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Communal Secularity: Congregational Work at the Sunday Assembly

1 Introduction

The Sunday Assembly is young. It is still developing as an international organization, and is in the early stages of making its mark in the broader secular community. Exactly what this mark will be remains to be seen. Despite its youth and status as essentially a 21 century secular congregational experiment, it appears to be maturing quickly and is unquestionably meeting a demand within a certain sector of the secular population in the west and other parts of the globe. Especially because of its newness, it is important to begin a discussion of the Sunday Assembly, and the idea of communal secularity more abstractly, by outlining the basics of its formation and operation in order to understand both its uniqueness within, and relevance to, organized secularism generally.

After examining the key components of its history and early development, this chapter explores the interactional details of what I call "communal secularity," (Smith 2017) with the Sunday Assembly serving as a salient case study of the concept. This involves a sociological discussion of congregational and identity dynamics, and the application of social psychological insights regarding ritual, emotion, morality, and other symbolic dimensions of this type of collective expression of the secular. I conceptualize communal secularity as the particular relationship of these elements vis-à-vis the secular, and by way of defining the process by which some secular people in contemporary culture address and express their secular identities, values, and worldviews.

2 Sunday Assembly's History and Organization

The Sunday Assembly began in the United Kingdom in 2013, a product of earlier conversations between Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, two young British comedians. One day while driving to a gig together, they were reportedly half-joking about the idea of a church for atheists, when they stumbled upon the conceptual seeds that would grow to become the Sunday Assembly (SA or Assembly, hereafter). On the simplest level, we can define the SA in accordance with its publicly stated intent as proffered by it co-creators. It is, as SA's website

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described it, a regularly scheduled gathering – an assembly – of secular-minded people for the purpose of "living better, helping often, and wondering more."[1]

The creation of an inclusive, synod-style network of secular congregations in communities around the globe became the major objective. The very first Assembly was held on January 6th 2013. About 200 congregants were in attendance at the Nave, a deconsecrated church in London. The original Assembly has since found its permanent venue at the historic Conway Hall, the home of one of the oldest ethical culture societies. The SA has seen significant growth and garnered considerable public and media attention (and some controversy) since then. As of this writing there are officially 70 established, active congregations in 8 countries across Europe, North America, and Oceania. Over half of all Assemblies are in North America. The most active Assemblies have between 50 and 250 congregants, while many smaller start-up or "warm-up" congregations (by some reports, in the hundreds) have far fewer participants and meet irregularly.

The SA is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization and has acquired legal status as a registered charity with a trading subsidiarity, Sunday Assembly Limited. Each congregational chapter, regardless of its geographic location, adheres to a general set of guidelines, policies, and quality control measures as outlined by its creators, official charter, and other administrative organizers, collectively referred to as the General Assembly. Sanderson Jones holds the position of CEO. He and the SA are supported by a COO, "community creators," and a five-member board of trustees. Like the polities of some (especially liberal) religious groups, it gives a fair amount of autonomy to individual congregations regarding the specifics of their Sunday services. There is no deliberate hierarchy or central authority beyond the basic administrative body (the General Assembly), which supports the public relations, media, and marketing aspects of running an organization. There is no codified or official Assembly doctrine and no paid or trained clergy who exercise doctrinal authority over congregations. Instead, each congregation is led by a team of Assembly organizers who adhere to the Assemblies policies and general objectives. Each start-up congregation is self-produced by volunteers in the community based on local interest and demand.

Local secular activists, humanists, and nontheists interested in starting a congregation are directed to the SA's website where they are asked to review the charter, relevant policies, accept their terms and conditions, and to connect with already officially recognized congregations. This initiates the process of developing a new Assembly. Next, aspiring congregation organizers undergo a for-

1 Sunday Assembly's web address: www.sundayassembly.com.

mal peer-review process from SA's governing body to show evidence that a stable, regularly meeting congregation is feasible. When at least 10 committed organizers can show they are meeting regularly and gathering interest in the community (most often through various social media outlets like Facebook and Meetup) they can become a "warm-up" group, be added to the website as such, and benefit from wider promotion.

Once a regular venue has been established, musicians are brought on, and speakers have been lined up, the warm-up group can formally apply for official status, and if approved, have their first "launch" as a full-fledged Sunday Assembly. If the burgeoning congregation does well, it must then apply for accreditation from the General Assembly within two years of its launch. This accreditation process involves legal documentation to accommodate SA's U.K.-based charitable organization status, on-site visits, and video recording of live Assemblies to ensure they are meeting the objectives and are within the guidelines.[2]

Not surprisingly, most Assemblies are hosted in major cities such as London, Los Angeles, and Sydney, but there are also congregations in smaller cities and even rural areas around the globe. Specifically, there are up to 200 Assemblies (including warm-up groups) on 5 different continents. No official public records are yet available regarding membership at the SA, but it seems likely that if congregations continue to grow, greater effort will be made toward official record-keeping. Unlike most religious congregations, there is no formal documented process (e.g. baptism or member confirmation) for becoming a member of the SA, and currently organizational affiliation is entirely based on adult, voluntary self-identification.[3] Irrespective of SA's quick growth, their total numbers are a tiny fraction of those maintained by many established religious congregations. Even if each current, active Assembly had 100 regular congregants, that would bring the total global participation to around 7,000 people.

2 See www.sundayassembly.com for more details regarding the technical aspects of its organization.

3 This contrasts with many religious organizations, where much of the membership is comprised, not by adult converts, but by those raised within the religion as children who become official members through religious ordinances. With some organizations (e.g. Mormon Church), those who leave as adults must formally petition to have their names removed from member records. Otherwise they continue to be counted as members by the Church, despite inactivity or even apostasy.

3 Studying Godless Congregations

I began studying the Sunday Assembly in the summer of 2013 – just months after its formation – after receiving a small grant to travel and begin fieldwork. I participated in the San Diego, Chicago, and London Assemblies. San Diego has one of the larger Assemblies in the United States, and at the time had around 200 participants. The Chicago chapter had around 80 congregants when I attended (they had a larger turnout previously, but lost some participants because of an issue securing a regular venue). Conservatively, these numbers likely represent many of the 70 Assemblies active today.

Over 18 months I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 congregants from the San Diego Assembly, and 8 from the Chicago Assembly. I attended, but did not interview congregants from the London Assembly due to travel and time constraints. My participation in live Assemblies in each city totaled about 10 hours, but I also analyzed the content of approximately 18 hours of live video recorded Assemblies made available on the San Diego chapter's website. Watching recorded Assemblies added to my fieldwork by expanding my familiarity with details of Assembly services. This allowed me to further develop the themes and patterns of interaction that I observed in the field. This was important for my research since U.S. Assemblies only occur once a month, which obviously limits the frequency with which I could attend.

I recruited interviewees both in person during actual Assemblies and with organizer-preapproved flyers that announced my study. The latter led to further recruits in a snowball fashion after Assembly events. Each interviewee was also asked to complete a separate survey that gathered demographic information and asked logistical questions about their involvement with the SA. Basic demographics for the 21 Assemblers are as follows: 9 identified as male, 10 as female, 1 as transgender, and 1 as gender queer. Interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 80. Eighteen respondents identified as white, 2 as Hispanic, and 1 as African American. The majority identified as middle class. All had at least some college education. Most of the interviews were conducted by phone with those I met in person or those who volunteered their time and left contact information after seeing a study flyer. The reason for phone interviews was practical; there was usually not time during my travels and after Assembly services for in-person interviews.

4 Sunday Assembly as Communal Secularity

When the SA was first taking off, the co-creators playfully suggested to an interested public and media that it was the, "best bits of church, but with no religion" (Del Barco 2014). This statement was offered a bit facetiously, but, of course, there is also truth to it. Indeed, much of the controversy surrounding the SA when it first arose had to do with whether it is, or is not "religion for atheists," and what the implications of this might be.[4] Rather than taking either media characterizations, or the SA's self-description at face value, I define the SA as, "communal secularity" to offer in more neutral terms, how it is both like, and unlike religion in relevant ways.

4.1 Promoting Secular Worldviews

Examining the Sunday Assembly's charter and the words of Assembly organizers and congregants themselves is a good starting point for understanding what attributes it shares with religious congregations, as well as its meaning, organization, and positioning within and relationship to the broader secular community. The charter offers ten short propositions that outline the manifest reasons for its existence. The first three are the most essential to the SA, and the most relevant here. "Sunday Assembly: (1) Is 100% celebration of life. We are born from nothing and go to nothing. Let's enjoy it together. (2) Has no doctrine. We have no set texts so we can make use of wisdom from all sources. [and] (3) Has no deity. We don't do supernatural but we also won't tell you you're wrong if you do."[5]

The first proposition is significant enough that the final statement of the charter simply rephrases it: "And recall point 1: The Sunday Assembly is a celebration of the one life we know we have." This is a fundamental existential claim that "doctrinally" sets the Assembly apart from religious congregations. Indeed, nearly all religious groups, whether they have a this- or other-worldly orientation, are premised on beliefs about a supernatural realm, an afterlife, however conceived, and the continued existence of the self (or soul) within it.

The implications of this perspective provide the context in which the meaning structures and congregational activities of the SA make sense and reflexively unfold. The existential premise that conscious experience ends with the death of

4 One influential religious leader, for instance, called the very idea of the Sunday Assembly, "highly inappropriate," suggesting it is trivializing what makes religion a "sacred" institution.
5 Access the full charter by clicking on the "About" link at www.sundayassembly.com.

the body informs and shapes the behaviors of the secular congregation just as beliefs in supernatural agents and eternal life inform the same with regard to religious congregations. How? Primarily through the linkage between cognitive beliefs/suppositions, a collective ethos, and the ways in which the micro interactions within congregations support, validate, and reinforce each. When Geertz (1973) wrote about the (sub)cultural construction of worldviews and the "moods and motivations" that instantiate them, he was showing how our collective behaviors, far from arbitrary, reflect and inform the things individuals value and believe. What we *do* is both cause and effect of how we *think*. An ethos is an ethos precisely because it locates the person within broader "webs of significance" that extend to collectives. Religious groups are salient illustrations of this because they explicitly respond to big questions about the cosmos and our place and purpose within it.

One might suppose this is inapplicable to organizations that overtly espouse secular claims, propose they are doctrine-free, and – as with the first proposition of SA's charter – assert a temporal-materialist cosmological view. But the purpose, organization, and activity of the SA suggest Geertz's "webs of significance" are no less applicable to secular groups that engage in meaningful, collective rituals and practices. The collective ethos the SA expresses through congregants' interactions is an important component of the broader, interrelated set of beliefs that comprise what Baker and Smith (2015, 208) call "cosmic belief systems." Based on their study of survey data and secular organizations, they outline the "cultural contours of nonreligious belief systems," arguing that organized secularism posits and advocates particular beliefs about the world in ways similar (and dissimilar) to organized religion. As such, both religion and the secular should be studied with the same conceptual tools – all focused on their broader cosmic belief systems (worldviews):

> The organization and functioning of religious, non-institutionalized supernatural, and secular beliefs can be studied in similar ways. For while some varieties of secularity are premised on *dis*believing in supernatural precepts, they nonetheless posit particular beliefs about reality and the social world, and also appeal to particular traditions and epistemic authority (Baker and Smith 2015, 208).

In other words, secular organizations, and especially secular congregations like the SA, are not so much about disbelief as they are about expressing positive beliefs about the world, even if these beliefs are framed in a way that downplays the importance of belief, as evidenced by their rhetoric of radical inclusivity and ostensible lack of interest in promoting doctrinal beliefs. Thus, whether secular or religious, what we might call *congregational culture*, by its very nature helps shape, organize, justify, and reward congregants' beliefs, and ultimately,

cosmic worldviews. This is also in line with Lee's (2015) concept, based on her ethnographic study of nonreligious individuals in Briton, of "existential cultures." Such cultures, Lee suggests, involve 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" (2015: 159 – 160).

4.2 Ritualizing the Secular through Congregational Practice

Religious congregations have long been the subject of academic research (Ammerman 1994), but few studies have examined the idea of the secular congregation – most obviously because they are comparatively rare. There are historical examples of secular-oriented congregations such as the Ethical Cultural Society, communal or pagan groups centered on religious naturalism (as opposed to supernaturalism), and religious congregations welcoming of nonbelievers in addition to theists, most notably seen in Unitarian Universalism. However, the Sunday Assembly represents the clearest contemporary example of an avowedly secular congregation, as it expresses a nontheistic/nonsupernaturalist identity and secular message through the deliberate adoption of a congregational model.[6] As such, we can define and study the SA as a salient form of *nontheistic expression*, which is attempting to formalize itself through the development of a new institution (Smith, forthcoming); that is, functionally they bring secular values and beliefs to life through ritualistic practice, in similar ways that religious congregations express theistic beliefs.

On the most basic level a congregation is simply a gathering of individuals for some identifiable purpose. But sociologically, congregations are complex social entities that circumscribe interrelated processes of identity, belief, and practice. Cultural (and subcultural) values come in to high definition in congregational contexts, and as significant mediums of symbolic identity expressiveness (Hetherington 1998) and ritual interaction, congregations develop the private lives and beliefs of individuals in public spaces (Tavory 2013). As Ammerman (1994) observes, religious congregations serve as important symbolic links to other cultural dynamics that can strengthen community relations, develop social networks, and encourage prosociality. As volunteer associations, they bring to-

6 This form of cultural appropriation is not uncommon among religious groups themselves. "Seeker-sensitive" churches, for instance, often appropriate various aspects of secular culture.

gether community members, create solidarities, and can serve as a springboard for social action well beyond the parameters of the congregation itself.

Beyond the purely practical outcomes of congregations, they also function as powerful symbolic settings that touch upon bigger issues. They give meaning, direction, and purpose to the relationship between person, society, and cosmos. Congregations are important resources for moral identity and spiritual fulfillment (Gallagher and Newton 2009) and they bridge personal stories with collective moral narratives, and serve to dramatize the experiences of congregants' everyday lives – their aspirations, struggles, family and social values, and even political concerns. Of course, beyond these functional outcomes (but related to them), religious congregations embody particular belief systems and make religious claims about the nature of reality.

In what sense does communal secularity do the same? At the interactional level, Assembly services closely parallel the basic activities of religious congregations. A typical Sunday service includes intervals of singing and dancing to secular songs, (in some cases to a live band), "moments of reflection" and similar silent observances, talks on secular themes, testimonials from congregants, artistic performances like poetry readings and spoken word, ice breaker activities, and even the passing of a collections plate to financially support the congregation. Designed to be family friendly, Assemblies include a "kids corner" in where small children can occupy themselves with other activities while the adults focus their attention on the services.

At the San Diego, Chicago, and London Assemblies I attended, there was a palpable enthusiasm among the congregation, in part fueled by those leading the services. Each host was effective at engaging congregants, but none more than the co-creator of SA himself, Sanderson Jones at the London Assembly. He had many of the qualities of a charismatic religious leader, including the ability to elicit a range of emotions from the audience from laughter to reverence. This is why researchers Cimino and Smith (2014, 118), in their study of American secular activism in *Atheist Awakening*, compared Sanderson to a "Pentecostal preacher." Weber's (1947) description of charismatic authority centered on how the personal qualities of religious leaders can be routinized in such a way as to become an institutionalized feature of the religious organization over time. Of course, unlike Joseph Smith and other founders of new religious movements, Sanderson neither fancies himself a prophet, or makes supernaturalist claims or substantive demands of his "followers." However, the essence of his leadership style and its connection to his character bears the signature of the charismatic authority Weber identified as being central to the success of new religious movements, should such movements sufficiently integrate this authority on an institutional level.

These congregational activities effectively cultivate a setting in which a this-worldly, temporal-focused life is celebrated in communal, secular terms. It is in this sense that the idea of "secular ritual practice" gains the most purchase. Core elements of congregational ritual include: (1) emotion work (Cowen 2008), (2) symbolic and moral boundary construction (Wilkins 2008), and (3) belief systems, or ideologies (Tavory 2013). The first is apparent on multiple levels. Emotions suffuse rituals with significance by framing them in terms of some greater purpose (Corrigan 2008). When congregants employ the above elements of Assembly services, whether activating their vocal chords and bodies for singing and dancing, or listening reverentially to poetry on some humanist-naturalist motif, they are engaged in more than entertainment. These practices sacralize the secular, that is, they endow the secular with special meaning beyond what "the secular" signals in everyday ordinary living (what Durkheim called the *profane*). Put differently, Assembly services employ rituals that construct and maintain a "secular solemnity" in some sense analogous to religious congregational worship.[7] What makes this the case is not so much about songs, talks, or artistic performances themselves (after all, these happen in many contexts having nothing to do with either religious worship or secular solemnity), but their collective, emotional nature and the ways in which a shared sense of meaning and aesthetic are directed at the secular itself and given symbolic import.

Previous research on both religious congregations and atheist organizations (Guenther 2013; Smith 2013) show how emotions shape symbolic and moral boundaries. For instance, Wilkins's (2008) study of a Christian congregation found that members would use a kind of emotional exuberance – essentially a kind of "happy talk" – in their interactions within and outside the congregation as a way of demonstrating to others, and themselves, that they are happier than non-Christians. I am not suggesting Assemblers are likely to do the same, or that secular people believe they are happier than the religious, but I have observed at Assemblies and in my interviews an inclination toward, and appreciation of, the role of emotions in secular beliefs and values. More than other secular organizations, the SA attracts and cultivates an inclination for what Durkheim identified as *collective effervescence*, wherein members of a group direct emotional energy onto some object or idea, endowing it with qualities of the sacred.

As Woodhead and Riis (2010) argue, scholars (and laypersons) tend to overemphasize the cognitive, belief-based dimension of religion, which misses the

7 The likeness of secular to religious congregations should not be overstated however. Belief in – and rituals directed at – the supernatural are clearly different in both their content and intention from those involving secular ideas and values.

critical role of emotion. This bias is perhaps especially salient among researchers and secular people themselves with regard to atheistic groups, where the rational, proposition-based arguments about the nature of reality are given primacy over emotion. The SA stands as an interesting counterexample of secular groups that place a premium on emotion and the experiential qualities of secularity. In Durkheimian terms, the cultivation and projection of emotion figuratively reverberates back on to the group, adding to the sense of solidarity and commitment among its members. Absent an object of worship, Assemblers nevertheless engage in emotional work that produces a similar outcome. In this way, the absence of theistic belief does not impede the more essential need for communality and belonging among this segment of the secular population (Oakes 2015).

Assemblers themselves talk about how they value ritual practice and other social aspects of congregational life usually associated with religion. This includes the "spiritual" idea of seeking the transcendent. Consider the comments of Becky, a local Assembly organizer and chapter leader. She suggested that rituals are useful for "bringing people together" and can help shape meaningful experiences that "go beyond the mundane." In talking about SA's motto, "Living Better, Helping often, and Wondering More" she went on to state:

> These [awe and wonder] are very, very important, and I would like to think I wouldn't be closed off to explorations of "spiritual things" although the way I view the nature of reality is that all of these spiritual experiences are simply human experiences. They are rare, they might be unique, they might feel transcendent or special given the nature of our everyday, mundane lives, but they are simply *human* experiences...and that's what makes them great.

It is not just those leading congregations who value ritual and seek such experiences. Stan, a rank-and-file Assembler commented:

> One thing that I do value about religion is the rituality of it. I have always been able to connect with the mystical experience portion of religion...The transcendent, or the peace and calm that comes from repeated ritualistic practice. I find that quite essential, and it ties into the meditative techniques I've come to develop...but I don't have to connect that to religious experience or to a particular set of dogmas or belief structure...If you're in a group and you're singing songs together as a congregation and everyone around you has the emotion; you look at those people and your feelings resonate and you share that experience...I feel empowered and I can find joy in that experience and to feel that sense of serenity and togetherness with fellow humans and connect to them in an emotional way is very much, for me, a transcendent experience. I find great peace in that shared emotion.

Both Becky and Stan value the emotional and ritualistic aspects of communal secularity. One may suppose they would therefore lean toward or be open to beliefs regarding the supernatural, but that is not the case. As Manning (2015)

shows in her study of secular parents, there are many different internal reasons and external pressures for seeking the communal, and part of the ambiguity of seeking something beyond the mundane may have to do with how secular people define and employ terms such spirituality and the transcendent. Nevertheless, regarding the supernatural per se, when I asked specifically about this Assembler's beliefs, Stan went on to suggest:

> My worldview is based on that which can be objectively proven...a worldview based on observable reality, that is to say objective...As I developed an understanding of the world I live in I realized the only way to be certain about the reality that you and I are both experiencing is to focus on that which is objective, both sides, to measure and explain something that is not subjective. The [best] methodology of coming to a justified belief about reality is...science – a method to test and provide falsification for claims made about the world that we share. Being scientifically literate and sound are very important for both developing my worldview and for maintaining a worldview that I can feel comfortable having.

At root, Stan is a materialist and atheist. His language about "objective reality," the necessity of scientific methodology, the importance of "falsification" etc., is very much in line with studies examining the views of many atheists (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Smith 2013). Yet, his pursuit of the "peace" of the transcendent and the utility of the collective emotion and congregational rituals that provide an avenue to it, undermines the usual assumptions about nonbelievers. Of course, it is unlikely that *all* Assemblers are as open and comfortable as Becky and Stan with these "spiritual"[8] pursuits, but it does seem that Assemblers are generally those who seek what are usually thought of as religious goods, in secular, nontheistic, and most often scientific terms.

More important here, however, is the connection between congregational work and belief systems themselves. Peter Berger, in *The Sacred Canopy* (1990), famously wrote about the ways in which religious behaviors and rituals justify and reinforce specific beliefs. Through *plausibility structures* belief-systems and entire worldviews are constructed and maintained through (sub)cultural practices and institutions in ways that are intellectually *and* emotionally compelling to individuals. Becky's and Stan's ideas represent the connection of embodied ritual practice to broader belief systems. Congregational contexts in particular give substance and validation to these beliefs, whether religious or secular. In short, the SA stands as an example of how some secular people draw comfort from and validation of their beliefs, not simply through cold athe-

8 It is important to note, as the literature suggests, that the term "spiritual," among the religious, can have wide-ranging meanings and uses. The interpretation of secular individuals' "spiritualty" should be qualified in a similar way.

istic reasoning in their private mental lives, but through the collective, congregational dynamics of communal secularity. This is particularly noteworthy, as contemporary studies point to the hyper-individualism that characterizes many atheists and other secular people. It is clearly useful to speak of "secular rituals" as long as the intention and meaning of *ritual* is understood in context. As Cimino and Smith (2014, 139) observed in their study of organized atheists, whereas the religious understand rituals, "as a means of transcending 'the worldly,'" and connecting to a divine realm, "secularists understand ritual as a means for celebrating oneself as human and dwelling in a contingent world." Assemblers understanding of – and search for – transcendence, thus speaks to transcendence of a different kind. It is not that which most religious theology promotes, in that it seeks to rise above the secular world through preternaturalism, the search for the divine, or that which exists beyond nature, but the active invocation of the secular world itself as a source of transcendent meaning in the here and now.

4.3 Secular Activism, Secular Mission

Earlier I suggested rituals are meaningful because they impart a sense of something bigger, or as Corrigan put it, "a greater purpose" (2008). But what is the "greater purpose" for ritual-embracing secularists who do not believe in a cosmic grand design set out by a deity? The manifest goal of the SA – to *celebrate the one life we know we have* – may seem apolitical, or to be about simply enjoying the company of like-minded people who want to live life to the fullest. But there is more to the story than this.

If we understand secularity not as a passive descriptive term referencing those who happen to be secular, but a dynamic concept that suggests it's public expression motivated by particular aims, then the question becomes more about the ways in which nontheistic congregations contribute to secular activism and secularism more generally. In other words, we do not have to understand the SA as an activist organization with global aspirations per se, to see how it contributes to the broader promotion of the secular. The socio-political and historical conditions of SA's emergence suggest this. The increased political polarization and the salience of the religious right (especially in the United States), religious and political sectarianism, and the rise of global fundamentalism(s) have each contributed to the growth of secularity (Baker and Smith 2015). Combined with social media and other communication technologies, and the availability of information generally via the Web, it should not be surprising that secular organizations – most prominently in the U.S. – have proliferated, perhaps even causing, in the words of Cimino and Smith (2014), an "atheist awakening" for

the 21st century. The SA has been part of the wider outcome of these social and political conditions; one iteration within the broader secular community in which the timing was right for its development.

In this light, it should come in to focus how secular congregations are linked to secular activism and the promotion of the broader secular cause. In contrast to some religious organizations, the SA does not recruit new membership through active proselytization, and it is much too young to have experienced the benefits of intergenerational socialization to establish and maintain a core membership.[9] Rather, it relies on promoting itself through its website, local chapters, social media, existing secular organizational networks, and word of mouth to an already extant (and growing) population of secular-minded people interested in congregational, communal culture. Thus, aggressive marketing or the targeting of specific nonbeliever groups has not been necessary, as there is a subset of nontheists in the broader secular community already poised to participate as they have few other options for joining strictly secular congregations or for communal forms of secularity generally.[10]

In the United States in particular, demographics have played an important role in providing a viable market for secular congregations. For example, increasing religious disaffiliation, the rise of the nones, and other shifting patterns of religious (non)identity (Hout and Fischer 2002; Sherkat 2014) have opened an effective space for secular congregations and different ways of living secular lives (Zuckerman 2014). Since many American nonbelievers were raised in religious households, the SA is seen by some as a way of reconnecting with the communal aspects of religion, but without the commitment to religious claims they do not accept as true.

Despite important differences in growing their numbers and developing commitment to the organization, there are some both latent and manifest "missionizing" elements to the SA (Smith 2015). Congregational commitment is made, not through narratives of conversion or adherence to particular doctrinal claims, but through belief in the value (or necessity) of addressing the challenges of community and the anxieties of contemporary life in secular terms. This is evidenced in the online publications of the SA, where organizers write posts on con-

9 Given this and other shifting social patterns, it will be interesting to see if so-called millennials develop more interest in the SA than other demographic groups as might be suggested by their more liminal relationship with religion and traditional institutions generally.

10 No clear data exist on membership composition, so I cannot make objective claims about demographic patterns regarding who joins the SA. However, by most accounts, they seem to largely draw a mostly white, middle-class demographic. Average age and the proportion of men to women Assemblers is not known.

necting with others during difficult times, dealing with grief and the loss of loved ones (including through "nonbeliever funerals"), leading meaning-rich and purpose-driven lives, and always searching for experiences "beyond oneself" – all in secular terms.[11] Returning to SA's charter, the last several of its proclamations are illustrative. The SA states it will be "a force for good" via its "community mission" with congregants as "action heroes." The Sunday Assembly will "make the world a better place" and is "here to stay" (Sunday Assembly). In other words, the SA's aspirations and activities reach well beyond simply offering regular Sunday services to secular congregants. Through community outreach, volunteer activity, and working groups ("smoups") on social justice issues within local Assembly chapters, the SA essentially functions in the public sphere as the kind of community organization that Cnaan and Curtis (2013) discuss in their study of religious congregations as voluntary associations. In this view, sans theology, religious congregations are simply one prominent manifestation of the rational nonprofit sector.

Yet, we know faith and religious claims *do* in fact motivate and orient the collective actions of religious groups. They are sometimes more effective than other organizations at generating trust between participants and facilitating community engagement across and between social networks – not all of them having to do with religion (Seymour et al. 2014). What about avowedly secular, faith-*less* congregations? Is the SA no different than any other secular nonprofit charity unconnected to any particular religious institution? Given their communal rituals, goals, and symbolic positioning vis-à-vis the wider public as a deity-free congregation, the answer is no. Rather, the organizational practices of the SA suggest it is more than a celebration of life; it is a public, symbolic demonstration of the moral utility of secular values and their connection to an atheological cosmology centered on this life, rather than one to come.

Given the preceding, we can distill the following four interrelated elements regarding the activist and "mission" dimension of communal secularity. It is centered on: (1) the reaping of social and personal rewards of communal life for secular individuals, (2) normalizing and destigmatizing nontheism, (3) promoting secular beliefs, and (4) validating and legitimizing those beliefs through public congregations and organizational social action. It does this all through activities found in the more or less traditional organizational structure of religious congregational communities. It appears as though the SA has taken heed (knowingly or otherwise) of the advice offered by Baker and Smith (2015, 215) in their study of

11 One blog series on the SA website, for example, is titled "M is for Meaning" and offers advice about finding meaning and happiness in both good times and the bad.

contemporary secularism that suggested, "in order to achieve long-term organizational success, secular groups would need to – dare we say it – look to religious communities."

4.4 Sunday Assembly and the Secular Community

How does the Sunday Assembly fit within the wider secular community? What role does it play, and what does this all mean for organized secularism at large? As I have suggested, the SA meets a demand among those who desire a communal secularity that, organizationally and interactionally, functions much like a religious congregation. For a subset of those in the broader secular community the SA offers meaningful ritual practices that develop a kind of emotional and expressive solidarity qualitatively different from the solidarities found in other traditional atheist and secular activist groups. There is an emerging popular interest among nonbelievers in these expressive, even nonsupernaturalist "spiritual" pursuits. Recent examples include Sam Harris's book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (2014), and Alain de Botton's, *Religion for Atheists: A Nonbeliever's Guide to the Uses of Religion* (2013).[12] Given the interests of the SA in creating meaningful experiences in secular terms (e. g. the aforementioned secular funerals), the communal secularity it is cultivating is consistent with – and could possibly extend in the future to – the management of life cycle events usually associated with religion, such as birth ceremonies, secular marriages, and other symbolically-infused rituals.

In developing a communal secularity, the SA also promotes a secular message that contributes to organized secularism through its volunteer and service efforts in local communities. It implicitly advances secularism through practices that facilitate commitment to secular values beyond the purely rational-instrumental or intellectualized versions of nonbelief, such as those characteristic of the new atheism. This will likely contribute to any continued growth and success the SA may experience organizationally. Its cultivation of commitment from its congregants unfolds in less obvious ways when compared to groups like the American Atheists, Center for Inquiry, and other secular organizations that purse their activism through public campaigns, and sometimes legal action.

Whereas avowed secular activist groups engage the public through billboard campaigns, conventions, sponsoring debates, television programing (e. g. Amer-

12 Alain de Botton even has his own secular organization, *The School of Life* that bears similarity to some of the goals of the SA.

ican Atheists "Atheist TV"), demonstrations, and political activities (e. g. church-state separation issues and other legal matters), the communal secularity of the SA has a different quality of character in its relationship to the wider public. Its Sunday services and community and volunteer actions are focused on a rhetoric of inclusivity, promoting secular ethics, and – given the continued social stigma of atheism (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006) and discrimination toward nonbelievers (Hammer et al. 2012) – normalizing nonbelief at a *cultural* level. They avoid the perceived defensive or combative posture of atheist activist organizations and in fact in some ways attempt to downplay the nonbelief component, highlighting instead the celebratory and communal aspects of their organization. In addition to what it offers participants by way of the congregational model it embraces, the SA's position in the broader secular community is in large part based on its focus and public expression of normative cultural values. In a sense, it eschews a defender-of-atheism disposition and instead adopts a do-good, lead-by-example approach to normalizing nonbelief.

None of this is to suggest all Assemblers are secular activists or are involved primarily because of their will to influence public perception of nontheists. In my interviews with Assemblers, although many were involved in secular activism of some kind, there were also those who simply wanted to enjoy the services, without intention of making a moral or public statement about the value of secularity or the importance of affiliation with secular groups (see Langston et al. this volume, in which they outline the motivational dynamics of both "secular affiliates" and secular nonaffiliates").

It is also too early to tell how the SA might evolve in the future based on the desires of it constituents,[13] but the kind of secular the SA represents – and what is different about it from other secular organizations – lies essentially in its communal character and symbolic positioning as it embraces the organizational and community-building strengths found in the religious congregational model.

5 Conclusion

Secularity, as the context of the present volume suggests, reflects a wide range of values, identities, individual viewpoints, and organizational activities. In a study of organized nonbelief and the strategic goals of secular groups, Langston, Ham-

13 One notable fracture has already taken place: the Godless Revival split from the Sunday Assembly as it (SA) was seen as not having sufficient focus on an atheist message. The inclusivity and porous symbolic boundaries that currently characterize the SA could lead to further divisions in the future.

mer, and Cragun (2015) examined the affiliation patterns of nonbelievers, finding a mixed bag when it comes to why some nonbelievers, and not others, join secular groups. Those who do not affiliate cite their nonbelief as a low priority; that it is simply not an important part of who they are (although, as somewhat counter to this, the authors also found fully one-third of secular nonaffiliates say they would join a group if one were locally convenient). This suggests that for those who organize – including Assemblers – their nontheism is important to their identities and outlook on life. Most relevant here however, is the study's findings that affiliation patterns hinge on the question of how secular groups interact with the broader – and especially religious, public. Significantly more (60%) of nonbelievers had a preference for the "accommodation" of – rather than confrontation (25%) with – religion (Langston et al. 2015). It may be that nonbelievers see the SA as a novel and non-confrontational way of expressing and promoting secular beliefs.

But the *meaning* of the secular, and surrounding issues regarding identity-labels, can be complicated, and of course, not all secular-identified people see the SA as truly secular. For instance, some prominent secular humanists such as Tom Flynn, the editor of *Free Inquiry*, and Greg Epstein, the humanist Chaplain of Harvard, see the SA, not as a secular congregation, but as "congregational humanism," defined essentially as a nontheistic version of communal religiosity. This is because some secular humanists view communal activity based on a religious congregational model as being at odds with the meaning of secular. As Flynn argues, "secular humanists often disdain traditional congregational practices" (2013, 4) and therefore would not see initiatives like the SA as truly secular. To be sure, some atheists and other constituents in the nonbelieving community would take umbrage at the idea of congregational nonbelief, and thus Assemblies clearly self-select for nonbelievers open and unoffended by the notion of communal secularity. How or whether Assemblers themselves fit into any of the particular "types" that have been offered in secular-atheist typologies (see Cotter 2015; Silver and Coleman 2013) will be left to future researchers to determine after the SA has moved out of its status as a novel nonbeliever phenomenon, into an established secular organization.

What these differences – and the idea of communal secularity itself – demonstrate is further evidence of "polysecularity" (see Shook, this volume) and of the fact that increasingly, contemporary societies are characterized by multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012). That is, the contemporary secular landscape is characterized by greater diversity of secular viewpoints, interests, and complexity of meaning than is often acknowledged in prior scholarly literature. Some of the demographic patterns of atheism (see Williamson and Yancey 2013), for instance that it is a white, middle-class, male phenomenon,

suggest more homogeneity in the secular community than there is. But beyond the demographics and social location(s) of nonbelievers, there is also considerable variation in the meaning of nonbelief for individuals, and this is manifested in the different strategies and goals of secular and nonbeliever organizations. From the SA to the new atheism, this challenges the notion of a united or uniform secular culture or movement (Baker and Smith 2015). But this also does not imply that accommodationists are pitted against confrontationists in the world of organized secularism. In reality, as Langston et. al. (this volume) suggest, different secular groups simply emerge from, and respond to, the diversity of motives, values, and goals of nonbelievers themselves.

Researchers have observed that congregations with strong core faith messages develop stronger congregational adherence from their members (Roberts and Yamane 2012). For instance, evangelical groups that place more demands (e. g. time commitment, confession of sin, profession of belief) generally elicit stronger commitments from congregants. Such a model usually relies on narratives of conversion, rebirth, or other kinds of personal experience that deepen religious conviction and "prove" commitment to the congregation. Absent a "core faith message" or clear doctrine, Assemblies place little by way of demands on congregants and are unlikely to draw the kind of commitments that religious congregations are known for. Notwithstanding this concern, the SA does promote a secular message, and as a public space for the celebration of secular values, it relies on individuals by way of their general convictions regarding community, science, and education, as well as their personal commitments to normalizing nonbelief and expressing a secular worldview in a public setting.

It is not yet clear what impact the SA will have on the secular-religious landscape in the decades to come. But it is clear that it is unique and offers members something they do not find in other secular organizations. Its focus on emotion and ritual are a far cry from the traditional convention meeting halls where atheists occasionally gather to polemicize in philosophical debates about God or lament the influence of religion in public life. Its focus on radical inclusivity, celebration, and solidarity sets it apart from other secular organizations. But individual nonbelievers do not simply choose one group or the other. Many are involved in multiple groups, suggesting that communal secularity is not necessarily at odds with other secular organizations, but perhaps offers a space in which nonbelievers and even "hardline" secular activists can take reprieve from the embattled politics of (non)belief and enjoy the collective effervescence that congregations by their nature offer, be they religious or secular.

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