same emotional conclusion by the end of the piece. I think [SA] is a little bit of theater and drama; when you get people into nonverbal expressions, it can release them...and help break through some barriers. It's the movement, the music, getting up, getting down and doing things as a group can help people break out of [themselves]. It satisfies that need...you know. Showing up anonymously at a lecture doesn't do anything to feed—I want to say the word *soul* here but you know what I mean (laughs). That part of you that isn't fed intellectually likes to have that feeling of connecting emotionally with people.

This illustrates the relevance of embodied practice for creating meaningful experience. The body is positioned, moved, and manipulated in other ways to bring congregants to a shared "emotional conclusion." This involves communicating verbally through talks and song, but also through "nonverbal expressions" of meaning not communicable through words. This is "bodily knowing," a form of tacit knowledge (Altheide and Johnson 1994) produced and maintained through symbolic exchange where shared (sub)cultural understanding is central. Her "anonymous participation at lectures" references a typical atheist function where participants simply listen to a speaker develop a secular—often antireligious—message. The SA avoids this, instead engaging a positive, interactive, intimate experience that "feeds" Christine. Part of this edification involves Assemblers focus on the aesthetic as they work to create experiences framed within its rhetoric of "Living better, helping often, and wondering more" (sundayassembly.com). For instance, the London Assembly featured a professional poet, whose prose centered on—in secular terms—engaging beauty, finding peace, and coping with personal hardship. A reverential quiet came over the congregation during the reading, one that suggested Assemblies cultivate moments of secular solemnity.

Emotions and the body do not always involve the dramatic expressions Mason and Christine discuss, as there are also more subtle, practical aspects. Bradley, a middle-aged, married, self-identified transgender office manager, despite never being religious, values rituals for psychological, moral, and other practical reason: "I like having SA as a place of ritual...There is a comfort in ritual because people know what to expect. And when you bring in family and friends and someone you want to share that with, it's good they'll have the expectation of being as good, or better, than the last time they went." Bradley's suggestion that rituals offer a sense of familiarity, predictability, and other emotional "comforts" is well

documented (Smith 2007). For instance, New Religious Movements (NRM's) demonstrate this connection. Discussing the Hare Krishna movement, Cowan (2008) observes the "performance of affect" in their mantra chanting and music. A deep trust and expectation of enlightenment among followers develops from the repetition of these rituals. The emotional quality of ritual constructs and sustains subcultural bonding. Emotional bonds are necessary for religious congregations to be validating for adherents, and this is increasingly applicable to secular-atheist groups (Smith 2013). If secular congregations are successful into the future, this will reflect their ability to create successful "emotional communities" (Hetherington 1998).

The utility of emotion is evident in groups with strong symbolic boundaries. One study of an evangelical Christian group showed how members constructed specific scripts about happiness (Wilkins 2008). To demonstrate they were "happier than non-Christians," this group engaged in "happiness talk," a strategy for managing emotions that validates their religious beliefs. This involves a tightly controlled group dynamic in which congregants learn to adjust their emotions to fit the group definition of what it means to be Christian. Assembler's practices are not as obvious or scripted as this, but the celebratory signing and dancing, the solemn moments during readings and testimonials, and other aspects of Assemblies suggest an affective community based on patterned emotional ritual and affective performance.

## "Seven Reasons I'm a Nonbeliever:" Narrativizing the Secular

Collective ritual and emotive expression represent the embodied immediacies of congregational work. But this extends beyond the services themselves by way of the narratives constructed around and between them. The importance of biographical narratives and secular identity has been the subject of recent research (LeDrew 2013; Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2012). These studies show how nonbelief is itself a significant source of meaning and identity. Shared stories at Assemblies express and support secular values and commitments. Much of these center on secular interpretations of science, religion, nature, morality, community, and personal experiences. During our interview, Dan shared his, "Seven Reasons I'm a Non-Believer," a concise personal secular manifesto which integrates many of these themes. The seven points he covered included paragraph statements on experience, religion, prayer, the bible, science, morality and the afterlife.

In "experience" Dan wrote that he "spent fifty years looking for God" but slowly came to realize the "warm fuzzy feelings" he experienced were products of human endeavors such as music, art, and group behavior that he decided could be experienced, "without faith or dogma." His statements offered criticisms of religious authority and supernatural belief. In "prayer" he noticed his, "prayers were 'answered' at approximately the same rate as [his] Jewish and Catholic friends, and about as often as [his] secular friends' wishes and hopes." He observed, "God is praised for the 'hits' and given a pass for the 'misses.'" He argued science is a better way to answer life's questions, that morality is innate, and a product of "common sense for living with others." He further wrote, "Morality motivated by eternal reward or violence is not really morality at all." Dan's shortest and final statement on the afterlife read:

> I believe this is my one shot at life. I am one of the lucky ones who was able to live during this time. I choose to live a meaningful, creative, loving and fulfilling life, and leave this world better for my having lived. I do not believe that a few fleeting years on an obscure blue-green planet located somewhere in the vastness of time and space entitles anybody to eternal anything.

Dan was unique in actually drafting a written statement synthesizing his secular beliefs, but the *content* of those beliefs, and their expression at Assemblies, represent other participants as well. Consistent with previous studies of atheists, the topics Dan covered were embedded in much of his thinking and conversation. Assemblers' accounts reveal a narrative structure focused on personal history and the arrival at secular "truths." This was the case whether they came from religious or secular backgrounds. In short, secular congregations are a space in which Assembler's secular journeys, and journeys *to* secularism, find communal expression through embodied, symbolic performances that both affirm and reflect broader (if implicit) secular values and commitments. Dan's "Seven Reasons" is the culmination of long search for meaning, which included theistic belief and activity in several Christian churches. Others shared similar stories. For example, Gwen, a middle-aged art director and mother of two, grew up Methodist, suggesting that although her church was "fairly liberal," her family and upbringing was quite religious. On the whole, she appreciates this:

> I grew up there [church]. I did everything; that was my community and that was where my trust was...it was my family and my identity; it was great. I have virtually no complaints about my experience...I just got [to where] I couldn't believe all of the dogma...I wouldn't have chosen to leave except for I was like (pause)...this is bogus (laughs).

In contrast to other studies of atheists (Smith 2011), Assemblers did not necessarily resent their religious upbringing. Rather, they simply became unable to accept religious claims. To be sure, Dan's manifesto did not paint religion in a positive light, but nearly all of his complaints were directed at specific religious claims. Otherwise, he along with most Assemblers found value in the social aspects of religion. As Gwen explained how she came to the SA:

> I was looking for inspiration, community, and likeminded people. Since I was a churchgoer growing up, I liked, I missed what I felt was regular and motivational...(pause) things that inspire you to be better than you could by yourself. It's kind of a higher calling in some sense, even though I don't believe in a higher being. The fact you can belong to a group bigger than yourself and be able to affect positive change...ways that you challenge yourself to think about the world, to make yourself a better person. That for me had been lacking since I left religion.

Gwen finds at the SA many of the benefits she formerly received from religion. Like other congregants she sought inspiration through Assembly services including "personal moments" where congregants share stories of struggle and hope. For example, one Assembler shared a story of his motorcycle accident. After describing the physical injuries and long therapy he underwent, he talked about how the accident frightened him, caused him to reassess his life, take better care of himself, and do more for others. Had it been a theistic congregation, this Assembler would have taken one of the many opportunities in sharing his story to affirm a faith position, or how he turned to a higher power in his time of need. Instead, carefully avoiding any "God-talk," he simply affirmed his desire to live, help others, and rely on his fellow Assemblers for support.

Studies of religious congregations, whether liberal or conservative, show that faith centers the stories congregants tell, how it sustains them through difficult times, and offers a sense of direction for future action (Ammerman 1994). Faith narratives that rely on supernaturalist assumptions are conspicuously absent at the SA. Yet a kind of faith narrative rooted in a larger secular-scientific and humanist meaning system guides the stories of congregants as they rely on temporal beliefs about the natural order (and our place in it) and imbue it with a sacred

character. Moreover, the trust, shared meaning, and affective bonding at the SA provides the same context that Ammerman (1994), discusses, in which the personal stories of congregants are actuated and connected to the values and pursuits of the collective. A congregant's "sequence of actions, [and] the events that befall him or her" (Hewitt 1989, 182) are endowed with a special meaning by dint of its suffusion with the congregation.

Also prominent in Assemblers' stories is their felt need for a more robust "secular space" in the broader culture. For instance, when asked what the SA means to him, Clancy, a man in his late forties who works in the film industry, simply stated, "Community. That's our goal. We want to create more of a community." But this need for community goes beyond the benefits Assemblers reap from communing with fellow secularists. It involves a cultural dynamic premised on the relationship of nonbelievers to the broader public. The comments of Saige, a middle-aged office manager, whose interest in the SA led her to become a co-organizer of her local congregation, suggest this:

> Oh my goodness! Acknowledgement that humanists, atheists, agnostics have a place in our society? That we have ethical responsibilities...that we have a credibility that has nothing to do with supernatural beliefs!? When we as a culture, we as a movement—and I think SA could very well end up being a huge movement—have thousands of people out there cleaning the streets, raising kids, donating and doing charitable work and emphasizing empathy, joy and celebration, then we will not be looked down upon so much by the believers. Then we will also have more representation from politicians who are out there and are atheist. Those people will come forward and we will have equal footing with supernatural believers. We need to make our own space. That's what SA is. It's a little bubble of a safe place...the more we create that, the better.

Saige's belief in the "credibility" of nonbelievers and their need for greater representation suggests a latent desire to show "supernatural believers" the pro-sociality of the nonbeliever community. This "secular space" is not only about creating a niche for nonbelievers; it is about symbolic engagement with the wider public for the purpose of normalizing secularity.

## "It's a 100% Celebration of Life. We Are Born from Nothing and We Go to Nothing. Let's Enjoy It Together!": Authentic Secular Selves

As with other congregational settings, at the SA, the personal and political coalesce. Assemblers' motives are multilayered. On the one hand, they seek what the SA expressly offers: a public space where secularists can connect and enjoy the benefits of congregational life. On the other, congregants hope for something bigger, namely that the wider community will take notice and change their assumptions about nonbelievers. In the surveys participant completed, most responded "Yes" to whether there should be "more secular alternatives to religion." Additionally more than half selected "Promoting a secular view of the world" and "Showing others that nontheists share similar values with the broader culture" as a response options to the question, "For me, the SA is mostly about_____."

In other words, beyond the congregational context, Assemblies connect the secular self with broader sociopolitical concerns. The direction and purpose derived from this, "becomes the *property* of the individual. It is something taken on from community and culture, but once acquired it begins to have a life of its own" (Hewitt 1989, 182). Secular congregations provide the set of (sub)cultural practices from which one expresses and develops the self not just in

relation to fellow congregants, but an imagined theist public. When Assemblers' sing and dance together, share their stories, and seek inspiration in secular messages, they hope to influence a broader public while communing with each other.

The quote starting this section is the first of ten items of the SA's official charter (sundayassembly.com/story). Its three short statements reflect its intended purpose: 1) "A 100% celebration of life," a humanistic affirmation of life 2) "We are born from nothing, and we go to nothing," a secular proposition about the nature of reality and 3) "Let's enjoy it together," a call for community and connectedness in the context of the previous two statements. Indeed, nearly all participants expressed beliefs that centered on these and related ideas of the existential variety. Christine for instance, had this to say:

> I believe we create our own lives. We are placed into the world with certain parents, certain communities, certain limitations in our environments. Internally, we have certain strengths and limitations. I'm an existentialist; there is no *inherent* meaning in life. Every person and every generation has to try and find the best way to make it through this existence in *this life* and I think over the generations people have learned ways to make life meaningful and valuable. We are physical beings and neurologically we don't have what I would consider free will all the time...But we do have choice in what we think is valuable, what we think is right or wrong and I find this is the great mystery in life, it's the great struggle....I love science. I've always been attracted to scientific endeavors – learning more, exploring more about the universe – I'm very comfortable with not knowing, but exploring. I don't need to have an "answer" to feel safe, but I do think I should always be questioning and seeking and learning more....science itself is just a tool, a discovery with checks and balances because science is more interested in the truth than in reinforcing its dogma. Its more interested in knowing what's real, and that I trust.

Christina's comments traverse a number of interconnected beliefs, from existentialist and humanistic values, to a materialist conception of the cosmos, to an embrace of the scientific method (and veiled criticism of religion). Assemblers' narratives repeatedly converged on these issues, providing further evidence the SA functions as a social-symbolic platform from which the secular finds collective legitimacy. Mason echoed these precepts, adding in the issue of parenthood, while offering his final thoughts at the end of our interview:

> I would say that, to sum up, I believe in the Humanist Manifesto. Basically it [means] that you help others when you can, you learn as much as you can, and [you] make better decisions. It is most what I base my life stance on. I mean, I'm a husband and father of four; I try and teach my kids the same thing, I think that's important. Try to enact change no matter how big or small, as much as I can, to try and make things better for others when [I'm] gone. That's pretty much it for me.

He went on to suggest he wants his kids to discover the value of this position for themselves. He cited the fact his 10-year-old daughter is currently "exploring Christianity" at the behest of her grandmother. He stated, "If she can come to that conclusion [secular humanism] on her own, that's great! If she is a Christian at the end of the day and gets baptized as a Christian, then ok. As long as she remembers my lesson to respect other people." Others Assemblers talked about the importance of intellectual freedom, scientific inquiry, and the constructed nature of meaning and purpose, apart from a divine plan.

Embedded in all this is the notion of an authentic secular self. By "authentic" I do not suggest an essential "true" or inner self, waiting to be discovered, but a socially acquired self in equilibrium with the social environment in which it is constructed. When one's subjective experience, mental life, and self-appraisal are in alignment with the self presented to others in social interaction, one is being "authentic."[7] Participants discussed the need of secularists to be honest with themselves and others about their beliefs. This is reflected in conversation about labels. For instance, when I asked Brandon, a young graduate student, "How do you think of yourself in terms of your beliefs?" he responded:

> When I was in high school I hid behind the word "agnostic." Though it's true, I knew as I was saying it I was weaseling my way out...The word agnostic and the word atheist are virtually unrelated; they answer very different questions. The word "atheist"...has such a bad rap—I certainly want to fight against that. [So now] that's why I usually go with that first. But I'm also a secular humanist—that's just talking about morality, and living your life having very little to do with religion. Agnostic is mostly a discussion about knowledge. Freethought can talk about skepticism or resisting dogma. So I use each of these in different contexts as they kind of work in a different way.

The strategic and situational use of identity labels that Brandon alludes to have been discussed elsewhere (Smith 2011). He, like other secularists make different identity choices depending on context. Of greater interest here however, is his later insinuation that the SA doesn't focus on labels, that it offers a "safe space" in which secularists can be their true selves. "It's like" in his words, "the LGBT movement in that sense." For Brandon, the SA allows labels to dissolve into the background. Research examining organized atheism (Cimino and Smith 2014) shows that internal argument about the meaning and use of identity labels is common at meetings and events. Atheist groups certainly offer support and solidarity to members, but Assemblers seek communion with fellow secularists in a less intellectualized, debate-minded atmosphere.[8] Brandon was not himself raised with any religion, which is why his comments about becoming an Assembler are that much more revealing:

> Basically what I get from it [SA] is just felling good that I'm providing a safe space for people that really need it—people coming out of religion...out of religious communities and are losing their support structure. I hear those stories all the time. I keep thinking "Boy I wish I had this growing up," and I bet my parents wish they had this too. I'm just trying to build what I think needs to exist.

It seems clear why those who leave, but continue to value aspects of religion, would seek out a secular congregation. But Brandon's motives stem from wanting to foster an inclusive space where both former believers and "always seculars" can find a "support structure," and enjoy the benefits of congregational life. The second part of his comment speaks to his belief that Assemblies, had they existed a generation ago, would have allowed his parents to celebrate their true secular selves. Like the Christians Wilkins's (2008) studied, the SA becomes a site for the enactment of authenticity and encourages mutual reinforcement between the self and the secular.

[7] This is strongly based on self-perception. As Goffman observed, how we think others perceive us can depart significantly from how they actually see us.

[8] Of course, this is not an either-or choice. There is crossover between atheist groups and the SA, and one may participate in both, as they get different things from each.

## Conclusion

Returning to the Durkheimian question offered in the introduction, my research supports the notion that newly emerging forms of communal secularity—what Durkheim would identify as the creative effervescence of the "living cult" (2001, 323)—can, for some, replace the old gods while maintaining the critical social functions, moral substance, and normative outcomes of collective religious life. In other words, symbolically expressive congregations like the SA can "work" without belief in a God or the supernatural. To be clear, I am not suggesting (even less predicting) that new secular congregations can or will, in Comteian style, eventually replace theist-centered religious congregations. Nor does communal or "religious" secularity evince by example Bellah's (1967) concept of a diffuse form of civil religion suffused in the institutional structures of modern secular societies. My argument is simply that Durkheim's insights about the nature of religion and collective life continue to show their relevance for twenty-first century congregations, *including* those that take the secular itself as its object of belief and belonging.

Congregations then, be they religious or secular, are an important dimension of contemporary social life; namely in that they reveal the enduring relevance of collective ritual practice, regardless of the substantive belief systems they express. The shifting religiosity and affiliation in the United States over the last two decades has helped set the conditions for the growth and visibility of the secular community, primarily through a variety of rational-instrumental and identity-based secular organizations, some of which have social and political objectives. Communal secularity as embodied by the SA represents a new development in the broader secular community; one more focused on group practice and the experiential qualities of the secular, rather than in promoting secularism per se through the identity politics other secular organizations have employed (see Cimino and Smith 2014). This is a rich setting for sociological insight, as the affirmation and veneration of trans-mundane, "big question" meanings across a range of (sub)cultural settings, including those which, prima facie, should be the *least* likely in the American context, are in full view at the Sunday Assembly. Communal secularity as a concept should provide an analytical starting point for studies that address future groups engaged in similar activity.

The beliefs, values, and motives of Assemblers demonstrate the need of some secular people to seek collective "religious" forms that imbue nontheistic worldviews with special import through rituals that engage the emotional, moral, and personal. The SA for these congregants offers a regular space in which secular beliefs and values find implicit legitimation, and for which all things secular can be collectively celebrated, memorialized, and made personally compelling. Indeed, the (sub)culturally constructed, collectively performed, emotionally suffused embodied ritual practice centered on the secular, is precisely what makes Assemblies relevant and powerful to its congregants. It gives concrete expression to implicit cultural values framed within a secular interpretation of a broader moral order and worldview.[9] It represents one among a growing number of "existential cultures" (Lee 2015) that reflects the deeper moral and cosmic concerns of secular people, and has likely contributed significantly to its growth.

Although traditional atheist and secular humanist groups offer their own strong sense of community—often through the ways in which they engage and critique religion (Cimino and

[9] I have not developed it in this paper, but scholars working in the area of *implicit religion*, a concept to which an entire journal is devoted, would not likely find much difficulty in mapping on its basic premise to secular congregations.

Smith 2014)—communal secularity is distinct in that secular congregants embrace the religion-like activity considered antithetical to secular groups focused on a critical, often defensive position with regard to religion. More critically however, is the ways in which communal secularity legitimates, through embodied practices in collective contexts, the cosmic belief systems (Baker and Smith 2015) that comprise one's worldview. If an analogous "secular canopy" of ultimate meaning is to be cast over the experiences of nontheistic individuals, it appears the secular congregation is one optimal way of accomplishing this.

Atheists are popularly thought of as cold rationalists who discount the role of emotion in everyday life. Indeed, research shows that many atheists value logic and reason over appeals to personal and emotive experience (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006), and the scientific voice and critical-analytic orientation expressed in Assemblers talk clearly does suggest a self-reflexive, secular consciousness that is reflective of broader cultural commitments (e.g. humanistic values, empirical evidence etc.). However, congregational nontheism, as salient sites of ritualized emotional expression, undermines this assumption. All culturally expressive groups develop and demonstrate a particular ethos—the "moods and motivations"—that underlie collective behavior and are fundamental to worldview construction (Geertz 1973). Moreover, the emotional rewards drawn from collective ritual, and the substance of Durkheim's notion of *collective effervescence*, are highly visible in congregational settings, even those in which faith narratives are centered on nontheistic, this-world beliefs, where the secular stands proxy for the sacred. In light of SA's strategies, emotions should be a primary concern in analyzing the behaviors of not just "atheist churches," but other varieties of secularity as well.

The SA self-selects for "pro-ritual" secularists open to the social rewards of congregational culture. My sample is small and not an attempt at representativeness in any statistical sense, but at least two demographic patterns (see Appendix) are worth considering. First, these Assemblers are slightly older than the compositions of other secular-atheist groups, and appear to be more family oriented. More than half of participants are married ($n$ = 13) and nearly three quarters ($n$ = 18) have children. This suggests that Assemblers are drawn to congregational life in part because of their children. Based on Manning's (2015) first-of-its kind study of how none (i.e. religiously unaffiliated) parents are raising their children, this is in some sense what we might expect. That is, as nones encounter the social and psychological dynamics (and challenges) and the general question of how to raise their children, they often find new reason for (re)engaging with religion or solidifying their secularity. The second notable demographic issue concerns the SA's homogeneity; Assemblers are predominantly middle-class whites. Although this does not depart significantly from what is known about the social characteristics of other secular-atheist groups in the U.S. (see Baker and Smith 2015) it bears mentioning that the largely Christian congregational model the SA has adopted likely lacks appeal to groups with status characteristics outside of those found within its congregations.

Some Assemblers no doubt joined because they wanted their children to experience the benefits of congregation and community. However, beyond this unsurprising trend, Manning developed a four-part typology of unaffiliated parents that raises an interesting question regarding Assemblers. Her categories include unchurched believers, seeker spirituality, philosophical secularists, and indifferents. Assemblers are clearly neither believers or indifferent to religion in the ways Manning discusses, but nor do they neatly fit into either seeker spirituality or philosophical secularism, as the former engage in prayer and often describe themselves as "spiritual, not

religious" while the latter reject things like prayer, worship, and congregational or ritual behavior. Assembler parents thus appear to occupy some in-between, or not-yet hypothesized type.[10] It will be important for future studies of communal secularity to investigate these dynamics more closely.

Researchers should also examine how emotional bonds influence the organizational strategies of, for instance, secular activists. This seems a fruitful line of mostly unexplored inquiry, even as research is examining the identity politics, psychosocial dimensions of this activism (Bullivant and Ruse 2013; Cimino and Smith 2014) and even the idea of "atheist missionizing" (Smith 2015). This could also reveal the emotional underpinnings to inter-secular/atheist organizational conflict,[11] something so far examined only in terms of the rational, philosophical goals of such organizations (Manning 2015).

Congregations aid spiritual growth insofar as they offer a space for the accrual and exercise of "spiritual capital": the mastery of particular rituals, texts, norms, vocabulary (Stark and Finke 2003) and other aspects of religion that serve to credit one's identity and implicit moral status among fellow congregants. "The persistence of religion and religiosity" writes Gallagher and Newton (2009, 234) suggests that "religious communities offer some subset of unique goods [including spiritual growth, however defined] beyond what are available in secular groups." They are referring to secular public life generally, the everyday mundane concerns of the individual—the *profane* in the Durkheimian sense—as distinguished from the sacred; but this idea takes on new meaning in light of symbolically expressive secular congregations that celebrate secular life itself and offer something beyond daily profane concerns. Related to spiritual growth is the notion of conversion. The focus of this study has centered on Assemblers' practices and narratives and their congregational work per se, but future studies might take up the question of whether this work involves a secular conversion process in ways analogous to, or different from, religious conversion.

As Americans continue to move in and out of religion, as political issues continue to exert their influence on both religious affiliation and disaffiliation (Hout and Fischer 2002), and as Americans continue to seek meaning and value-rich lives through both institutions and private pursuits, some subset of the increasing numbers of "seculars" will be drawn to organizations like the SA for the benefits of congregational life and greater cultural legitimacy for nontheism. The future growth and success of the SA itself remains to be seen, but public forms of symbolic nonreligion are likely to persist if the social and political conditions that led to its rise themselves endure. The popularity of writers who argue for secular experience of the transcendent (e.g. Alain de Botton's 2013 *Religion for Atheists*), the dramatic growth of the Student Secular Alliance and other secular-humanist organizations since the mid-2000s (Baker and Smith 2015), and the increasing popularity of "secular celebrants"—secular ministers who officiate rites of passage (see centerforinquiry.net)—suggest an increasing portion of America's nonbelievers will seek out secular congregations.

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[10] Manning's study was published in 2015, two years after the SA emerged, but strangely there is no mention of them at all in her book.

[11] Conflict between secular-atheist organizations has not been my focus, but it would be interesting to explore to what extent different groups' versions of "appropriate" expressions of atheism are its source. The early schism between the Sunday Assembly, and their spin-off group, the Godless Revival suggest the relevance of this.

## Appendix

**Table 1** Socio-demographic characteristics of sample: ($n$ = 21)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Age range | 18–25 | 4 |
| | 26–40 | 4 |
| | 41–55 | 9 |
| | 56 or older | 4 |
| Gender identification | Male | 9 |
| | Female | 9 |
| | Transgender | 1 |
| | Gender fluid* | 2 |
| Race/Ethnicity | White | 18 |
| | African American | 1 |
| | Hispanic | 2 |
| Region | Urban | 11 |
| | Suburban | 10 |
| | Rural | 0 |
| Highest level of education | Less than High School | 0 |
| | High School Graduate | 0 |
| | Some College | 5 |
| | Bachelor's Degree | 9 |
| | Master's Degree | 3 |
| | Enrolled in Doctoral program | 2 |
| | Doctorate (PhD, JD etc.) | 2 |
| Employment | Clinician/Researcher/Teacher | 2 |
| | Technical/Trade | 4 |
| | No response | 1 |
| | U.S. Military | 1 |
| | Other professional/office manager | 4 |
| | Self-employed/Freelance/Performance Art | 3 |
| | Retired professional | 2 |
| | Student/unemployed | 4 |
| Marital status | Married | 13 |
| | Single | 4 |
| | Divorced | 1 |
| | Cohabitating | 3 |
| Children | One child or more | 13 |
| | No children | 8 |
| Previously identified with religion? | No/None/Secular | 7 |
| | Catholic | 3 |
| | Mainline Protestant | 6 |
| | Evangelical Christianity | 1 |
| | Christianity Non-Denominational | 3 |
| | Jewish | 1 |
| Term to best describe self** | Atheist | 7 |
| | Agnostic | 2 |
| | Non-theist | -- |
| | Freethinker | 1 |
| | Naturalist | -- |
| | Humanist | 1 |
| | Secular Humanist | 4 |
| | All of the above | 6 |
| Political orientation | Liberal/Progressive | 20 |
| | Conservative | 0 |
| | Other/unspecified | 1 |
| Consider self secular activist? | Not at all | 1 |
| | Somewhat | 11 |
| | Absolutely | 8 |
| | Not sure | 1 |

**Table 1** (continued)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How likely fellow Sunday Assemblers to share similar views on social and political issues? | Not likely at all | 0 |
| | Somewhat likely | 7 |
| | Very likely | 13 |
| | Not sure | 0 |
| | No response | 1 |
| More need for secular spaces and alternatives to religion in public sphere? | Not at all | 0 |
| | Somewhat | 4 |
| | Very much | 14 |
| | Not sure | 3 |
| Sunday assembly is mostly about** | Secular community/solidarity | 5 |
| | Promoting secularism in society | 1 |
| | Demonstrating morals without religion | 2 |
| | Showing similar values with broader culture | 1 |
| | Showing children "good without god" | 2 |
| | Celebrating life and humanist values | 1 |
| | All of the above | 9 |

*Participants had the option of using their own term regarding gender identification

**Participants had the option of selecting multiple items in this category, and the majority did so. The survey also encouraged participants to circle the "most important" of all the items selected. All numbers corresponding to the options (except for "All of the above") represent the circled items

**Sample Questions from Interview Guide:***

1) Tell me about how you came to attend the Sunday Assembly.

   a) What is the most important thing you get from it?
   b) Do you attend alone or with others?

2) Do you come from a religious background? Do you consider yourself religious? Is religion important to you today?
3) How do you primarily identify and/or think of yourself – secular humanist, nontheist, naturalist, agnostic, atheist etc.?
4) How long have you been involved with any explicitly secular groups?
5) What do you think groups like the Sunday Assembly have to offer to your community, society, and the global community? What would you say is the purpose and goals of the Sunday Assembly?
6) Do you feel like there are enough/effective secular opportunities/spaces to express your nontheist identity?

* Questions were not necessarily asked in this order.

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